PECULIAR INFORMATION, PARTIC’LAR FRIENDS:
HOW AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE
KNOW HORATIO ALGER, JR.

By

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To Gram, who now has two doctors in her family
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PECULIAR INFORMATION, PARTIC’LAR FRIENDS: HOW AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE KNOW HORATIO ALGER, JR.

By

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Chair: Kenneth Kidd
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Peculiar Information, Partic’lar Friends examines Horatio Alger, Jr.’s equation with the American Dream in our popular imagination. Using cultural, American, and queer studies, this project investigates Alger’s historical and popular significance through his biographies, the gossip that surrounds him, the parody our culture often makes of him, and the Horatio Alger Society, a group of Alger devotees whose idolization keeps Alger ambiguous and allows our various interpretations of his contributions to our cultural narrative.

Alger is at once static and elastic. He is used to depict a variety of noteworthy and notorious symbols, including but not limited to hard work, success, individualism, pederasty, mediocrity, and failure. Alger’s interpretability and symbolism shift depending on the situational context, yet his standing as a symbol remains ingrained in our popular consciousness. In what follows, I focus less on Alger’s texts and more on our construction and perception of who Alger is, his discourse, his creation, and his maintenance through four distinct, and not necessarily unrelated, lenses: biography, gossip, parody, and the Horatio Alger Society. These four approaches are distinct in that they each offer a unique perspective and insight into how Alger has been formed. Simultaneously, they rely on similar information and maintain a singular constant influence: our construction and perception of Horatio Alger.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL AND PARTICULAR APPROACH TO A COMMONLY REFERENCED AND LARGELY FORGOTTEN FIGURE

As I stood there in the twilight hours of the summer evening, I strongly felt that we, who know Horatio only from his life’s work, are basking in the twilight of his memories. I now felt that I had honored our hero according to my ability, having visited his place of beginning and ending. What went on in between, will be discussed and disputed for ages to come.

—Forrest Campbell, Newsboy (1962)

With these sentences, Forrest Campbell concluded the inaugural issue of Newsboy, a bi-monthly newsletter written for and by Horatio Alger Society members. Before he wrote this conclusion, Campbell, a founding member of the Society, drove to Revere, Massachusetts, Alger’s supposed birthplace. He knocked on the door of 88 Beach Street, Alger’s supposed former house, and “felt right at home.”¹ Then he traveled to South Natick to see Alger’s grave and shared the above description. Campbell’s insight offers a telling introduction, as it embodies several key aspects of this project. His comment reflects the personal attachment that, at times, overwhelms Alger research and researchers. By using “our hero” and Alger’s first name, Campbell shows his devotion and dedication to Alger, to who he believes Alger is, and to what Alger means to him. Campbell also acknowledges the lack of factual information available on Alger since he knows “Horatio only from his life’s work.” Alger’s “life work” denotes not only his texts but the belief in Alger’s dedication to boy welfare and inspiring American youth to better themselves. Most importantly, Campbell astutely addresses Alger’s interpretability. For more than any other aspect, this project explores the discussions and disputes that have constructed Alger in our society, our literature, and academia.

¹ Newsboy 1, no. 1, 1.
I first met Horatio Alger, Jr. in the fall of 2003. I was debating the idea of continuing my master’s research on queer adolescent literature but having trouble finding texts published before the 1940s. That is when my husband suggested I read Alger’s 1868 *Ragged Dick*. My blank stare revealed both my lack of enthusiasm and lack of knowledge about who Alger was, outside of a vague connection to bootstraps and “working hard.” He explained that *Ragged Dick* contains frank depictions of same-sex friendships, and said, “You might find something there.” After I continued my blank stare, my husband said quite simply, “Just read it.”

In Alger’s stories, I found boy characters who work together, live together, and in some cases live for one another. They share one-room apartments with one bed, one dresser, one foot locker, and often one chair. They teach each other how to read and open bank accounts together. They give each other clothes and money for rent or food. Their relationships motivate their labor and their struggle to achieve a better job and a better wage. In essence, the boys create their own self-sufficient world, except for the financially-secure businessman who seems to surround Alger’s protagonists when the street boys need, well, anything. The ever-present older man gives them money and their first real jobs other than bootblack, baggage smasher, or match stick seller. The older man teaches them the value of literacy, and instills in them a work ethic and desire to better themselves. He provides knowledge in the form of advice or ‘how to’: how to save money, how to earn enough money to save, how to invest their saved money. The relationship between younger and older males fosters a transfer of knowledge inspired by a shared attraction. Their mutual desire does not necessarily have to be sexual, but their relationship does not preclude or shut down its possibility and the physical expression of that possibility. In essence, Alger’s fiction demonstrates a homosociality at its basic level, with boys helping boys learn, men helping boys gain knowledge, and boys gaining knowledge together.
My curiosity piqued, I read Alan Trachtenberg’s introduction to *Ragged Dick*, which mentions Alger’s expulsion from the priesthood for “‘unnatural’ acts with several boys,” acts that Alger “did not deny.”² And soon I wanted something different from a connection to modern queer adolescent literature; I wanted to know more about Alger and who he was. The majority of critical articles on Alger’s works focus on his economic and capitalist narratives, paying little attention to what I thought was Alger’s very obvious depiction of same-sex relationships. That is until I found Michael Moon’s 1987 article, “‘The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes’: Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger.” His article argues that a new brand of fiction emerged during the Gilded Age connecting men and boys around and though the nineteenth century’s incipient corporate capitalist culture. More specifically, Moon explores the “quasisexual ties and domestic arrangements between males that impel Alger’s fiction.”³ What struck me was that to build his argument, Moon removes Alger from it. That is to say, Moon’s argument was not as interested in a “quirk in Alger’s personality” as it was the “basic contradictions in [Alger’s] culture that his tales engage.”⁴ However, like myself, Moon came to Alger interested in his predilections and their possible influence on his stories:

I first began to read Alger’s writing out of an interest in thinking about ways in which his pederasty might have determined it, but I have come to think that the far more interesting way his work manifests male homosexuality is not as indirect autobiographical data for a single figure (i.e., Alger) but as an encapsulations of corporate/capitalist America’s long-cherished myth, its male homoerotic foundations fiercely repressed . . .⁵

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⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁵ Ibid., 107.
I too began this project looking to connect Alger’s pederasty to his texts. But my interests take me into the “single figure” of Alger, his biographical data, his equation with the strive-and-succeed myths and American Dream clichés, and how that data produced the Alger we know today.

In what follows, I focus less on Alger’s texts and more on our construction and perception of who Alger is. Far from a singular figure, Alger is at once static and elastic, standing as an author whose symbolism shifts depending on situational context. As Gary Scharnhorst explains, the name Horatio Alger and phrase “Horatio Alger hero” have such a fluid rhetorical quality that they mean nothing despite being employed as a symbol for success and hard work, a “defender of the social and political status quo” or “rugged individualism,” a pederast, an opponent of “forced busing,” “a gay activist,” “the first supply-sider,” and a failure. The premier Alger academic, Scharnhorst declares that Alger’s name has become an “insidious analogy,” “misleading, perhaps meaningless” as a proper name, and like the metaphor “Victorian and Freudian” has “diminished our understanding’ of the nouns they modify.” He neatly summarizes what we actually know or can prove about Alger. In doing so, Scharnhorst also reiterates Alger’s various “meaningless” meanings:

Who was Alger? Born in 1832, the eldest son of a Unitarian minister, he graduated with honors from Harvard College in 1852 and worked over the next dozen years as a literary hack and part-time teacher. He received a ministerial diploma from Harvard Divinity School in 1860 and settled over the Unitarian society in Brewster, Mass., in 1864. Fifteen months later, he was charged with pederasty and dismissed from the pulpit. He moved to New York and turned to writing juvenile fiction as much to expiate his sin as to earn a living. He harbored no illusions about the quality of his work. “The res augusta donis of which Horace speaks compelled me years since to forsake the higher walks of literature, and devote myself to an humbler department which would pay me better,” he explained in 1875. “From that time I leased my pen to those boys, and the world has been spared much poor poetry and ambitious prose.” A writer of admittedly limited talents, Alger enjoyed a
modest popularity during his life. He earned an average of about 3500 dollars annually during his career, and he sold a total of about 800,000 books over thirty years.\(^6\)

Alger may have had “limited talents,” but his juvenile writing made him a best-selling author. The fact that he still circulates as a reference point in popular culture is indicative of his success. Or perhaps, it better indicates our need for Alger’s success and our need to use Alger as a metaphor for whatever we desire. Scharnhorst himself defines Alger as a guilt-ridden molester (“charged with pederasty . . . . turned to writing juvenile fiction as much to expiate his sin as to earn a living”), a humble yet not-as-successful-as-we-would-have-him-be writer (“modest popularity . . . . 3500 dollars annually . . . sold a total of 800,000 books over thirty years”), one who wanted more but could not live up to expectations (“settled over the Unitarian society . . . . harbored no illusions about the quality of his work”), and a failure (“literary hack . . . . dismissed from the pulpit”). Alger is all of these incarnations. Rather than compartmentalize Alger’s different meanings and dismiss his multifaceted ambiguity as “meaningless,” this project investigates, challenges, and embraces Alger’s elasticity as vital to our understanding and construction of who Alger was and who he is today.

My research led me first and foremost to the five Alger biographies that provide the foundation for this project. At different points, the biographies praise Alger as a boy-savior, degrade Alger as a failed writer, confront previous biographies for corrupting Alger research with falsehoods, conform Alger to romantic heterosexual conventions, mock Alger’s contribution to literature, depict Alger as a pederast, and continue Alger’s relationship to success story clichés. These various Algers co-exist from the first biography to the last, from biographers who were not members of the Society to those who were. As I began to question the

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consistency of the biographies, I wanted to connect these seemingly disparate versions of Alger. To a greater degree, I wanted to know how one man could provide such forcefully produced and vigorously defended narratives.

In scouring these different sources for facts to construct the real man who existed in the 1800s, I came across the Horatio Alger Society and discovered its archive at the Northern Illinois University. I applied for and was awarded the Horatio Alger Fellowship for the Study of American Popular Culture, which allowed me to feed my Alger curiosity. Alongside Alger first editions and manuscripts, the archive contained several Alger wills, hand tracings of Alger cover art, and boxes full of Society-made Alger-themed trinkets, including license plates, key chains, address books, stamps, playing cards, plates, figurines, and member’s letters to each other. I became immersed in the Society’s hero worship for one main reason. Authors’ lives, like their texts, are interpreted not through their intention, but through our desires and needs. The thoughts that continually crowded my mind were, why does Alger exist in our culture as the dominant symbol for American achievement while the man and his books have virtually disappeared from reference? How has his myth persisted while the homosociality remains relatively under explored? How and why did Alger become consumed and subsumed by his myth and at what expense? Each chapter approaches these questions by examining Horatio Alger, his discourse, his creation, and his maintenance through four distinct, and not necessarily unrelated, lenses: biography, gossip, parody, and the Horatio Alger Society. These four approaches are distinct in that each offers a unique perspective and insight into Alger’s cultural formation. Simultaneously, they rely on similar information and maintain a singular influence: our construction and perception of Horatio Alger.
Chapter 2 begins this project by exploring how the five Alger biographies depict Alger through assorted narratives of failure and queerness, emphasizing each to varying degrees depending on the biographer’s relationship to the Society and whether the biography was published before or after Alger’s pederastic past became public in 1971. Herbert R. Mayes’s 1928 *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero* inaugurates twentieth-century Alger studies by presenting an amalgam of fictionalization that combines Alger’s novels with the author’s desires. The four biographies that followed incorporated Mayes’s format, including the two written by Society members. The Society also played a crucial biographical role by actively promoting their biographies as truthful, and just as actively dismissing Mayes’s works as pure imagination. Yet their biographical information mirrors Mayes’s in theme and style, particularly the notion that, despite the equation of Alger with the success story in popular imagination, Alger is largely a failure as an adult author and heterosexual man. The less association the biographer has with the Society, the more failed Alger becomes. The more contemporary the biography, the more likely Alger is to possess an ostensible sexuality. Each generality has exceptions. But in the end, the biographies interpret Alger as part failure, part queer, and entirely open to interpretation.

The third chapter came about after an inspired conversation among Moon, my husband, and myself about Cora Crane’s doughnuts. Author Stephen Crane met Cora Taylor in Jacksonville, Florida, where Cora owned the downtown brothel Hotel de Dream. After discussing Crane’s ownership of the brothel, our conversation quickly turned to the time when the Cranes invited Henry James to their Brede Place house, in East Sussex. There is a picture of James holding one of Cora’s famous doughnuts with an odd look on his face. James insisted “it
can’t be any doughnut of yours that is making me make such a gruesome grimace.’’\textsuperscript{7} Cora’s biographer states that James found her to be an unrefined American and was more approving of her husband. But this information in no way deterred the three of us from gossiping about James enjoying the former madam’s tasty treats and indulging our delight in such an image.

As I read the Alger biographies, I remembered this conversation. Much of what goes on in the biographies imagines what could have happened in Alger’s life. In mimicking Mayes’s structure and imagination, the biographies steadily and definitively created and circulated gossip; each successive portrayal validates the previous one by reiterating its interpretive technique and information. Chapter 3 investigates the two components of Alger gossip. First, that it revolves around Alger’s boy-love or his status as a boy-lover. Second, that its true or false status matters less than its ability to connect and provide interpretative possibilities for our Alger construction. Even when Alger’s pederasty accusation is proven true, or when Alger’s friendship and confession to William James is proven impossible, or when Alger’s authorship remains within the juvenile genre, these gossip items remain in circulation. Alger gossip, then, proves its importance through its ability to linger, create, and encapsulate our culture’s construction of Alger.

As I continued this project, I found Alger’s ubiquitous existence harder to escape, especially when I encountered an Alger reference in an old *Golden Girls* episode. Rue McClanahan’s Blanche recounts a tale of all-night passion that led her to various locations around Miami. In response, Bea Arthur’s Dorothy calls her “a real whore-ratio Alger.” The farcical nature of this highly obscure reference struck me. Not that I rely on *The Golden Girls* to guide my academic choices (only my personal ones), but this joke depends on a certain

\textsuperscript{7} Lillian Barnard Gilkes, *Cora Crane: A Biography of Mrs. Stephen Crane* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 205. The photograph can be found on page 207.
knowledge of Alger’s myth and personal history. By replacing the financially successful older businessman with a sexually successful older woman, the joke parodies Alger’s depiction of hard work by reiterating it, with a difference. Chapter 4 looks to this process of repetition and considers Nathanael West’s 1934 *A Cool Million* and its perceptive and purposefully phobic reiteration as a quintessential Alger parody. By copying Alger texts word for word, West’s novel re-imagines Alger’s relatively safe, capitalist-friendly, and homosocial structure as an abusive, violent, and phobic fascist nightmare. *Million* defines parody as not simply ridicule but also differentiated imitation that plays out through the text’s slow mutilation of its protagonist, Lem. As such, the book confronts Alger’s texts and our naïve readings of them.

Simultaneously, West’s parody exposes a violence that lies beneath the Alger surface while dismembering and reiterating its original Alger material. *Million*’s extreme commentary on Alger’s text is largely forgotten, overshadowed by the more dominant strive-and-succeed interpretations and the equation of Alger with American Dream clichés. But because it is largely forgotten and because it is so extreme, *Million* deserves examination.

Chapter 5 returns to the Society and examines the networks of information found in that archive, my own hesitations and enthusiasms, and the ownership and personal relationship to information about and around Alger. More than a group of fanatic collectors and retired hobby seekers, the Society functions as a network of devoted individuals who see Alger as a living social value and entity. As a group, the Society constructs a sexually vacant and morally active Alger whose idolization of, attraction to, and knowledge about Alger remain one dimensional, free of any possible impurities or negative possibilities. Yet the individual members’ intensely personal dedication keeps Alger alive in our culture and in academia.
Each chapter joins on-going conversations about Alger. I do not offer this project as a definitive stand on Alger or Alger studies. Nor do I intend to foreclose any dialogue with the conclusions I reach. Instead, I offer a re-imagining and re-approach to Alger that incorporates his fictionalization, gossip, perceptive derision, and idolization, all of which construct and maintain Alger in our current popular imagination.

I am confident in the sources, research, and citations I make in this project. Simultaneously, I am confident that my project names some fiction as fact, contributes gossip, parodies itself, includes snippets of hero-worship, and becomes repetitious. My repetitions and reiterations are not meant to belittle the reader. Instead, I embrace these aspects and offer them as part of Alger scholarship, for the same reasons I purposefully slip into personal anecdotes. Rather than approaching my writing as a removed analytical assessment, I envision it as an extension of the cyclical nature and reinforcement of how our society interprets Horatio Alger, Jr.
CHAPTER 2
“A HISTORY OF CONCEPTION, OF ATTEMPT AND OF FAILURE”: HORATIO ALGER, JR.’S FAILURE AND QUEerness

Fiction . . . gives the reader something more than information. Complex understandings, indirect, intuitive, and nonverbal arise from words of the story . . . an instructive emotion is generated in the reader from the illusion of suffering an experience not his own.

—E.L. Doctorow, “False Documents”

Fiction, as Doctorow suggests, can be more informative than fact because it offers “more than information.” It generates a “complex understanding” through “indirect” and “intuitive” emotion. For Horatio Alger, Jr., no truer words have been written. Our knowledge of Alger comes from our ability and willingness to perceive and interpret. The biographical facts of Alger’s life are slim. He was born Friday, January 13, 1832. He attended Harvard. He was a minister in Brewster until he left the night he was accused of molesting several boys in his congregation. He lived in New York City, where he knew Charles O’Connor and Charles Loring Brace and their respective Newsboys’ Lodging House and Children’s Aid Society. He published over one hundred books, and he died on July 18, 1899. However, these biographical facts have little impact on how biographers and our culture interpret, perceive, and portray Alger.

There are five major Alger biographies: Herbert R. Mayes’s Alger: A Biography Without a Hero (1928), John Tebbel’s From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr., and the American Dream (1963), Ralph D. Gardner’s Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era (1964), Edwin P. Hoyt’s Horatio’s Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger, Jr. (1974), and Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales’s The Lost Life of Horatio Alger (1985). To one degree or another, the biographies combine Alger’s themes of luck and pluck and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” with the author’s life story to create a man who does not live up to his own myth. Collectively, the biographies portray Alger as a failed adult author who could not escape the boy-book genre. The
biographies also position Alger as a failed heterosexual man who constantly sought out and
reveled and prospered in the company of boys. This failed and queer Alger remains constant
from the first biography (Mayes, in 1928) to the last (Scharnhorst and Bales, 1985), despite
Mayes admitting that he fabricated everything in his biography, despite the Horatio Alger
Society actively fighting Mayes’s fictionalization, and despite the equation of Alger with the
American success story in our popular imagination. Moreover, while all biographies take their
cue from Mayes’s largely fictitious work, each emphasizes Alger’s failure and queerness to
differing degrees. This difference can be tied to the biographer’s association with the Society
and whether or not the biography was written after the Brewster affair was published in 1971.¹ I
do not intend this chapter to be a definitive and factual Alger biography; nor am I concerned with
who Alger really was or with parsing out a truthful Alger. Rather, this chapter investigates the
varying relationship between multiple interpretations of Alger’s prescribed failure and his
attraction to boys.

The Alger biographers span the past eighty years and a range of professions. Herbert
Mayes was managing editor of The American Druggist when he wrote his biography and
eventually became the editor of Good Housekeeping and McCall’s. John Tebbel was a
prominent biographer and chair of the journalism department at New York University. Edwin
Hoyt was a former associate editor of Collier’s Magazine and a producer-writer for CBS TV
News. The other three biographers were members of the Horatio Alger Society. Ralph Gardner
was a journalist and advertising executive in New York City. Gary Scharnhorst was an
instructor at the University of New Mexico’s Department of English Language and Literature,

¹ Richard M. Huber’s The American Dream of Success (New York: McGraw-Hill), 1971, was
the first to print the Unitarian Society of Brewster’s historical records. Previous to this
publication, accusations of Alger’s pederasty were whispered about but not confirmed. I will
address Huber’s revelation later in this chapter.
where he is currently a distinguished professor. He is also co-editor of *American Literary Realism* and edits the annual *American Literary Scholarship*. Jack Bales remains a reference librarian at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Dividing the biographers into four camps—non-Society and Society members and authors of pre- and post-1971 biographies—I will approach these groups in a progressively thematic and mostly chronological order (figure 2-1). Mayes and Tebbel had no Society affiliation and their biographies were published pre-1971. As a result, failure envelops their Alger. Mayes declares in strikingly heteronormative language that Alger’s life is a “history of conception, of attempt and of failure.”\(^2\) Additionally, Mayes contends that Alger wrote “books for boys because he could not write books for men. The implication is not that the author of juvenile fiction is inferior, but that Alger was. Besides, boys interested him. He liked to be in their company.”\(^3\) Though he attempted to write for men, Alger’s inferiority prevented it. As a result, Alger’s story becomes one of failed producer and failed man.

Mayes’s own autobiography states that when he wrote his Alger biography, he was “unencumbered by facts, I could make everything up. I did make everything up.”\(^4\) Tebbel’s *From Rags to Riches*, published in 1963—more than thirty years after Mayes’s work—claimed that Mayes’s Alger “can hardly be improved upon nearly four decades later. The primary sources of Alger material are meager, indeed, but Mr. Mayes appears to have examined all of them and no new original material has turned up in the intervening decades.” There were no primary research sources. In fact, Tebbel cited Alger’s diary as his other main source, a diary

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\(^3\) Ibid., 37–38.

that was “non-existent.” Consequently, both Tebbel and Mayes depict Alger as a frustrated, mentally inferior, and talentless man who desired to write adult novels but could not. Their Alger had failed relationships with women in Europe, a failed attempt at marriage/engagement in America, but also a burning desire for the company of boys. Specifically, Tebbel and Mayes note that “the greatest love of his life was his love for a boy” and that Alger “came to love one boy with a wholeheartedness he had never felt for anyone,” respectively. Both biographers give Alger child-like qualities that diminish any possible sexually predatory accusations. These qualities also protect Mayes and Tebbel from exploring their claims as in-depth and as speculatively as they do Alger’s heterosexually failed relationships.

Gardner was one of the first members of the Society, which published his Alger biography in 1964. In general, the Society-penned biographies seek to discount the previous ones by proctoring a truth that only they, as devoted fans and self-established “Partic’lar Friends” of Alger’s, know. Their intimate knowledge tends to affirm Alger by focusing on his good deeds and wealth of publications. Unlike Mayes and Tebbel, Gardner declares that Alger fulfilled his desire to write and publish adult novels, but also portrays Alger as content with his literary boy-book achievements. Gardner mentions Alger’s failed engagement, and minimizes any


6 Mayes, Alger, 38; John Tebbel, From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr., and the American Dream (New York: Macmillian, 1963), 73. Though these are not exact matching quotes, the symmetry between these two statements will become apparent as this chapter progresses.

7 Gardner technically wrote his Alger biography before he joined the Society. However, I take this liberty because of his membership in and enthusiasm for the Society.

8 Abbreviated PF, this term is the Society’s own nickname for its members. Each member has a PF number and is encouraged to use their designation and sign letters, email, and other correspondence “Your Partic’lar Friend.” As an act of disclosure, I am PF-1088. Chapter 5 will explore this term and its relationship to Alger scholarship further.
disappointment Alger may have felt by constantly surrounding him with the street boys of New York City and his fictional boy characters. Gardner’s Alger has a seamless connection to the world of boys, as he lives at the Newsboys’ Lodging House and creates boy characters inspired by those he met in real life. Gardner’s biography rarely places Alger outside the company of boys. Alger lived with them, searched the streets for them, taught and tutored them, and donated all his spare time to their welfare. Alger may not have escaped the boy-book genre. But writing over one hundred boy books, surrounding himself with boys, and becoming a boy-savior softened any discontent Alger may have had.

After Gardner comes Hoyt, who was not a Society member and whose work was published in 1974. Hoyt picks up on one distinction Tebbel makes in his Alger biography: that “there were strong elements of the homosexual” in Alger.9 Hoyt’s Alger is definitely a homosexual and definitely not a failure. At one point, Hoyt compares Alger to Oscar Wilde and brazenly declares Alger equal parts queer and successful. Hoyt offers a believable if fictional description of how Alger felt after being expelled from his Brewster congregation. In a sense, Hoyt’s Alger is unbound and freed by both the biographer’s non-association with the Society and by following the Brewster-affair publication. As such, Hoyt’s biography provides a fitting border between the particular versions of Alger’s biographical depictions.

The final biography belongs to Scharnhorst and Bales, whose 1985 work was directly influenced by their Society membership. They strove to correct the previous biographies’ fabrications and write a definitive factual account of Alger’s life. They include copious amounts of documented research, and their work concludes that Alger reveled in the company of boys and spent his life longing to write novels for adults. Scharnhorst and Bales’s portrayal reflects the

9 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 66.
tension within the Society and the Society’s phobic response to the 1971 Brewster revelation and Hoyt’s biography. More so than Gardner, but less than Hoyt, they depict Alger as possessing an ostensible sexuality. They take Alger’s pederasty head on and connect his publishing bounty to his fondness for boys. In fact, Scharnhorst and Bales’s Alger required these same boys, which they call “material,” to inspire his most prolific writing period. Yet even at his most productive, Alger still yearned to write one successful adult novel. So while they declare Alger a failure as an adult writer, Alger’s queerness leads to a modest production of successful books.

The emphasis on and construction of Alger’s failure and queerness range from sympathetic to declarative to phobic, depending on whether the biographer has a relationship to the Horatio Alger Society and whether the biography is pre- or post-Brewster revelation. All biographies employ an Alger who was known or proven to be fictional, as all biographies use Mayes’s Alger to varying extents. The older the biographies and the further removed they are from the Society, the more they emphasize Alger’s struggles as a writer and as a heterosexual man. In more contemporary and Society-influenced biographies, Alger is increasingly likely to have homosexual tendencies and moderate success. These generalities, though, have exceptions. Most notably, the consistency and connectivity of the Algers depicted in the biographies produce a figure who is part failure, part queer, and entirely up for interpretation.10

**In the Beginning: Narrative Truth in the False Biography**

Herbert R. Mayes’s *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero* initiated Alger’s failure and queerness. Countless encyclopedias and other historical records cite this first biography as their

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10 The sources in this chapter tend not to differentiate between the terms queer, gay, homosexual, and, at times, pederasty. This conflation is a product of the different time periods during which the biographies were written and not indicative of the authors’ personal or political beliefs. Rather than impose a more politically correct or contemporary definition upon the authors, I try to match my usage of these terms as closely to the original source as possible.
Alger source. The scant information offered in Mayes’s volume sets the tone for much Alger research: though the biography was proven to be entirely fictional by the early 1970s, Alger and his work became mired in falsehoods. The biography begins, appropriately, by identifying Alger Jr.’s birth as possibly the worst day of Horatio Alger, Sr.’s life. I quote the first two paragraphs to convey the text’s full effect:

The senior Horatio Alger held one especial grievance against his wife. In doing things, he complained, she was always too late or too early. For such an important matter as bearing a first child he thought she might have altered her habits, but the poor woman ran true to form and never was fully pardoned for her tactlessness. She gave birth to the young Horatio on Friday the thirteenth of January in the year 1832. It was on Friday, the thirteenth of some month in some forgotten year that her husband had accidentally gashed his cheek with a razor, and the scar that resulted was a perpetual reminder of the date’s ill omen. Had she exercised more will power and given up the boy a day sooner, or more self-control and carried him a day longer, she would have performed what was no more than her simple Christian duty.

To make matters worse, the boy was born at night, the very night which was set aside each week by Mr. Alger for preparation of the coming Sunday’s sermon. The concomitant hullabaloo: Dr. Thomas Samuel tramping through the rooms growling for water and bandages, and Nurse Sarah Morse responding to all commands with noisy footsteps and raucous voice, to say nothing of the low pitched moans emanating from the bedroom of the mother-to-be, had a devastating effect on the work Mr. Alger was struggling to complete. Fortunately for Olive Fenno—the woman’s maiden name—she bore a boy. What the consequences might have been had the issue of all the tumult been a girl, no one may say.

Yet, Mayes does go on to say that a “girl would have been, at the least, sacrilegious.”

Questions of how Mayes knows what Alger Sr. wrote are superfluous. It is impossible to know, despite Mayes’s claims, what Alger Sr.’s emotional state was, the effect the child birth had on his sermon preparation, or whether he would have excommunicated his wife for bearing the wrong-sexed child, to say nothing of the supposed “scar,” “noisy footsteps,” and “low pitched moans.”

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12 Ibid., 14.
Nevertheless, Mayes offers an engaging read and lays the groundwork for Alger’s pattern of failure. Mayes recounts creating his “fairy tale” Alger in “After Half a Century,” the introduction to the 1978 edition of his Alger biography. During conversations with friends in the publishing business, “it was suggested that a biography of Horatio Alger, Jr., might be fascinating to men who remembered his books.” Mayes began to research Alger after meeting George Macy, head of the Macy-Masius publishing house. But as Mayes states quite forcefully, the more of the little I read and heard, the less likely it seemed that Alger was worth a biography, a quickly-reached baseless conclusion because of the insignificant time and attention I had given to investigating the details of Alger’s life. No book about Alger had been written, it was my guess, because no writer and no publisher thought of Alger as anything but a facile hack who produced dozens of simple stories devoid of literary merit, and a man who in no other aspect of his life had done anything or said anything to warrant anybody’s interest.

After relaying his thoughts to his publishing friends, a “suggestion was made” to do a “parody” of Alger. With the parody, Mayes could write the biography in a matter of weeks: “All I had to do was come up with a fairy tale. No research required. Nothing required but a little imagination. Overnight, in effect, I could be an author!” Soon he would “make up books he never had written” and “quote copiously from Alger’s diary. If Alger ever kept a diary, I knew nothing about it. In any case, it was more fun to invent one. I had no letters ever written by Alger, which was fortunate. Again, it was more fun to make them up, as it was with the letters presumably sent to Alger, none of which I had ever seen.”

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13 Mayes, “After Half a Century,” iii.
14 Ibid., iv–v.
15 Ibid., v–vi.
16 Ibid., vii.
Mayes’s “fairy tale” reveals itself as he continues the first chapter of his biography, prophetically linking Alger’s beginnings with his authorial ability and life in general. He also offers an alluring allegory for Alger’s repetitive literary style. From the “outset the boy was dull” and,

Until he was seven he had mute companions—only colored, wooden blocks—to play with . . . . Some children worked miracles with blocks. They raise bridges in an hour, and tunnels, even palaces and forts. Horatio specialized in towers. Over and over he built a tower of the same design, anticipating always a structure that would stand straight and proud, higher than his head, an impressive architecture. When the tower crumbled to the floor before its tall destiny was accomplished, the boy would gather the scattered segments and begin again, uncomplainingly.17

Apparently, Alger’s life and career were always doomed to repetition and banality. Moreover, within the first six pages, Mayes declares Alger’s destiny “crumbled” before it “was accomplished.” Luckily for the reader, Mayes continues constructing the “scattered segments” of Alger’s destiny, since Alger could not do so himself.

Mayes’s ability to know exactly what happened reaches beyond the Earth-bound Alger. When Alger breaks up with a woman he wants to marry (unfortunately named Patience, since Alger never did marry), his great-great-great-great grandfather Thomas Alger “gloated in his heavenly abode at the manner in which young Horatio was preserved intact for the ministry.” Mayes, though, reserves most of his conjectural facts for descriptions of the “stupid” Alger, Jr.,18 referring to him as a “mental nomad,”19 saying he lacked a “substantial imagination,”20 and that he would rather “follow fire engines and ride on horse cars and go to Barnum’s museum” than

17 Mayes, Alger, 16, 17–18.
18 Ibid., 33–34.
19 Ibid., 65.
20 Ibid., 174.
act like an adult. Each book Alger wrote “bound him closer to the mediocrity he sought to avoid.” He spent his whole life wanting to “let go” of juvenile books and write his “masterpiece” of adult fiction. Mayes established other Alger falsities that biographers took as facts: school children “teased,” “mocked,” and “called him Holy Horatio.” Alger published “one hundred and nineteen books,” lived for thirty years at the Newsboys’ Lodging House, had trysts in Europe and Peekskill, New York, and fought the padrone system.

One of Mayes’ most amazing tales has Alger emulating the Lime-Kiln-Man. No urban legend, the Lime-Kiln-Man, or Alexander McFarland, “for some twenty-five years, has been seen wandering around the streets” of New York City, “his head downcast, his beard uncombed, his hair matted.” Mayes’s Alger mimics this New York celebrity by wearing a wig and cape

21 Ibid., 118.
22 Ibid., 226.
23 Ibid., 119.
24 Ibid., 19.
25 Ibid., 226. Ralph D. Gardner’s Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era (Mendota, IL: Wayside Press, 1964) states, “In all, one hundred twenty three original titles bear his name. Deduct from this eleven written by Edward Stratemeyer (the famed author of boys books, who claims these titles are completions of outlines left to him by Alger), four that appeared in periodicals but never as books, and one unpublished manuscript that has survived the years.” These details would give Alger a total of 107 titles (356).
26 Ibid., 101.
27 Ibid., 72–84. The “actual” journal entries on Alger’s recollection of sex and then subsequent guilt for enjoying it are not to be missed.
28 Ibid., 171–95.
29 Ibid., 131–48.
“as he forged an ambling gate along Broadway at night, an appearance of a male hag escaped from some Hallowe’en.” Alger did so because he was “intrigued” “by the publicity” of the Lime-Kiln-Man, had a “flair for the Bohemian,” and because “street arabs” and other boys found the Lime-Kiln-Man a “fascinating terror.”

Alger does enjoy some successes, which Mayes ties directly to boys. Alger’s most popular texts, *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*, were written while surrounded by boys at the Lodging House. Alger’s success allowed him to ride “around in a carriage, visiting boys at the ferry entrances and street corners which were their places of business” and take “droves of them to eat.” “[F]or boys in particular his love was boundless.” At one point, Alger rescues a boy named Wing from a cold and wintry night and he becomes “Alger’s son.” Mayes uses Wing to introduce Alger’s “queer” affection that was “not to be interfered with.” But even his love could not prevent Wing from having his “bowels kicked out when he fell under the hoofs of a runaway horse.” Since Alger sent Wing on the errand that resulted in his death, Alger’s inability to protect those who were close to him overshadows any possible queerness. Even inside Alger’s boy-built world, Alger was a failure.

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31 “The Lime-Kiln Man,” *New York Daily Times*, July 31, 1855. I say “celebrity” because the Lime-Kiln Man garnered this front-page obituary in the *Times* the day after his death.


33 Ibid., 102.

34 Ibid., 105.

35 Ibid., 47. Alger’s interest in boys corresponds to the general notion of needing to be boy-like in order to write for boys. Discussions of Mark Twain illustrate this notion, as argued in Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, and more recently in chapter 2 of Kenneth Kidd’s *Making American Boys*.


37 Ibid., 111.
The Boy-Loving Failure; or, the Incorporation of Mayes’s Alger into Our Society

The biography’s mixed reviews focused on Mayes’s campy narrative. The Washington Post congratulated Mayes for having “at last given us some intimate glimpses of the man himself,” the glimpses being “everything else he failed” at besides getting his books published. Mark Van Doren’s review in particular calls the biography “folklore” and goes on to say that it is “thin, sorry stuff . . . . we are never told what things are true and what things are merely vivid.” Despite those shortcomings, it still “reveals just what kinds of weakness Alger had,” though he does not specify them. It would not be hard to guess the intimation, though, since Van Doren quotes “119” as the number of books Alger published and says Alger “always wanted to write a good book.” Both statements can be traced directly to Mayes’s “folklore” biography.

When talking about the fictional biography, Mayes offers more speculation than evidence. He admits that “from the initial research it appeared Alger, for all his stupendous output, was a dull man and had led a dull life. If he was dull, the story of his life would be dull and I lost interest.” He also claims he offered an obvious “parody of the debunking vogue of the period.” Even if Mayes’s speculation were true, it would not matter. Mayes castigates his readers and those who allowed his book to be “taken so much for granted.” He also wonders why no “eminent scholars” or other “writers” ever questioned his use of Alger’s secret diary, a diary that

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38 For more on the biography’s critical reception, see Mayes, Magazine Maze, 356.


40 Mark Van Doren, “First Glance,” The Nation, March 28, 1928. The review is preceded by a review of Claude McKay’s novel Home to Harlem, which Van Doren dismisses as “without form and meaning” because it is “the work of a Negro.”

41 Mayes, Magazine Maze, 184.

42 Ibid., 185.
never existed. As a result, nearly forty years of writing about Alger fell victim to mistresses in Europe, a severe stutter, an adopted son or a boy-lover in New York City (depending on interpretation), and publication credits. If these were true, it was only “through carelessness or accident.”

Mayes’s hindsight seen in “After Half a Century” laments the disservice his book had on Alger’s reputation, but Alger’s lack of reputation allowed him to publish such a work in the first place. As he says, “if the book had been about a historical or literary figure” it would never have achieved its ultimate “frame of reference.” Mayes was not the first critic to claim Alger was neither historical nor literary; nor was he the first to argue that, like sensation fiction or children's literature, his novels were not worth the scholarship. Mayes depended on Alger’s unimportant and forgotten status when writing the biography. It enabled Mayes to create Alger as a character, someone outside and unattached to his writings. As such, Alger, his texts, his persona, and his myth became up for grabs.

While many writers repeat Mayes’s mediocre clichés, very few explore the Alger who lived at the Newsboys’ Lodging House, took boys on vacation with him, bought boys clothes, books, food, and paid for their schooling, apartments, and job training. Hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles cite Mayes’s 1928 work as their source. Though very few explicitly mention Alger’s boy-centered world, they always re-create it. Or, at least, they connect him with


45 Ibid., 185–86.
his boy-ology.\textsuperscript{46} For Alger’s hundredth birthday in 1932, the \textit{New York Times} laments the forgotten day, except for the “doubtless thousands of men throughout the country who traveled in imagination back to boyhood and recalled the author.”\textsuperscript{47} The article continues by citing Mayes’s figure of “119” books and the Alger who lived at the Newsboys’ Lodging House and who, despite his “weak personality,” won the “affection” of countless boys. In a 1938 “Topics of the Times” piece on the Newsboys’ Lodging House, Alger’s books passed from boy to boy as an artifact. The article commends the biographer for truthfully describing Alger as “continually victimized by the real street arabs of the New York pavements” as well as not having a “primary literary urge.”\textsuperscript{48} A 1942 article “Ragged Dick” describes Alger as teaching boys “to love failure” and adopting a “Chinese foundling” he met at the Lodging House.\textsuperscript{49} In a 1944 article, part of a series on forgotten best sellers that influenced America, Stewart Holbrook faithfully recounts Mayes’s biography and its Alger: his writing is “tripe,” Charles O’Connor (founder of the Newsboys’ Lodging House) was Alger’s “only real friend,” and Alger lived an “inspired” life at the Lodging House.\textsuperscript{50}

Mayes’s biography inspired at least four others, all of which repeat his inaccuracies with varying emphasis. I point out the repetitions not to discount the biographies or discredit the

\textsuperscript{46} Though I use the term “boy-ology” to refer to the personal depiction of Alger as constantly needing and wanting a harem of boys around him giving their affection and love, Kidd’s definition, as an “American preoccupation” with boys and their “authorized worker,” influences this definition and recognition of Alger as an authority on boyhood. For more, see Kidd’s \textit{Boyology}, introduction and chapter 2.


biographers, but rather to trace a history and explore the connections between Alger’s failure and queerness. Usually biographies present different views or readings of their subjects as additional material becomes available; but the Alger biographies exist through the repetitive multiplication of distortions. Alger himself exists as an amplification of impressions, only one of which proved factual. It may be possible, through letters, correspondences, and various other historical records, to reconstruct the physical being that existed in the 1800s. But to what effect? As will become apparent, biographers have already combed through what remains of Alger. Non-Society members, Mayes and Tebbel, present a disheartened man, a failed writer, and a literary abject. Gardner’s Alger copes with his possible literary shortcomings by dedicating himself to and surrounding himself with boys. In one fashion or another, the pre-1971 biographers portray a heterosexually failed, boy-dedicated, inept if comfortable boy-book writer.

**Alger [as] Hero**

The Horatio Alger Society began when Forrest Campbell met Kenneth Butler in Kalamazoo in 1961. Both ardent readers and collectors of Alger’s books, they decided to create a newsletter for “readers, collectors, and dealers of books written by Alger” to attract other fans. The newsletter began what Campbell saw as a “religious conversion” to promote the “wholesome values” of Alger’s fiction and to expose the “many inaccuracies, distortions and outright lies about Alger and his work,” for which he blamed Mayes. Campbell and the Society, which incorporated in 1965, worked to erase Mayes’s Alger through two venues. First,

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51 Scharnhorst with Bales, *Lost Life*, xvi. For precision, Scharnhorst states that the “original biography, purposely spurious, was succeeded by others that not only failed to correct obvious distortions but multiplied them.”

52 *Newsboy* 1, no. 1 (1962), 1.

they promoted their “hero” through the Society’s values: “it is America’s loss that we do not have more men like Alger who taught the younger generation thrift, honesty, and hard work as a means of success in life, rather than the sometimes questionable short cuts toward this goal today.” They argued against the “rags-to-riches” label, claiming that Alger’s “high-minded heroes are more interested in doing good [than] in making money, and usually ended up more respectable than rich.”

Second, Campbell and Butler wanted to produce a new biography to properly honor their “hero.” As it turned out, Ralph Gardner, PF-053, had already written one. Gardner had been unable to find a publisher for his biography, *Horatio Alger: or, the American Hero Era*; but luckily for him, Butler owned Wayside Press, which promptly published Gardner’s book. It instantly received the Society’s “stamp of approval,” declared Gardner “the leading authority” on Alger, promoted his biography in every newsletter, and encouraged its members to spread “the truth about Alger.”

Gardner’s biography contains an amazing one hundred-plus-page bibliography detailing the publication history and precise physical descriptions (binding, collation, title page) of the 123 books Alger wrote. However, Gardner fictionalized the biographical section, possibly more so than Mayes. It reads like an Alger novel, which is apt because Gardner took whole sections of Alger’s own texts and repeated them as actual events that Alger experienced. Gardner’s introductions freely admits that “some situations were dramatized and dialogue created, but always within the framework of existing facts. . . . Throughout, Horatio’s words are used

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54 Ibid., 98.
55 Ibid., 99.
whenever possible.”  Most often, Gardner uses “Horatio’s words” to place him squarely in the middle of his numerous boy characters. The best example is Alger’s crusade against the padrone system. Mayes began Alger’s crusade, saying that “of all his sixty-seven years of doing things, the most constructive” thing Alger did was bring indentured servitude to the public’s attention.  Gardner does the same with chapter 22, placing Alger in an exact replica of Phil, the Fiddler.

The padrone system is one in which an older man, usually Italian (the padrone), imports boys from his native country and has them work as buskers to pay off the debt owed by their parents.  Of course, the padrone does not keep accurate records of the money repaid, and, as the story goes, the boys remain “little white slaves,” most not surviving their adolescence. No doubt this system existed to some extent, but Alger’s role in extinguishing it cannot be proven.

Nevertheless, Alger becomes “engulfed” in the cause after an “eight or nine” year-old boy “beaten until he collapsed” by a “burly persecutor” was brought to the Newsboys’ Lodging House, where Alger was “writing in his corner room.” As little Paolo lay with “his eyes closed and a trickle of blood flowing from his mouth,” Alger leaned close to hear his last words, “No padrone, No! Don’t beat me, padrone!” Minutes later, Paolo died, “not only from inhuman punishment . . . but also from starvation.”  To fight this criminal practice, Alger and O’Connor

57 Ibid., 12–13. For comparisons, see chapter Gardner, American Hero Era, chapter 17, esp. 160–62 and Ben, the Luggage Boy; Or, Among the Wharves (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003) chapter 1 and Tattered Tom; Or, The Story of a Street Arab (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003) chapter 7; also Gardner’s chapters 17 and 18 and Phil, the Fiddler.

58 Mayes, Alger, 131.

59 Ibid., 132–33.

60 Gardner, American Hero Era, 225.

61 Ibid., 209. In Phil, the Fiddler (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), Gardner’s “Paolo” is Giacomo, and his vicious beating and death are found in chapter 11, 77–80 and chapter 24, 151–56, respectively.
teamed up with “Alfonso Cerqua, superintendent of the Italian School at the Five Points.”

Gardner recounts several months of conversations between them and the man Cerqua “recommended” Alger meet, “Giovanna Secchi de Casale, editor of our local newspaper, Eco d’Italia.” Together, with Tribune reporter Nathan D. Urner, they rooted out crime, exploring “gang hangouts and barrooms,” finding “children—some of them naked” all over the Italian sector.

They meet Filippo, who escaped his padrone when “his best friend, a sickly boy, died after a beating received for not bringing in enough money at the end of the day.” Gardner describes Filippo as a typical Alger protagonist: “although undersized for his age, he was a handsome lad, about twelve years old. He had a dark complexion, black hair and shining brown eyes.” The crusaders arrange for Filippo to go west with the Children’s Aid Society, whose representative “vowed to ‘keep a special eye on the kid, all the way.’”

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62 Ibid., 210.
63 Ibid., 213.
64 Ibid., 214, 215.
65 Ibid., 223–24. For comparison, see again Phil, the Fiddler, chapter 11, pages 77–80. Also note that Filippo is the same name Alger gives to his main character, Phil, who also runs away from his padrone after he beat both he and Giacomo, who is “sick” and “weak,” for not bringing him enough money.
66 For comparison, Phil, the Fiddler, chapter 1, page 23: “He was twelve years old, but small of his age. His complexion was a brilliant olive, with dark eyes peculiar to his race, and his hair black. In spite of the dirt, his face was strikingly handsome.” For more on the attractiveness of Alger’s protagonists and others’ ability to perceive it, see Moon’s “‘Gentle Boy.’”
67 Gardner, American Hero Era, 225. Phil, the Fiddler does not go out west; instead, Dr. Drayton rescues him from the snow and adopts him to replace the son he lost. Julius, from Julius, or the Street Boy Out West (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), travels west to escape a padrone under the supervision of the Children’s Aid Society.
Their fight for justice was not without danger. According to Mayes, Alger was beaten “by, it seemed, a hundred pair of hands” sent by the padrone he would later have arrested. ⁶⁸ When protecting boys, Mayes writes, Alger was “militant. . . . What he lacked in originality of expression he more than made up for by his belligerent tactics.” ⁶⁹ Gardner says Alger’s apartment was robbed and turned into “complete chaos,” and the Lodging House was stench bombed. In both scenarios, Alger “badgered and hounded the legislature” and got “protection . . . enacted into law,” rescuing hundreds of helpless “white slaves.” ⁷⁰ And do not forget: he finished Phil, the Fiddler three months later. ⁷¹

There exists no record of these conversations, rescues, heroics, legislative meetings, or Alger’s involvement in combating the padroni. ⁷² Yet, Gardner did not completely fabricate this adventure. In the preface to Phil, the Fiddler, Alger writes:

I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of two prominent Italian gentlemen, long resident in New York—Mr. A. E. Cerqua, superintendent of the Italian school at the Five Points, and through his introduction, of Mr. G. F. Secchi de Casale, editor of the well-known Eco d’Italia, from whom I obtained full and trustworthy information . . . . My readers will learn, with surprise, probably, of the hard life led by these children, and the inhuman treatment which they receive from the speculators who buy them from their parents in Italy. ⁷³

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⁶⁸ Mayes, Alger, 141. It was actually eight pair of hands, as revealed on page 142.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 142–43.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 226.


⁷² The biographies cite no sources, and no proof turned up through various searches in newspaper archives or other historical records.

⁷³ Alger, Phil, the Fiddler, xv.
A. E. Cerqua did exist. He worked with the Children’s Aid Society to hold a holiday festival that seven hundred Italian children attended.74 Beyond that small article, no definitive evidence suggests the two ever crusaded against juvenile servitude.

I point to these differing depictions, again, not to discredit the Alger biographies, but to focus on what Doctorow calls fiction’s instructive and indirect emotions. What intrigues me about these biographies, and the three to come, is not their fictionalization per se, but the information that is fictionalized, the Alger they transmit, and the complex understandings and intuitive personality they create. Despite wanting to prove Mayes false, Gardner mimicked his structure and gave Alger the essential elements of a fake wife-to-be, a stutter, presidential ambitions, and even the nickname “Holy Horatio.” Gardner, like Mayes, crowns Alger a boy-savior and identifies Alger’s eradication of boy slavery his most worthy accomplishment. Perhaps dullness was the distortion to which the Society and its members objected: Gardner certainly removed the insipidness that Mayes dreaded in Alger. Unlike Mayes, Gardner’s Alger did publish several adult novels, including A Fancy of Hers and The Disagreeable Woman, despite Alger’s publishers being “furious” with Fancy’s “saccharine romance” and rejecting Woman twice. After each adult novel, Alger’s publishers asked him to “stick to juvenile adventures.” Alger submitted to his publisher’s requests, not because of an inability to write, but because Alger was “anxious to accommodate.”75

While dampening Alger’s failure, Gardner amplifies remnants of Mayes’s work that construct what I assert are Alger’s pederastic tendencies.76 If boys did not surround him, Alger

75 Gardner, American Hero Era, 286–90.
76 James Kincaid names these remnants Alger’s “pedophilic fairy tale” and calls the Alger heroes “American Dream” children who have become central to Western popular mythology, both
strolled the streets looking for one to talk to, feed or clothe, or take to the Lodging House.77

Even before the molestation charges exposed Alger as an accused pedophile, Gardner, like
Mayes, portrayed Alger as dedicated to boys. Instead of emphasizing failure, Gardner’s Alger
wrote his “finest” work amongst the bootblacks.78 Charles Loring Brace, sponsor of the
Newsboys’ Lodging House, tells Alger that he “will find sufficient material for a hundred
‘Ragged Dicks,’ we can make it available to you.”79 Gardner’s Alger reveled in the company of
boys, who “fascinated him.”80 Alger not only lived at the Newsboys’ Lodging House but
“lavished affection and attention upon homeless waifs, buying them gifts of shoes, clothing and
sweets, handing over money.”81 Mayes connected Alger’s simple-mindedness to his desire to be
around boys. But in Gardner’s depiction, Alger felt a sense of belonging because he “always felt
more relaxed in the company of boys.”82 Alger paid for the boys’ business schooling and tutors,
and he traveled to his family home and to Maine with various boys who had spent time in his
apartment.83

Mayes’s fictionalization had been challenged prior to Gardner’s biography. As footnoted
earlier, Malcolm Cowley questioned Mayes’s “facts” as early as 1945. Frank Gruber’s modestly

“valuable and dangerous, familiar and strange.” He also notes, “it’s not hard works that brings
success but being cute, cute in the presence of susceptible adults.” James Kincaid, Erotic

78 Ibid., 189.
79 Ibid., 196.
80 Ibid., 199.
81 Ibid., 201.
82 Ibid., 227–28.
83 Ibid., 271.
titled 1961 book, *Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Biography and Bibliography of the Best Selling Author of All Time*, is often credited with being the first source to question the validity of the Mayes biography: “Mayes’s book is studded with such a vast number of factual errors and flights of the imagination that I am compelled to discard virtually everything in the book with one single exception, the date of his birth. Even the date of his death is wrong.” But the book’s print run of only 750 copies crippled the impact of Gruber’s claim. After Gardner’s work, Cowley took his acerbic pen and wrote “Horatio Alger: Failure.” He insults Alger extensively, saying he “went to New York to dream of unfading laurels while leading the life of a needy hack;” that the “myth of success” credited to Alger “is certainly not embedded in the career of the author;” and “as if conscious of his being only a boy in size, he preferred the company of bootblacks and match sellers to that of grown persons. At fifty he still liked to play with blocks.” Despite belligerently stating that Mayes’s biography was so “full of errors at the few points where it can be compared with dependable information from other sources,” Cowley cannot help but repeat Mayes’s padrone and “Holy Horatio” inaccuracies. He even quotes from Alger’s diary, a source he accused Mayes of failing to access.

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84 (West Lost Angeles: Grover Jones Press, 1961), 13. The book is mostly bibliography, as eighty of his 105 pages address Alger’s novels from the perspective of an avid book collector, giving extensively detailed descriptions of every book Alger ever wrote, even those falsely credited to him.


86 Ibid., 64.

Gardner’s biography echoes Mayes’s work and maintains Alger’s boy-obsession from Mayes’s pure “fantasy.” But Alger’s connection to boys does not move beyond the platonic, an important distinction to make for Society-sanctioned biographers. As Campbell illustrates, the Society’s Alger idolization is integral to their personal connection with him, which is equally dependent on Mayes’s erroneous attributes. In the inaugural issue of Newsboy in July 1962, Campbell, like Mayes, does not address textual or historical concerns; instead, he describes how his life has always been connected to Alger. His birthday was “Friday the 13th . . . the same as Alger’s” though admittedly not the “same month, nor, of course, the same year.” He grew up in the shadow of the state house where Lincoln began his political career; but, he calls Lincoln “the Backwoods Boy,” referring to Alger’s 1883 Lincoln biography. As a child, Campbell recalls that all of his schoolbooks and Alger books were interchangeable, both passed down from brothers, both teaching “every boy” how to succeed. As an adult, he searched for the “treasures of [his] youth, those Alger books” that connected him to his “patron saint” and his “god and his religion.”

Campbell’s intense commitment to Alger is not unique among Society members. In the preface to his Alger biography, Gardner describes the first time he “met Horatio Alger.” In Maine 1936, Gardner happened upon Mr. Spaulding’s junk store and his “mound of mildewed, mouse-nibbled books.” By the time Gardner scanned “to the bottom of the first page of Frank Fowler, the Cash Boy,” he “became an Alger devotee and searched for others.” After picking out ten books on the spot, Mr. Spaulding gave the thirteen-year-old Ralph three more at no cost,

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88 Mayes, Magazine Maze, 184.
89 Newsboy 1, no. 1, 1
saying “they’re too nice to leave.” Gardner asked if there was anywhere else to find Alger books, desiring them before reading more than a few paragraphs. Mr. Spaulding replied, “Not the Algers, sonny. They’re mine. I read them all when I was younger than you are.”

These relationships represent a male homosocial continuum amongst readers young and old, between Society members, and between Society members and Alger. More than camaraderie, these relationships create a “potential unbrokenness” between writer, reader, and worshipper, between the paternal and the filial. Alger’s texts, his existence in the biographies and their multiplied distortions allow this fluidity between men. Not necessarily sexual, the relationships are homosocial and, in the way members derive pleasure from their devotion to Alger, libidinal. Alger acts as a conduit for desire, evolving as new readers, new idolizers, and new biographies produce new readings. Yet, their desire must have boundaries, especially for and in a Society bound by personal connections to a nineteenth-century accused molester. Acknowledging Alger’s queer possibility is too troubling for many Society members to handle (as this chapter will demonstrate shortly), especially for those who do not believe Alger is a failure.

**Out of the Closet and Into the Fire**

Alger’s pederasty accusations finally came to light when Richard M. Huber’s 1971 *The American Idea of Success* printed Alger’s “unnatural familiarity with boys.” The Unitarian Society of Brewster records, where Alger was a reverend in 1866, state that

> Horatio Alger, Jr. who has officiated as our Minister for about 15 months past has recently been charged with gross immorality and a most heinous crime, a crime of no less magnitude than the abominable and revolting crime of unnatural familiarity with boys.

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Whereupon the committee sent for Alger and to him specified the charges and evidence of his guilt which he neither denied or attempted to extenuate but received it with apparent calmness of an old offender—and hastily left town on the very next train for parts unknown.93

Huber accessed the church’s historical records in Brewster and criticizes Mayes and Gardner for not doing the same. But he repeats the Alger that Mayes created, despite realizing that “it will take some time to correct the errors” in Mayes’s biography.94 The “encyclopedic and standard accounts” of Alger’s life, Huber proclaims, all take “as their source an inaccurate biography of Alger by Herbert Mayes.” Yet, he openly acknowledges the inaccuracies and cites them as truth. The “facts about [Alger’s] life” are that “he was a sickly child,” “a momma’s boy,” and that “Holy Horatio” was a gentle man who befriended “with a generous hand the street urchins of the Newsboys’ Lodging House.” Huber does add one element to the Alger discourse, that Alger “without very much of a doubt, was a homosexual.”95 Elaborating, he claims that Alger’s “homosexual undertones” allowed him to identify with the “little boys” and “elderly benefactor” characters in his novels.96

The only proof Huber offers of Alger’s homosexuality is the Brewster charges. In effect, Huber perverts Alger’s concern for boy-welfare by directly connecting Alger’s desire for boys to his desire to be around boys. This distinction is important because Huber dismisses John Tebbel’s 1963 From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr., and the American Dream, which evidences the homosexual undertones Huber mentions. But first, let me introduce Tebbel’s work

93 Huber, Idea of Success, 46. Huber’s text is not a biography. Rather, it traces a cultural history of middle-class success from Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger to B.C. Forbes and Norman Vincent Peale.

94 Ibid., 469n4.

95 Ibid., 45–46.

96 Ibid., 49.
and its other links to both Huber and Mayes. Huber disputes Tebbel’s claim that Mayes’s work “can hardly be improved upon nearly four decades later,” since Tebbel admits he drew “freely” from Mayes to write his Alger biography. However, Huber should not dismiss Tebbel, because both writers employ Mayes as their dominant source. In many ways, Tebbel’s biography could be called “Mayes lite,” as it, for the most part, repeats exact sentences, paragraphs, and entire chapters of Mayes. The examples are too many to list, but for consistency, here are a few of my favorites: Alger “stuttered badly,” had trysts in Europe, imitated “The Limekiln Man,” and always “made himself generally immaculate” around the Newsboys’ Lodging House but dressed “drab” when alone, which was rare. Alger was drawn to Wing first through “sympathy” and later love, rode on fire trucks like a child, fought the padrone system, yearned to write for adults, and should have “let go” of writing juvenile stories.

Though Tebbel claims that Alger “considered his own career an abject failure” and concludes “one cannot help viewing Alger as a pathetic figure,” he does diverge from Mayes in

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97 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, author’s note, iii.

98 Ibid., 24; Mayes, *Alger*, 17.


100 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 71; Mayes, *Alger*, 106.

101 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 70.


103 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 86; Mayes, *Alger*, 118.


subtle ways. Tebbel surrounds Alger with boys, and makes explicit his emotional preferences: “the truth was that Alger liked boys more than any other segment of humanity, more than anything else in the world.” Tebbel also nudges Alger toward an identity: where Mayes likens Alger to a “virgin girl” when he was in Europe with a sexually aggressive woman, Tebbel describes Alger’s “biology was reversed” and that “he was her mistress.” When Wing died, trampled by the same “runaway horse,” his death “was the cause of [Alger’s] emptiness.” One passage in particular illustrates how Tebbel improves upon Mayes, changing a few key words to make an until-then unnamed claim:

Horatio was unutterably lonely. He spent much of his early childhood building with large blocks, and no doubt a psychiatrist studying him at that stage would have derived further clues from the fact that he built the same structure again and again—towers which he erected block upon block until they toppled, whereupon he would quietly, unemotionally, start building them again.

While Alger’s physical obsession with and repeated failure to maintain an erect tower is enjoyable to read, Tebbel uses it as a precursor to dare speak the name that Mayes suggests:

His friendship with O’Connor was a closer relationship than any he had ever enjoyed. While it is dangerous to read into it more pathologic overtones than may have existed, there were strong elements of the homosexual in this friendship, at least on Alger’s part, although there is no reason to believe it was ever overt. On the face of it, Alger appeared to be living a kind of existence which was homosexual in nature, if not in fact. He had renounced women and the conventional patterns of sex. As far as anyone knows, he had

106 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 18, 85.

107 Ibid., 73.


109 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 52.

110 Ibid., 57; Mayes, *Alger*, 111.

111 Tebbel, *Rags to Riches*, 129.

112 Ibid., 24.
no women friends. All his time was spent with either O’Connor or the young boys who surrounded them.\textsuperscript{113}

Tebbel, working inside what Mayes established, constructs a homosexual Alger through his closeness to O’Connor. Where Mayes claims “Alger and O’Connor became inseparable,”\textsuperscript{114} Tebbel gives Alger a homosexual “existence,” one that “renounced women and the conventional patterns of sex.” Tebbel also denotes Alger’s “existence” by recognizing a difference between just being “queer” and being overtly and factually so. Such a nuance begs the question of what marks this distinction. How much more overt can Alger be if he “liked boys more than any other segment of humanity, more than anything else in the world”? If he “erected” phallic structures compulsively as a child and spent all his time with “O’Connor or the young boys who surrounded them”? Even more so, Tebbel connects Alger’s publishing successes to his queerness and his closeness to the Newsboys’ Lodging House. Unequivocally, the Lodging House is where Alger “found the material for the books that were to make his reputation.”\textsuperscript{115}

One page later Tebbel defines this “material” as the “hundreds of homeless footloose boys,” “bootblacks, delivery boys, newsboys” ranging in age from “twelve up to sixteen or seventeen.”\textsuperscript{116}

Tebbel does equivocate about his proof for Alger’s homosexuality, relating it first to Alger’s closeness to O’Connor and then to “either O’Connor or the young boys who surrounded them.” Huber does not, and neither does the first post-1971 biography. Edwin P. Hoyt’s \textit{Horatio’s Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger, Jr.} amplified Tebbel’s emphases to an

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 69.
\item Mayes, \textit{Alger}, 104.
\item Tebbel, \textit{Rags to Riches}, 66.
\item Ibid., 67.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
extreme, and earns distinction for several reasons. First, Hoyt gives excellent summaries of Alger’s books, far superior to Mayes and Gardner in detailing key plots and characters and their repetition in other books. Second, he does not repeat Mayes’s narratives of Alger as a pitiful, sad man and a failed writer; to do so, says Hoyt, is to “deny our own history.” 117 Quite a history, Hoyt contends, since the biography’s most striking distinction is its brash declaration that Alger “had all the makings of a homosexual: a domineering father, a weak and patient mother, a strong and not very attractive sister and a grave feeling of inferiority in the world of men.” 118 Hoyt’s book is not completely separate from the previous biographies. Both the “Holy Horatio” nickname and Alger’s domineering father stem directly from Mayes. But Hoyt does take Alger in a new, sexualized direction. Picking up on Tebbel, Hoyt states that O’Connor and Alger were “guided by a common interest in boys—although not stemming from the same roots.” 119 Along with printing the Brewster charges on the back cover, Hoyt claims that Alger “learned the need for discretion” after the Brewster incident. 120 Hoyt’s Alger also pursued an “active social life . . . in the company of boys or grown up boys” 121 and “reveled in his relations with boys.” 122 He tells a story of Alger having to move because he had too many boy “callers,” 123 and finally calls

118 Ibid., 21.
119 Ibid., 88.
120 Ibid., 63.
121 Ibid., 199.
122 Ibid., 222.
123 Ibid., 224.
Alger “an American folk hero to rival Oscar Wilde.” Essentially, Alger could not possibly be pitifully sad when he was constantly surrounded by the ephebes he loved. More importantly, where Mayes and Gardner merely surround Alger with young boys, Hoyt explicitly labels Alger “a minister who buggered little boys.”

Sedgwick’s *Between Men* explains the “double bind” that governs male homosociality: “For a man to be a man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men.’” In naming Alger a homosexual and providing proof of his pederastic past, Huber and Hoyt disrupted the continuum in which Society members existed with their hero. Society members’ personalized relationships with and narratives of Alger and the sense of “filiation” members created allowed them to idolize Alger, his ideas of boyhood, and the boys who inhabited it. In effect, Huber and Hoyt clarified the blurred line and named Alger idolization homosexual. Implication, says Sedgwick, is a powerful regulator, which now tainted the personal investment the members made in Alger. Once named, the Society challenged it with religious fervor.

Gilbert K. Westgard II, PF-024, started *Bootblack: The Horatio Alger Magazine* in 1988 partly in response to Newsboy’s inability to talk openly about the 1866 records detailing Alger’s “unnatural familiarity with boys.” In a March-April 1989 issue, he published “In Defense of Horatio Alger, Jr.” by Dr. Max Goldberg (originally from the December 1981 *Dime Novel Round-Up*). Of all Society members, Dr. Max Goldberg was perhaps the most attached to Alger.

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124 Ibid., 242.

125 Ibid., 7.

126 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89.

127 Chapter 5 addresses Westgard’s forming a new magazine and narrates the relationship between this specific information and the Society’s history.
One of the first to join the Society, PF-008 organized a yearly memorial service at Alger’s grave starting in May 1968,128 actively recruited younger members with his essay and movement “Generation Gap: How to Close it,” and encouraged members’ sons to form Junior Alger Clubs. He argued that “Alger’s books converted the thieving, cursing street boys of Manhattan in the 1860s” and could “do something similar for the counter-culture boys of the 1960s.”129 Here, fiction gives Goldberg the complex understanding that Alger saves his characters and could save the misguided youth of the time. As with the biographies, fact and reality are indistinguishable, or better yet, purposefully integrated.

In his article, Goldberg’s personal belief motivates his vehement defense of Alger against the pederasty charges, calling the records “persecution,” and that “there will always be persons, less knowledgeable about Alger’s character than we are” to “slander” him. Arguing strictly from the personal and intimate knowledge of a Society member, Goldberg defends Alger by presenting him as a victim of his own identity and kindness:

It is said that “a leopard never changes its spots.” Neither does a “Gay.” Neither psychoanalysis nor psychiatric treatment show [sic] any results. Once a Gay, always a gay.

For 30 years Alger, Jr. had served the Lodging Home boys, as Chaplain and advisor. The boys were worldly, due to their hard lot. Imagine Alger even insinuating an idea of an aberration, when he had preached to them about morality. They would blackmail him out of New York! Yet for 30 years, not a word of reproach reaches our ears! Take the Seligman instance. Here were five highly intelligent brothers. He lived in their home and tutored them. He played billiards with them. They even played pranks on him. They were quite intimate with him. But not a word comes from them stating anything immoral!130

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129 Forreyn, “Religious Experience,” 100.
Instead of distancing Alger from potential molestation situations, Goldberg’s defense against the charges places Alger in the constant company of boys. How could Alger have had sexual relationships with boys, he asks, when he was always around them? Thirty years at the Newsboys’ Lodging House, living and tutoring the five Seligman brothers, playing billiards and pranks, being “quite intimate” with them; Alger’s boy-loving tendencies were already circulated, repeated, and believed. Specifying and designating the tendencies “pederasty” is the crime.

While members and critics can discuss the all-male worlds surrounding both Alger and his characters, Goldberg vehemently defends even the naming of what those all-male worlds could possibly foster or the reason for the homosociality in the first place. If desire (and again, desire in the sense of pleasure, not necessarily sexual) is the root of these formations, then the desire must remain unnamed.

Goldberg’s defense reflects Sedgwick’s definition of homosexual panic as “the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail.” For as Goldberg continues his article, he places more emphasis on Alger’s relationship with boys and the distinction between being gay once and being a lifetime gay:

What about the boys in Natick, whom he used to read to in the park. [sic] Bought them candy in Bailly’s hotel and entertained them. No comment from there. Why? Were the Brewster boys more attractive? “Do not cast away an honest man for a villainous accusation.”

I am irked to boredom with the Brewster affair. All seem hearsay. True, times have changed and our attitude towards gays have [sic] changed. I could name many ancient and modern writers who were gay. BUT these are proven cases. With Alger it is different. The accusation is only ONE instance and that is hearsay. There is a saying that one

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131 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89.
swallow doesn’t make a summer, neither does ONE accusation in a life time, prove a guilty overt act, especially when it is one sided, with no judicial verdict.\footnote{Goldberg, “Defense,” 34.}

There was no judicial verdict because Alger “hastily” ran to New York, presumably, to avoid such a verdict.\footnote{Huber, \textit{Idea of Success}, 46.} Goldberg argues that one “incident” is not enough to label a man gay. His point reflects the distinction Tebbel tries to make earlier when he says that Alger was not “ever overt” even though his friendship with O’Connor has “strong elements of the homosexual.”\footnote{Tebbel, \textit{Rags to Riches}, 69.}

Most often, one “incident” is more than enough to label a man; if not, why fight the one “incident”? If, as Goldberg asserts, “our attitude toward gays have changed,” why muster such a defense against the one accusation? Why can Alger not be gay? The accusations caused panic because the naming implicates those who feel closest to Alger, those who are most “knowledgeable” about Alger, those who replicate and reiterate what Alger’s novels and biographies are about, and what Alger means to them. The same personalized, “private, psychologized” relationship replicates the continuum of desire: “to draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.”\footnote{Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men}, 1–2.} “Men-loving-men” and “men-promoting-the-interests-of-men” must be divorced and strict boundaries enforced, even though, as the Society illustrates, they remain quite permeable.
Definitive Statements of Ambiguity

The final biography illustrates how the Horatio Alger Society creates and maintains, not disputes, the Alger narratives of failure and queerness. Hoyt was not a member, or if he was, I have found no record of it. As such, he appears neutral, without adoration and implication, despite not claiming Alger a failure. But Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales were members, and they, along with Westgard, were responsible for pushing the Society to talk openly about the Brewster incident. As editor of Newsboy from 1974 to the mid-1980s, Bales watched the debate unfold on the pages of the magazine. In the December 1979 issue, after waiting two years because of “opposition” within the Society but wanting members to “judge for themselves,” Bales ran an article by Westgard featuring the unedited church records.136 In the same issue, Scharnhorst reviews a new edition of Mayes’s original biography in which Scharnhorst deems all biographies on Alger (Gardner’s included) “fabrications.”137 In the editorial introducing Westgard’s article, Bales identifies Gardner as “the first Alger nut” to discover the Brewster records but says that he “avoided” them because they were “far from conclusive.” Bales goes on to wonder why, when actual “records exist,” the Society promotes Alger “bringing an end to the padrone system,” “selling upwards of 400,000,000” books, and “hobnobbing with . . . Mark Twain and Bret Harte,” knowing these claims are false: “WHY WOULD PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT THE ACCOUNT OF A REAL OCCURRENCE, WHEN I HAVE NEVER HEARD ANY PROTESTS CONCERNING THE ABOVE AND OTHER PIECES OF PURE FICTION!” But with Alger, reality does not apply, as Bales and Scharnhorst’s biography illustrates.

Scharnhorst and Bales spent twelve years reviewing over 150 letters and 700 articles to produce *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, the definitive biography that they confidently boasted “will not soon be superceded.” Their 1985 “labor of love” offers an excellent historical account of Alger biographies, benefiting from a relationship with Herbert Mayes that formed over the 1970s. They state that “through reiteration,” the Mayes biography “obtained the force and luster of truth,” and through their research, they will finally write the Alger story that “deserves to be told at last.” But their “story” proffers an Alger whose “life reads like a case study in frustration” and “thwarted ambition.” Alger was “confined” to juvenile literature his entire writing career, and his books sold “despite their literary demerits.” He never “abandoned all hope of winning renown as a serious artist,” and always possessed an “irrespressible [sic] ambition to write for adults.” Like Gardner, they gather most of their assumptions about Alger from his own fiction: Alger was a “sickly child, near-sighted,” because in 1859 he wrote a story for *True Flag* in which the narrator states “my near-sightedness was born with me, and it is likely to last me through my lifetime.” When at Harvard, Alger, “like his later hero Ragged Dick, . . . studied alone, confident he would later reap dividends from the

138 Ibid., 4.
139 Scharnhorst with Bales, *Lost Life*, xviii.
140 Ibid., xix.
141 Ibid., ix.
142 Ibid., xix.
143 Ibid., 63.
144 Ibid., 106.
145 Ibid., 10.
investment.”146 He is hazed at Harvard, just as in Sam’s Chance.147 He visited London only “as long as would the hero of Alger’s later novel Frank Hunter’s Peril.”148 He is “hired by banker Seligman much like Ragged Dick had been hired by banker Rockwell,”149 and the end of Ragged Dick “voiced his own fond fantasy: ‘The past with its trials over; the future expands before him, a bright vista of merited success.’”150

Whereas Gardner painted Alger in a glowing light, Scharnhorst and Bales present Alger as unhappy with his career. Similar to Hoyt, they do not refrain from portraying Alger as a boy-lover and as queer. They said Alger oversaw “a veritable salon of boys” and quoted his sister Augusta as saying that nothing pleased Alger more than “to get a lot of boys between the ages of 12 and 16 into the room with him.”151 They gave Alger an intense desire to tutor adolescent boys, especially the five Seligman brothers. They addressed his “adoption” of the Downie brothers and the fact that Alger paid for their school and apartments.152 Additionally, Scharnhorst and Bales quoted Alger’s reference to his Friday ritual, wherein boys would hang out at his apartment: “I have a natural liking for boys.”153 They also wrote about new acquaintances and unpublished material. When Alger was in Europe, he went on a “three-day expedition to the picturesque town of Sorrento” with “a young Bostonian and military officer

146 Ibid., 14.
147 Ibid., 22. Mayes recounts a hazing on Alger’s first day of college, Alger, 50.
148 Scharnhorst with Bales, Lost Life, 46.
149 Ibid., 98.
150 Ibid., 87–88.
151 Ibid., 77.
152 Ibid., 124–25.
153 Ibid., 135–36.
named Charles Edward Paine.” They printed a previously unpublished poem of Alger’s from 1853 that pines of unrequited love and sexual subterfuge in a female voice. They also printed another poem in which Alger writes as a woman to Jamie, a code name for Joseph Dean, a sixteen-year-old Bostonian in whom “Alger’s emotional investment . . . ran high.”

Scharnhorst and Bales also directly link Alger’s literary merits and success to boys. After asking “what could be salvaged from the debacle in Brewster?,” they claim that “Alger resolved to expiate his own sins through a literary ministry.” As he writes Ragged Dick during the summer of 1866, “Alger began to haunt the docks” and other sites where “the friendless urchins could be found,” “especially the Newsboys’ Lodging House.” Alger’s new residence in New York City inspired a “significant structural innovation” in his literature that leads directly to his success: “a stock adult character, the Patron, whose role paralleled the part Alger had begun to assume among the street children of the city.” Alger’s integration into his own texts, Scharnhorst and Bales argue, result in his more successful texts. Yet simultaneously, they denigrate Alger’s author status: “between 1867 and mid-1873, when he took a brief respite from authorship, he wrote eighteen juvenile novels.” Alger, then, was not an author during his most “prolific” era, the era during which he produced his best-selling work, the era during which he spent the most active time around the boys of New York City. Alger fails as an author by not

154 Ibid., 49.
155 Ibid., 32.
156 Ibid., 56–57.
157 Ibid., 67, 70.
158 Ibid., 77.
159 Ibid., 83.
160 Ibid., 87.
being named an author, but succeeds in writing and publishing eighteen texts while “among the street children of the city.” It seems Alger’s proximity to his proclivities both dictates and hinders his authorial and successful status.

But in a troubling narrative, Scharnhorst and Bales make an erroneous claim about Alger’s sexual identity. Needing to base their biographical information on Alger’s text, they read *Tattered Tom* as Alger’s own gender confusion: “In the title volume (1871), as if to betray his own sexual insecurity, Alger allowed that ‘it was not quite easy to determine’ whether his protagonist ‘was a boy or a girl.’”¹⁶¹ In a mixture of textual psychoanalysis and inference from correspondences, the “definitive” biography reinforces the same opinion Gruber espoused twenty years prior: the biographers of Alger are “compelled to invent even more romantic and glamorous incidents than did Mayes to fill out the pages. There just wasn’t enough interesting material in Alger’s life to fill even a thin volume.”¹⁶²

So who was Horatio Alger, Jr.? He was born Friday, January 13, 1832. He attended Harvard, and he was a minister in Brewster who left the night he was accused of molestation. He lived in New York City, where he knew Charles O’Connor and Charles Loring Brace and was familiar with the Newsboys’ Lodging House and the Children’s Aid Society. He published over one hundred books, and he died on July 18, 1899. But the more important and far more intriguing question is, who is Horatio Alger? According to his biographers, he is a failed man who longed to write successful adult fiction. Surely it is a dramatic irony that Alger is read more by adults who worship his supposedly failed juvenile writing. He is a man who dedicated his life and work to the street boys of New York City, raising their esteem and outlook, supplying them

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 92.

with hope of advancement beyond poverty. He is a man devoted to boys in monetary, physical, and emotional ways. Alger is repetition, reiteration, and recreation, as the Horatio Alger Society illustrates with its philosophy on and narratives of Alger. He is a character to be created as hero, savior, pederast, writer—take your pick. Above all, according to his biographies and his discourse, Horatio Alger, Jr. is failure and queerness.
Figure 2-1. A graph of the Alger biographies.
CHAPTER 3
NOBLE AND/OR NASTY: A HISTORY OF HORATIO ALGER GOSSIP

What we know about Horatio Alger comes from biographical information, the idolization
of that information, and the construction of Alger by the Horatio Alger Society. This chapter re-
imagines what we know as Alger gossip, not in spoken but in written form. I rely on some
repeated information from previous sources, not to bore or browbeat, but to re-emphasize, re-
contextualize, and illustrate the permeability of Alger’s surface. Alger gossip traverses genre,
moving from non-fiction biographies and diaries to a fictional novel. As such, to define it as
independent from the biographies, or even the forthcoming parody and the Society chapters, is
intellectually dishonest. Yet Alger gossip provides an individual and unique perspective on
Alger construction. The Alger biographies show how fact and fiction blend to form a mythic
figure whose success or failure as an author connects to Alger’s queerness in various ways. In a
similar fashion, all Alger gossip seems to revolve around Alger’s boy-love or status as a boy-
lover and provides varied interpretations that ennoble, devalue, forgive, or maintain Alger in our
popular imagination. By specifically focusing on one historical novel and three distinct and
prominent examples of Alger gossip, this chapter seeks out the whispered stories to illustrate
how gossip functions in Society discourse and academic studies of Alger.

Three “known” pieces of information consistently surround Alger: (1) Alger was a
pederast;¹ (2) Alger wrote the biography of Edwin Forrest, regarded as the first icon of the New
York stage; and (3) Alger befriended William James and the two talked about their supposed
insanity and time spent at Somerville Asylum. We can confirm the first item, as much as one
accusation can support any claim. The social aspect of its whispered history exceeds the

¹ I choose the term “pederast” over “pedophile” because pederast is specifically defined as male
and because it has a more static and less criminal definition.
biographies’ boundaries and exists in the collective consciousness of Alger studies. Specifically for the Society, the tension that exists between Alger’s concern for boy-welfare and Alger’s expression of boy-love reflects, fairly or not, on the Society and their Alger admiration. Scharnhorst addresses the second gossip item to elevate Horatio’s status as an author. In actuality, Scharnhorst’s evidence may prove a collaboration between Alger and his cousin. More convincingly, though, Scharnhorst confirms a desire to elevate Alger beyond a boy-book author and boy-centered figure, a desire that exceeds the need for factuality. Louis Menand’s work with William James in *American Studies* disproves the third item. More importantly, Menand provides the “crisis-and-recovery” structure that dominates most biographical writing as a venue for reading the Alger/James connection. This particular gossip remains in circulation, not because of a possible Alger/James friendship, but because it offers the possibility of an Alger confession of boy-love.

With all Alger gossip, its usefulness proves more significant than its truthfulness. To support my claim, I turn to Jon Boorstin’s 2003 *The Newsboys’ Lodging-House; or, the Confessions of William James*, a novel that fantasizes what might have happened if James and Alger knew each other. As with Mayes’s biography, Boorstin’s novel calls attention to the interplay of fact and fiction to such an extent that it synthesizes the Alger gossip items outlined here and offers an approach to Alger that is geographically truthful, factually inaccurate, and ultimately wish fulfilling. Boorstin’s novel evidences the possibilities that gossip contributes to our definition of Alger.


Gossip, . . . as a form of witnessed knowledge, is often taken by academics as being only as unreliable as the person conveying the information, and, by definition, it is not
necessarily unsubstantiated. Further it is hard to dismiss gossip as mere whim or simple untruth because it’s “unwritten law,” to quote David Ehrenstein, is that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” suggesting that even if gossip gets some things slightly skewed, it nevertheless contains some kernel of truth.2

Gossip usually grows from a “kernel of truth” but becomes distorted through repetition. This distortion, in my application, is positive and negative. Certainly, no one aims to be a rumored pederast, but being whispered about, whether positively or negatively and whether fact or falsehood, reinforces any kernel of truth simply through its repetition. For the most part, one can prove or disprove Alger’s pederasty, his friendship with William James, and his authorship of the Forrest biography. Even after researchers determined the veracity of these Alger gossip items, they continued to be whispered about in the pages of Newsboy, suggested in newer biographies, and treated as privileged information among those in the Alger community.

Ralph Rosnow and Gary Fine’s definition of gossip as “talk with a social purpose” addresses how Alger gossip sustains the Alger community, regardless of its accuracy or effect. Gossip outlives truth and survives as its own informational entity, preserved by transmission from one person to another as a means of bonding certain social groups.3 Rosnow and Fine further examine gossip as a form of social exchange “motivated primarily by ego and status needs.”4 The knowledge and information the Society owns and shares elevate it to the status of “authority” on all things Alger; but its gossip demonstrates more intimacy than ego and status. The Society members unite through collective admiration, idolization, and love of their imagined Alger. Gardner’s deeply personal and fictional biography illustrates how the Society prefers

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4 Ibid., 4.
intimacy to factuality. The Partic’lar Friends’ intimate and personal relationships with Alger embrace the unconventional acquisition of information through interpretation of a kernel of truth. Alger information, even when proven false, remains useful in its ability to bring and keep people together.

In addition to enabling bonding and conversation, Alger gossip offers an alternative means of processing information. As I stated previously, Alger does circulate outside the biographies, even if what circulates depends on biographical misinformation. But as the previous chapter argues, the fictional nature of the biographies enriches and complicates our understanding of Alger. In a sense, the biographies present a comfortable and convenient truth. Despite our awareness of the inaccuracy of the information provided, it is still the information we want to hear. Boorstin’s novel replicates this complexity by astutely combining an accurate depiction of people and places in New York City with our belief in Alger’s guilt, his friendship with James, and his lack of literary status. We are comfortable with a penitent pederast, or with two writers who live during the same time period knowing each other, or with maligning a boy-book author. These beliefs are easy to imagine and easier to maintain, despite evidence to the contrary.

Relying on our Alger construction, as Butt states, “queer[s] the very ways in which we might think of the evidential.”5 It is chronologically impossible that Horatio Alger and William James met when the gossip suggests they did, even if the intrigue of their rumored relationship tickles the Alger enthusiast’s fancy. The proof that Alger wrote the Forrest biography is extremely slim and circumstantial. Yet, if a fake diary can be cited as evidence years after its existence is called into question, one almost feels cruel dismissing the importance of this source. Through its

5 Butt, Between You and Me, 7.
ability to linger, create, and encapsulate, gossip forms a critical component of our beliefs about and desires for Alger.

**Alger and His Boys**

It is neither gossip nor a secret that Alger’s texts revolve around male homosocial relationships, be they boy/boy or man/boy. His biographies embed this kernel of truth in their construction of Alger, though they never specifically name it “boy love”. The intricacy involved in maintaining such an open secret necessitates the following rough, detailed, and possibly repetitive history. Not until Richard Huber’s 1971 *The American Idea of Success* did the pederastic intimations have a source outside of Alger’s texts. The gossip began with Mayes’s 1928 biography in which he said, along with other similar phrases, “boys fascinated [Alger]. He liked to be in their company. The greatest love of his life was his love for a boy.”6 Gardner’s 1964 *Horatio Alger, Jr., or the American Hero Era* picks up where Mayes left off, saying that “boys . . . fascinated him,”7 that Alger lived at the Newsboys’ Lodging House “where he lavished affection upon homeless waifs,”8 and that “Alger always felt more relaxed in the company of boys . . . . Much of his time was spent with them.”9 Though entertaining and informative, these passages are nevertheless gossip rather than documented facts. Mayes and Gardner also claim that Alger left the Unitarian Church in Brewster to pursue a writing career, rather than running away from pederasty accusations. Specifically, Gardner portrays Alger as the “writing parson” who was “thankful” that the “church committee voted not to re-engage him”

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7 198.
8 Ibid., 201.
9 Ibid., 227–28.
as their minister. Gardner states that the historical records of the Unitarian Church in Brewster “contained no direct language that would tell us what happened,” so he “avoided” directly addressing the subject. Huber’s interpretation as a non-Society member refers to the same church historical records Gardner “avoided” as proof of Alger’s pederasty and his true reasons for leaving Brewster. In 1868, an investigative committee reported “that Horatio Alger, Jr. has been practicing on them [the boys of the church] at different times deeds that are too revolting to relate.” Later his “deeds” are related rather directly, though still somewhat ambiguously: “gross immorality, and a most heinous crime, a crime of no less magnitude than the abominable and revolting crime of unnatural familiarity with boys. . . . which he neither denied or attempted to extenuate but received it with apparent calmness of an old offender—and hastily left town on the very next train for parts unknown.”

Huber’s revelation provided the seed for Edwin P. Hoyt’s 1974 Horatio’s Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger, Jr. The first chapter, titled “Crossroads,” fictionalizes the day the commission confronts Alger with the charges as a “blustery, cold Tuesday afternoon in the sprawling little white frame village of Brewster.” Alger wore “a dandy little moustache that lent him the dignity his size tried to deny.” “[I]t was boys, boys, boys that interested the Reverend Mr. Alger” as “his love for boys and the boys’ attraction to him were well known.”

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10 Mayes, Alger, 98; Gardner, American Hero Era, 182–83.
12 Huber, Idea of Success, 45.
13 Ibid., 46.
14 Hoyt, Horatio’s Boys, 1.
15 Ibid., 2.
However, “Horatio Alger’s affection for the boys had changed from something admirable to something suspect. Several mothers of the parish were very much upset.”\textsuperscript{16} Most of Hoyt’s writing is fictional, even if one can imagine mothers’ distress at the thought of a pederastic minister. Pictures at the time show Alger’s moustache to be rather full, but images can deceive. Hoyt fills the gaps with the descriptive phrases missing from historical accounts, answering the questions “How did the townspeople react?,” “What does a pedophile look like?,” and of course, “What was he wearing?” When Alger is faced with the charges, Hoyt offers this delicious piece of writing: “But no. Braced by the committee, Horatio Alger, Jr., did not deny the charges. He had been ‘imprudent,’ he said. Imprudent! Pederasty was imprudent, was it?”\textsuperscript{17} But “Horatio Alger, Jr. knew what he had done . . . . Horatio knew full well.”\textsuperscript{18} So he moved to New York City, “where even a minister who buggered little boys could live in peace.”\textsuperscript{19}

Neither Huber nor Hoyt’s stories simply relate the facts; both are prone to gossip. Huber’s narrative does not rely on scandal: “Guilty he no doubt was, but brutal he was not. This gentle, little man . . . went off to New York City to befriend with a generous hand the street urchins of the Newsboys’ Lodging house . . . and lived a comfortable life as a shy, increasingly rotund little bachelor.”\textsuperscript{20} Fictional but, by all accounts, verifiable. Huber gently addresses the question, why flee the scene if you are not guilty? The “little” Alger was around five feet tall. Pictures do show he gained weight as he aged. He never married, his surviving letters support the notion

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Huber, \textit{Idea of Success}, 46.
that he had few friends, and he did spend time at the Newsboys’ Lodging House. Huber offers a non-brutal, harmless Santa Claus-type man who only desired to help boys and write for them. Hoyt’s opprobrious and catty account declares that not just boys, but “boys, boys, boys” interested Alger. Of course they did; after all, he “buggered” them. Hoyt calls attention to Alger’s “dandy little moustache” and small stature, and though Alger may have started an “admirable” life, being around “boys, boys, boys” turned his affection into “something suspect.” Does Hoyt declare his own shock when he shouts “Imprudent! Pederasty was imprudent, was it?” or is he feigning astonishment? Either way, Hoyt takes the kernel of truth and shapes a fascinating narrative out of it.

The handling of the pederasty revelation, not its publicity, disrupted the Society’s harmonious relationship with Alger. The Society’s venomous defense took aim at Hoyt, not Huber, though neither was a member. Gilbert K. Westgard II reviewed Hoyt’s book for Newsboy and, while he discredits Hoyt, Westgard appears more concerned with the ownership of information than the libel. The “Crossroads” chapter is “six spicy pages . . . in the tradition of yellow journalism” because “vice will sell better than virtue. Any farmer can tell you what will attract more flies than sugar.” Hoyt and his publisher are only “two fellows [who] want to make some money!” Westgard seems offended by the reprinting of illustrations from Alger’s books: “as for the quality of their reproduction, there is much that could be desired. Engravings and woodcuts should not be rendered as half-tones, but eleven of them have received this treatment.” The rest of the review dictates Hoyt’s “ignorance of true facts” by incorrectly citing Alger’s Harvard class rank, his first serialized novel, his first story about city life, and a number of poems and odes, as well as the first pseudonym Alger used and the date of its original
appearance. In addition, Hoyt carelessly moves Alger’s tombstone “at least half a mile across the river” from its actual location.

The most striking criticism is Westgard’s last: “Mr. Hoyt states that no Alger manuscripts have survived. What about ‘Mabel Parker,’ which Stratemeyer revised and published as ‘Jerry, The Backwoods Boy,’ and ‘Out for Business,’ which was officially offered to readers of *Newsboy* only last month?”21 Above all, Westgard reveals his defense of Alger when he says that Hoyt’s errors—the tombstone, the manuscript, Alger’s class rank, and Alger’s pseudonym—were corrected in previous *Newsboy* issues. Hoyt, according to Westgard, simply lies about Alger. Or perhaps, the Society and Westgard disapprove of Hoyt’s brand of Alger gossip; the Society may control the publication of “Mabel Parker,” but Hoyt’s biography directly violates their control of Alger. Hoyt mentions Gardner and Max Goldberg, both prominent Society members, in his “Notes and Acknowledgments,” possibly demonstrating a sense of unity or authority. But by making Alger’s pederasty charges central to his biography, Hoyt’s reference to them adds further insult to injury. The Society and Westgard’s review make plain their stance on Hoyt’s authority to speak about Alger.

The Society was silent on the pederasty accusations until December 1979 when Jack Bales, *Newsboy*’s editor, published the Brewster papers. “Probably nothing arouses the ire of HAS members more than the mention of ‘The Brewster Incident,’” Bales begins the article. He wanted the incident treated as a truth the Society could govern: “I have been toying with the idea of printing the Brewster data for over two years, if only to let people read it in its unedited form and not truncated in some sleazy expose [sic.]”22 Bales quotes Mayes’s 1978 essay “After Half a

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22 Bales, “Incident,” 3.
Century” in which Gardner reveals that he was the “first to discover the record of the Unitarian Church at Brewster—I mean, the first Alger nut.” Gardner states that the record was “just several vaguely worded lines . . . far from conclusive . . . so I avoided it.” This explanation did not satisfy Mayes or Bales, who inferred that partial knowledge is not knowledge, and that he should publish “all and let people judge for themselves.” Again, as for Westgard, the ownership of Alger information plays a significant role: “Personally, I feel that Newsboy should have been the FIRST publication to carry the Brewster material, since we are reportedly the world’s only publication devoted to studying Alger.”

At its core, gossip asserts a knowledge the subject has no control over and puts the owner of that gossip in a position of power. The Society’s role, then, is to protect Alger and to possess and control Alger information, as its reactions illustrate. Members’ responses also reflect an intimacy with Alger and Alger information, since the Society is “immensely interested in everything about this man’s life.” Alger did not literally save each Society member; but Alger’s novels converted his characters, America, and Society members into the “American ideal of Strive and Succeed.” Thus, Alger’s life is theirs and their lives are devoted to Alger. Citing themselves as creators of the “first” and “only publication” committed to Alger, Society members certainly possess and control Alger information; but they also protect and preserve Alger’s reputation and their relationship with Alger, as illustrated in Dr. Max Goldberg’s “In Defense of Horatio Alger, Jr.” One of the first to join the Society, Goldberg calls Alger’s non-

23 Mayes, “After Half a Century,” xxv.
24 Ibid., xxv–xxvi.
Society portrayal “persecution” and claims authority through an intimate knowledge of Alger: “there will always be persons, less knowledgeable about Alger’s character than we are” to “slander” him. Therefore, members must speak up before “slander by dint of reputation becomes accepted truth.”

27 Yet Goldberg’s defense of Alger can be read as an argument for ambiguity. Gardner’s biography certainly gossips about Alger’s love of boys; but to name the behavior outright is “slander.” Both Huber and Hoyt identify Alger as homosexual, but Hoyt does so scandalously. And Westgard and Goldberg’s criticism of Hoyt’s blatant and brutal characterization typifies the Society’s protective and deeply personal relationship with the nineteenth-century author.

**The Cousins Alger and Edwin Forrest**

No Society member has published more on Horatio Alger in the past thirty years than Gary Scharnhorst. Along with Jack Bales, Scharnhorst published *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, and boasted that their biography on Alger is “definitive . . . [and] will not be soon superceded.”

28 Certainly, it was the only biography to use footnotes and cite its abundant resources. Prior to that biography, Bales and Scharnhorst produced *Horatio Alger, Jr.: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism*, which lists over 680 articles, books, and literary reviews that mention or directly address Alger and his texts. Together since 1974, Scharnhorst and Bales have written almost forty articles, with Scharnhorst scribing the majority. For those reasons, it is important to note how Scharnhorst himself falls victim to Alger gossip in the most telling and complimentary of ways. This analysis does not devalue Scharnhorst’s scholarship, but rather reveals the pervasive and overwhelming nature of Alger gossip.


28 xviii.
In a 1974 article, Scharnhorst argues that Horatio Alger, not William Rounseville, wrote *Life of Edwin Forrest*: “in all likelihood, William Rounseville Alger composed little of the biographical narrative under his name in *Life of Edwin Forrest*; instead, Horatio Alger, Jr., the prolific writer of boy’s books and William’s cousin, probably assumed that responsibility.”29 Though Scharnhorst acknowledges the “limitations” of his “circumstantial” evidence, he insists that the “work was the joint product of two different pens.”30 He cites the “stylistic affinity of the chapter in *Life* entitled ‘Breaking the Way to Fame and Fortune,’” which is named after and reads like “authentic Alger juvenile novels.”31 Also, the “cousins Alger” wrote letters to one another and spent an evening together in 1876; therefore, “no obstacle such as distance or disinclination prevented their collaboration.”32 While William Rounseville, as a Reverend, did author “several theological treatises,” he had never before taken on a project of such magnitude.33 Horatio, by this time, had published at least thirty novels and countless short stories for newspapers, though he had not yet published his biographies of Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Webster, and James Garfield.

Alger probably did collaborate with his cousin, though no one will know to what extent. However, Scharnhorst uses this speculative information to elevate Horatio in the academic world. One “significance” in this “discovery” emphasizes Forrest’s reasons for commissioning his biography: to refurbish his public image with a “distinguished name prominently displayed


30 Scharnhorst, “Note on the Authorship,” 54, 55, 54.

31 Ibid., 54–55.

32 Ibid., 55.

33 Ibid., 53.
Horatio had established a name for himself as an author at that time. But, as Scharnhorst points out, William Rounseville was an acclaimed part of the Concord Circle that included Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott. William Rounseville was also the “chaplain of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and,” again, “friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson.” If William Rounseville could somehow glean status from knowing Emerson, Horatio’s association with his cousin certainly garnered similar rewards. Even Forrest, who chose William Rounseville, benefited from the cousin’s connection: “by selecting W.R. Alger, [Forrest] obtained a name for display and the services of an apologetic biographer—although each of these requirements would be satisfied, as Forrest probably did not realize, by a separate individual. . . . Horatio Alger, Jr.”

Second, and most important to Scharnhorst and Society members, Horatio’s contribution to *Life* “indicates that Alger, who is generally dismissed as a literary hack, was capable of writing serious works of merit.” The “digressions” in the biography attributed to “his cousin were roundly and deservedly condemned by reviewers;” but Horatio’s “contribution of biography, though banal in parts, enabled *Life* to succeed on a modest scale.” That Horatio “was capable of writing serious works of merit” comes across as Scharnhorst’s thesis. It is Horatio’s contributions that “enabled” any “modest” success, modest compared to Horatio’s success with *Ragged Dick* and other boy books, which along with any hint of Alger’s pederastic past, receive

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34 Ibid., 55, 53.
37 Ibid., 55.
scant attention in this article. Scharnhorst gives passing notice to Horatio as the “prolific writer of boys’ books”\textsuperscript{38} and stresses Horatio’s capacity for writing biography: “Horatio Alger wrote three other biographies—of Garfield, Lincoln, and Webster—and those, like [Forrest’s], were hero-worshipping sagas which portrayed their subjects apologetically.”\textsuperscript{39} Given the biographical connection between Horatio’s queerness and authorship, Scharnhorst’s vehement defense reflects a different approach to Horatio’s dichotomous existence. In fact, this shift in emphasis erases any queer possibility otherwise established by Scharnhorst’s Alger writings.

Personally, I do not believe Horatio wrote Forrest’s biography. He more than likely contributed, or at least read parts of a manuscript. Horatio wrote up to four novels a year during this time. Even if the chapter titles mirror Horatio’s, and the cousins corresponded frequently, the evidence remains “circumstantial” just as Scharnhorst himself declares. It is not important to prove or disprove Horatio’s involvement. Rather, it is important to note the circulation of gossip associated with him, or in this case, even the name “Alger.” Scharnhorst addresses the use of insidious analogy in a 1987 article. Quoting David Hackett Fischer’s \textit{Historians’ Fallacies}, he relates the term “Horatio Alger hero” to other insidious analogies that diminish our understanding of the nouns they modify: “such adjectives do not describe or define so much as they confuse or obscure.”\textsuperscript{40} Alger gossip definitely confuses and even obscures a possible truth, but it simultaneously proliferates possibilities.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{40} Scharnhorst, “Insidious Analogy,” 17.
The Epileptic Mischief of William James

Louis Menand’s *American Studies* examines Alger’s possible connection to William James and the possibilities such a connection offers Alger studies. Menand, a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and professor of English and American literature and language at Harvard, relates how William James’s biographies have been subject to questions of authenticity with regard to two instances: the epileptic patient and the Renouvier episode. As is the case with Alger, the source of these occurrences is a diary, belonging to William and dated 1868 to 1873. To briefly summarize, in 1902 William gave a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh, one of which became “The Sick Soul” chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. “The Sick Soul” recounts the story of a man who, in a “state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits,” has a vision of an epileptic patient he had seen at an asylum.41 William claimed he translated the story from a French sufferer. But in 1904, when *Varieties* was being translated into French, the publisher requested the original document from William and he wrote that the incident “is my own case—acute neurasthenic attack with phobia. I naturally disguised the provenance! So you may translate freely.”

In 1920, William’s oldest son, Henry, edited an edition of *The Letters of William James* and named his father as the epileptic patient. The Renouvier episode also first appeared in this 1920 edition. It describes a time when William read French philosopher Charles Renouvier’s 1859 *L’Homme* and experienced a new “free initiative” and “life” as the “governing resistance of the ego to the world,” signaling William’s “resolution and self-confidence.”42 As Menand states, “crisis-and-recovery” tends to be the conventional structure of biographies; the “temptation” “is

42 Ibid., 8.
to make the vision of the epileptic the crisis for which the reading of Renouvier was the cure.”

Henry’s edition of *Letters* leads readers to believe that the epileptic vision “must have occurred in the winter of 1869–1870” and that William read Renouvier on “April 30, 1870.” Since then, the scenario has appeared “in virtually every account of James’ life.”

The 1869 to 1873 diary dates gain importance when discussing William’s commitment to Somerville Asylum and his supposedly meeting Alger. In *Notes of a Son and Brother*, Henry, William’s brother, writes the following, dated “spring of ’70”:

> Horatio Alger is writing a life of Edwin Forrest, and I am afraid will give him a Bowery appreciation. He reports his hero as a very “fine” talker—in which light I myself don’t so much recall him, though he had a native breath—as when telling Alger for example of old Gilbert Stuart’s having when in a state of dilapidation asked him to let him paint his portrait. “I consented,” said Forrest, “and went to his studio. He was an old white lion, so blind that he had to ask me the colour of my eyes and my hair; but he threw his brush at the canvas, and every stroke was life.” Alger talks freely about his own late insanity—which he in fact appears to enjoy as a subject of conversation and in which I believe he has somewhat interested William, who has talked with him a good deal of his experience at the Somerville Asylum.

Despite this passage’s status as the smoking gun of a William/Alger/asylum link, no proof exists that either William James or Horatio Alger was ever committed to the Somerville Asylum or any other such institution. Menand cites several sources that have used the Henry James quote to prove William’s commitment; however, trusting anything Henry James says is a “mistake all

\[\text{\footnotesize 43 Ibid., 7, 8.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 44 Ibid., 8.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 45 Ibid., 6. On pages 6–12, Menand traces how the epileptic patient and Renouvier reading have played out. On pages 15–17, he points out a few different interpretations, including the Cushing Strout and Sander Gilman suggestions that the epileptic patient represents a link between masturbation, introspection, and insanity.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize 47 Ibid., 401. Scharnhorst also uses this quote to prove Horatio’s authorship.}\]
students of the Jameses eventually learn to avoid . . . . Henry freely changed dates, suppressed facts, and rewrote passages from other people’s letters, and then often added injury to insult by destroying the originals.”

The Jameses were and continue to be notoriously private. When Menand, along with other previous researchers, wrote the McLean Hospital (Somerville’s name was changed in 1892) to verify their information, the James estate “refused to permit the information to be released.” Menand speculates that the James estate’s refusal to acknowledge William’s commitment probably means William was a patient, but admits no physical proof can be produced to support it. Regardless, biographers claimed the quote as true to fill the gaps in William James’s diary, which is missing twenty-one pages, from April 1868 to February 1869. Those forty-two pages of writing “have been cut out, apparently with scissors.”

To further complicate matters, William Rounseville Alger, Horatio’s cousin, was committed to the Somerville Asylum in 1871, after he collapsed during a Paris vacation. Or so we should infer. Charles Brown-Séquard, William James’s teacher at Harvard Medical School, pronounced William Rounseville “hopelessly insane.” Menand states that William Rounseville “was released in the spring of 1872, and was able to return to his work.” Menand’s notes cite pages 123 to 126 of Scharnhorst’s William Rounseville Alger biography as his source. However, those pages detail William Rounseville’s European trip and the previously noted

48 Menand, American Studies, 17.
49 Ibid., 14.
50 Ibid., 20.
51 Scharnhorst, William Rounseville, 125–26. See also “Town Talk,” Boston Traveller, 3 October 1871, 2:3; Boston Advertiser, 4 October 1871, 1:7; New York Evening Post, 12 October 1871, 2:3.
52 Menand, American Studies, 17.
newspaper articles diagnosing him as “hopelessly insane,” but not any admittance or release. Scharnhorst does reach the conclusion that William Rounseville was admitted to McLean a few pages later, referencing the lack of letters in Rounseville’s archive. For six months, from August 12, 1871 until February 14, 1872, no letters exist in an otherwise voluminous archive. And when William Rounseville finally does write on February 14, the letter “was mailed from the McLean Asylum.” Since McLean refuses to confirm or deny William Rounseville’s admittance, because it “observe[s] no statute of limitations on the privacy of patient files,” this is all the evidence we have.

The quote from Notes of a Son and Brother seems to simply confuse Horatio for William Rounseville. However, nothing remains simple when dealing with Alger. The “spring of ’70” date predates William Rounseville’s possible McLean admittance by at least a year. Then, almost as a whim, Scharnhorst adds the following after revealing the McLean letter: “William James, as I recalled, had discussed his experiences as an intern there with one of the Alger cousins in the spring of 1870.” After proving William Rounseville was the Alger cousin admitted to McLean, Scharnhorst undermines his claim by referencing the quote which names Horatio as the cousin admitted to McLean. If the quote is correct, Horatio wrote the Forrest biography and was admitted to McLean. If incorrect, the quote mistakes Horatio for William Rounseville. Despite the lack of evidence, the assertion that William James interned at McLean in 1870 may be true. But neither Alger cousin can be confirmed at McLean during this time.


54 Ibid., 133.

55 Ibid., 132.
Scharnhorst spent several pages proving William Rounseville was there from the fall of 1871 through the spring of 1872. And if James was an intern at McLean and merely spoke of his experience with an Alger cousin, it proves nothing but a conversation. But if a date is obscured here and a cousin confused there, the gossip, no matter how untrue, offers countless possibilities. Were William James and an Alger cousin interns at McLean together? Was William James an intern while an Alger cousin was a patient? Did Horatio speak of his “own late insanity” and write the Forrest biography? If William James and William Rounseville did have a conversation about their mutual breakdowns, it could not have happened in the spring of 1870, a year before William Rounseville’s mental collapse. Such gossip conveys the intricacies of Alger gossip: curious possibilities carved from perceived dead ends.

Menand calls the “‘Horatio Alger letter’ . . . a red herring.”56 Finalizing his concerns, Menand concludes, “What makes incomplete biographical information generally worse than no information at all is that speculation fills the gaps and eventually becomes indistinguishable from ‘the facts.’”57 Menand ends his chapter by astutely stating that “the mistake has not been singling these passages out as emblematic of Jamesian insights. The mistake has been in stringing them together as the endpoints of a single crisis.”58 William James was depressed “all his life” and to link the epileptic vision and Renouvier episode as proof of recovery works well for biographical narrative but not for explicating a real lived experience. James knew “that philosophy could never be an adequate response to despair, because he thought that philosophy begins and ends with the recognition of its own inadequacy. . . . James knew that philosophy was

56 Menand, American Studies, 18.
57 Ibid., 14
58 Ibid., 26–27.
not enough. But it was all he had.”

Ultimately, “what lends authenticity to his philosophy is not its triumph over unhappiness in his own life, but its failure.”

Perhaps the misuse of the narrative bookends invalidates what William James believed, who he was, and what he espoused. But Horatio’s biographies and his mythic existence are built upon the gossip that fills the gaps to create a fictionally credible account: what lends authenticity is not only the indistinguishability of fact and fiction, but its acceptance, repetition, and inclusion.

Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales reference William James in *The Lost Life*, but unlike Menand, they emphasize the gossipy content of the letter. Horatio “had been afflicted with lingering guilt so intense” that he had to confide in William James. After doing so, “he was embarrassed by his frank revelations” and “renewed his vow of silence and went to his grave with his reputation intact.”

Reading these passages of Scharnhorst and Bales makes perfect sense. We believe and also take comfort in the notion of an accused pederast eventually becoming remorseful and ashamed, even if this belief elides the William Rounseville/Somerville connection. Repentance is the resolution of crisis-and-recovery. Henry James’s letter mistakes Horatio for William Rounseville, and uses the incorrect date; but Horatio’s supposed repentance—his overwhelming and lingering guilt that is interpreted from the letter—remains. This repentance, whether it existed or not, is the kernel of truth informing and creating the gossip that magnifies Alger’s boy-love mythology.

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59 Ibid., 28–29.

60 Ibid., 30.

61 Scharnhorst with Bales, *Lost Life*, 70.
Alger and James: The Lost Years

I now turn to a time when Horatio Alger and William James do meet and become embroiled in child sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, Anthony Comstock’s decency enforcement, and murder at the Vanderbilt mansion. An Alger novel for a modern reader, Jon Boorstin’s 2003 *The Newsboys’ Lodging-House; Or, The Confessions of William James* imagines what happens during the missing pages of William’s journal. In doing so, the novel ties together the epileptic patient as William’s own vision, his meeting both William Rounseville and Horatio Alger at the McLean Asylum, and Alger’s predilection for young boys. Boorstin also reiterates the gossip formula by taking as his point of departure “The Will to Believe,” a James speech from 1896 which Boorstin asserts “forms the kernel of James’ later thinking” and the novel.62

Boorstin’s novel resembles Alger’s texts in several ways. First, Boorstin maintains historical accuracy with regard to Manhattan street and restaurant names in the early 1870s. Secondly, Boorstin’s plot turns on one incredible event followed by a series of unbelievable occurrences. The novel begins with William writing a letter to “Dearest H,” most likely his brother Henry.63 He describes meeting William James MacReady,64 who claims to be William’s


63 Ibid., 1.

64 Given Boorstin’s extensive knowledge of James and Alger (which will become apparent), this name alludes to William Macready, whose rivalry with Edwin Forrest is credited for sparking the Astor Place Riot of 1849. In brief, Forrest represented the American, democratic, working-class Bowery Theatre crowd at the same time that Macready represented the British, aristocratic, privileged-class Park Theatre crowd during 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s New York. For more on their bitter and highly competitive relationship, see Richard Moody, *Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), esp. 27–41. Boorstin plays on their class-inspired contentiousness by having William James MacReady speak in horribly incorrect English: “Is you my father” being just one example (5). James is also told not to masturbate or it will “defeat all attempts at recovery,” in reference to other interpretations of the epileptic patient (10).
son. The next chapter has William James “suddenly” and “without warning” attacked by “the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum.” William James sat on a porch chair at McLean, body rigid from paranoid fear when Horatio Alger’s “melodic voice” awakens him. Horatio, a “bohemian” wearing a “flowing cape and floppy ascot,” who “moved like a small boy and talked like a precocious child and pepper[ed] his remarks with emphatic gestures,” is talking to William Rounseville, who believes that the street boys of New York City are “foul-mouthed, godless guttersnipes.” William Rounseville has similar feelings for Ragged Dick: when Horatio gives him a copy, he “tossed aside the book.” James, though, “thirsted for the written word” of the “seductive” book with a “lean, almost ascetic” youth on the cover. “Alger’s words poured through me like a cool and refreshing elixir,” says James, and he reads the book three more times. After the fourth read, James envisions himself working in the hat store with Fosdick and admires the way Fosdick fulfills James’s vision of what an artist should be and do: “to live so that his soul shines forth” and “to live or to act is more than to produce.” William James declares he must leave McLean, his treatment unfinished and go to Printing House Square in New York City. Only then “through action would I discover if I even had an essence. To find my true Artist I must first become pure uncluttered Fosdick.”

The remainder of the novel reads much the same. James (using the alias William Henry) meets Horatio in the Newsboys’ Lodging House, where Horatio has a desk and plays Lodging

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66 Ibid., 13–14.
67 Ibid., 15.
68 Ibid., 15–16.
69 Ibid., 19.
House-banned dice games with the boys. James also meets Jemmie, a boy who “exhibited an extraordinary beauty” and whose “solemn grace of prepubescent David sculpted by Donatello” shines beneath a “large swollen bruise around the socket of his right eye.” Jemmie meets Dannie, the embodiment of Alger-ian bad influences. Together, Jemmie and Dannie proceed to places that serve drinks to underage boys and the seedy Bowery district to watch sensational theatre. At one point, they hand-trap hundreds of rats in the west-side shanties for use in an animal fight. One hundred rats and one dog are placed in a fighting arena to rip each other apart; the owner of the fastest dog to do so wins a prize. Jemmie dreams of going west and fighting Indians. To raise the money, he and Dannie blackmail Alger—either he pays them $5000 or they tell the police that Alger “performed unnatural acts” with Jemmie, language pulled directly from the Brewster records. That plot fades when Jemmie, Dannie, and an adult male accomplice break into the Vanderbilt mansion, steal the silver, and kill the butler.

Emma, a teenage house worker who also happens to be Jemmie’s sister and who recently recovered from cholera and whom Jemmie thought dead, foils Jemmie and Dannie’s plans. Emma recovers after Alger and James find her lying in her own feces and vomit, and James nurses her back to health in a “house of assignation.” As soon as Emma can walk on her own, she and James have sex. Not wanting to marry Emma, James asks Frankie Vanderbilt, wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt and volunteer teacher at the Newsboys’ Lodging House, to provide Emma with a job as a house servant. Eventually, Emma reveals her pregnancy, and she and James go to

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70 Ibid., 25.
71 Ibid., 169.
72 Ibid., 204.
Madam Restell, “the Wickedest Woman in New York,” to perform an abortion.73 Right before the procedure, Anthony Comstock raids the house of indecency and hauls Madame Restell off to jail. Determined to do right, James proposes to Emma and takes Jemmie as his son; but as they board a train bound for St. Louis, James decides to return to Boston instead. He gives Emma and Jemmie about $400 and tells them, “My true name is William James. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. If you ever need me, you can find me there.”74 He briskly leaves the train, sails to Boston, and decides to write the journal entry that becomes this novel.

I offer this lengthy plot summary to highlight the lively mixture of fact and fiction that Alger gossip inspires. Boorstin’s historical references strengthen the intrigue of the book, much like Alger’s novels that name real streets, landmarks, and people. This blending of fact and fiction functions like gossip, in that the historical citations act as kernels of truth to root the story in reality; but like gossip, they are exaggerations. Most of the events highlighted by Boorstin’s novel could not have happened between 1869 and 1873, the dates of William James’s journal. Madame Restell’s mansion was notoriously known in New York City as the place pregnant women could go for abortions; but her arrest by Anthony Comstock and subsequent suicide due to an indecency trial occurred in the winter of 1878.75 Cornelius and Frankie Vanderbilt did live in New York, but at 10 Washington Place.76 Yet, Alger and Charles O’Connor were in the city

73 Ibid., 302.
74 Ibid., 333.
at this time. The Bowery Theatre indeed hosted plays,77 and the Newsboys’ Lodging House was located above the New York Sun offices at Printing House Square.78 All of these truths encapsulate Boorstin’s well-written and faithful book about New York City in the early 1870s. They also highlight a pivotal scene from the novel, a scene Scharnhorst and Bales’s Lost Life imagined and desired: Alger’s confession.

When first confronted by Dannie with the pederasty charges, Alger turns to James for help in squashing the boys’ plans. James fails to convince Jemmie not to go through with their scheme, and later meets Alger at a bar, where Alger has been downing copious whiskey shots. Alger asks James about Jemmie’s boy-magnetism, saying, “Doesn’t his beauty cause you the least discomfort? . . . All the perfection, all the purity doesn’t rouse the least desire to possess it?”79 James, sensing a story he does not want to hear, tells Alger “Buck up, Horatio. The truth will out.”80 With that statement, Alger orders a bottle of whiskey and relates the story of “a minister’s son” whose duties included “tutoring a boy in Bible”:

A boy quite like Jemmie in form, with the most delightful way of hopping onto a chair. . . . Though his tutor treated him with exaggerated propriety the boy sensed what he roused in the man, and took demonic pleasure in tormenting him, sitting on his lap, touching his chin or his cheek. The tutor longed for and dreaded their daily hour. One day in late fall, after a nasty cold rain, the boy appeared at his tutor’s door soaked in mud. . . . And when the boy intruded the tutor had been huddled in [a fire’s] shallow aura with a blanket over his lap. He stripped off the boy’s sodden clothes and wrapped him in the blanket, and they sat by the fire. Chilled to the core, or playing for attention, the boy shivered beneath the heavy wool. The tutor rubbed his hands up and down the boy’s body to warm him, conscious of the crisp bones and tender flesh beneath the fabric. The boy curled into the tutor, and


79 Boorstin, Confessions, 176.

80 Ibid., 177.
smiling like a cat, he kissed the man. The touch of his lips dissolved the tutor’s good intentions.81

Quite a story. And as we now know, Alger was accused of spending too much time with the boys of Brewster. As a minister, he more than likely did instruct the townspeople, including boys, in the Bible.

Further kernels of truth include references to men in Brewster who wanted Alger removed from the ministry, most notably Solomon Freeman. According to records, Freeman wrote several letters to the American Unitarian Association asking that Alger be prosecuted for pederasty. Also, Thomas Crocker, whose son was one of the supposed abused, took part in the investigative committee that produced the report about Alger and his “unnatural familiarity with boys.”82 Boorstin references these occurrences when Alger says, “the tutor left town the same day, hiding in his father’s house while his future was decided. The boy’s father wished to prosecute, but the church council feared scandal, and satisfied itself with banishing him from the ministry. The boy’s father, unhappy with the outcome, warned that should the tutor ever touch another boy, he would send him to hell via the penitentiary.”83

Boorstin’s novel facilitates our Alger interpretations and exemplifies the gossip that cocoons all things Alger. Despite proof to the contrary, Confessions narrates foreclosed possibilities by fictionalizing our Alger beliefs. By filling the gaps between supported documentation with hypothetically believable scenarios, Boorstin’s novel furthers Alger gossip, allowing it to linger as a version of the truth even though it can be disproven. It seems likely Boorstin read, or at least browsed, the Alger biographies. The novel’s familiarity with historical

81 Ibid., 178–79.

82 Scharnhorst with Bales, Lost Life, 67. For more, see 1–3, 66–67, and 72–73.

83 Boorstin, Confessions, 179.
documents suggests a knowledge of the biographies’ unreliability, knowingly integrating suspicious information into historical fiction. Boorstin also seems familiar with the misinformation that surrounds Alger, be it boy-love or a familiarity with William James. But these assumptions are just that. Perhaps they are even gossip.

**A Queer Familiarity**

As Boorstin’s novel illustrates, Alger’s pederastic tendencies were not as secretive, secluded, or scandalous as the Society would have them. In fact, many Alger allusions in popular culture function like gossip and often have sexual implications. In the debut episode of *CSI: Miami* on May 9, 2002, David Caruso’s character comforts a kidnapped little girl, Sasha. To do so, he tells her that his name is “Horatio Caine.” After Sasha questions Horatio’s “funny” name, he says “my mother named me after a famous writer named Horatio Alger,” who, of course, Sasha has never heard of. As the Miami police search for Sasha, she and Horatio sit together in ten-foot high shrubbery, Caruso’s character taking on childlike qualities:

Sasha: “They’re looking for me, you know.”

Horatio: “Me, too. Me, too. What do you say we sit here and get found together?”84

Horatio, a caretaker, watcher, and comforter of children, played by Caruso—who famously left his buttock-bearing role on *NYPD: Blue* to pursue other flesh-revealing movies like *Jade*—must protect a little girl who was kidnapped while her parents had a sex party at their mansion. This introduction drips with campy sexual tension, and is intensely creepier and less endearing than the man/boy relationships in most of Alger’s texts.

The cover of James V. Catano’s *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* is possibly my favorite Alger reference, even if, as an image, it is not necessarily

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narrative. Catano’s book explores our culture’s rhetorical practice of creating self-made men, reflecting our desire and need for such men. The text makes little reference to queer possibilities (Alger’s or otherwise), but the front cover (Figure 3-1) spotlights a Tom of Finland-esque construction worker with half-rolled-up sleeves that strain to encase enormous biceps. His tight-waisted overalls emphasize the über-masculine frame above and direct the gazer’s eyes to his crotch. Usually, Tom of Finland portraits show men’s penises straining against their skin-tight jeans, so tight that one can easily see the outline of what lurks beneath. In this cover picture, we see what happens when the jeans come undone: two gloved hands grip, at crotch level, an extended sledgehammer, which grows in size as one’s eyes follow its handle to its oversized head, pounding the “R” in the title phrase.

These two examples seek to play with, rather than harm, Alger’s and the Society’s reputations, and illustrate how Alger can permeate different contexts and genres with similar effects. However, I conclude this chapter by addressing how narrative gossip can be detrimental to Alger and the Society, and why the Society seeks to control the ambiguous possibilities that surround its “hero.” Larry Beinhart’s book Fog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of Spin rails against the Bush administration. No stranger to political satire, the author of Wag the Dog gives a brief, tawdry, and proper reading of Alger’s novels in the chapter “Don’t Listen to What They Say—Look at What They Do: How Dick Cheney Got Rich.” Beinhart imbues the Cheney/Bush pairing with an Algeresque quality by focusing his political critique on the homosocial networks in Alger’s texts, a critique the next chapter considers with more scrutiny. Calling Cheney’s Wyoming-to-Washington move “a real Horatio Alger story,”85 Beinhart

connects the Republican good ‘ole boy network to the typical Alger plot using the following summary:

They feature a boy just at, or on the verge of, puberty, from the country or the slums. He comes to the center of the big city. He does work, but he doesn’t work astonishingly hard. . . .

What really happens is he meets a rich older man who takes quite a fancy to him and sets him up with money and educates him and teaches him how to dress and conduct himself.

There is, indeed, a “meet cute” in which the boy does something that draws that nice rich man’s attention. . . .

This action is referred to in the books themselves and by people like those at the Horatio Alger Society as a sign of character. It is also a chance for the older man to notice how this boy stands out from the other boys. He has that forthright, noble-boy quality. Which is very, very attractive. In addition to the convenience, of course.86

Much like the biographers, Beinhart takes literally the occurrences in Alger’s works. Presumably, Cheney is the “rich older man” who “teaches” Bush how to dress and act presidential. Perhaps their “meet cute” refers to the fact that Cheney headed Bush’s vice president search committee and ended up nominating himself. Since Beinhart does not expand on his insinuations, there is no way to be sure. But he does continue his assault on Alger.

Beinhart calls Alger a “character who appears in every book, under different names and in different guises, the outwardly reputable older man—a pastor, no less—who is very fond of young boys.”87 He quotes “Friar Anselmo’s Sin,” which to Beinhart’s credit, many do interpret as “autobiographical.” But Beinhart raises “suspicion that pedophiles who choose to work in positions that keep them in contact with youngsters, have ulterior motives.” Beinhart compares these ulterior motives to Republican politicians who preach the failure of government out of a

86 Ibid., 93–94.
87 Ibid., 97. Huber and Scharnhorst and Bales make similar claims. See Huber, Idea of Success, 49; and Scharnhorst with Bales, Lost Life, 83.
desire to helm the broken system, thus insuring the government dysfunction continues. These motives produce “predatory desires cloaked in the rhetoric of goodness, sincerity so sincere, we can’t believe it’s not genuine, . . . but [they] aren’t . . . . We don’t have a label that describes the sort of people who speak such untruth with such sincerity from within such delusions.” A delusion, either Republican or Alger-ian, is “not made valid by logic or proof or evidence. It comes from the authority of the source.” Ultimately for Beinhart, like the foggy reasons for invading Iraq, Alger’s myth and texts promote naked “lies,” sincere untruths, and genuine delusions.

By suggesting Alger’s pedophilia, Beinhart associates Alger with the criminal activity of “predatory” sex with boys. He continues this thought by concluding with perhaps the most notorious speculation surrounding Alger: “The name of the New York chapter of NAMBLA, the North American Man/Boy Love Association, is the Horatio Alger Chapter.” Rigorous searches of various sources neither confirm nor deny the NAMBLA/Alger association; all the sources that cite this connection employ a similar sentence structure to that featured in Alger’s Wikipedia entry. But the veracity of this claim is not important—that fact that it continues to circulate reinforces the uncertainty surrounding Alger. Beinhart brandishes this possibility like a weapon with more malice than that exhibited by Hoyt. He impugns the Society, “the authority of the source,” by connecting them directly to Alger’s pederastic tendencies. He states that the “action” of Alger’s texts and Alger himself are a “sign of character” for the people “at the Horatio Alger Society.” Beinhart convicts the Society for what Alger wrote and declares them guilty for its

88 Beinhart, Fog Facts, 98, 99.
89 Ibid., 96.
90 Ibid., 99.
Alger admiration, which Beinhart interprets as “predatory desires” and “ulterior motives.” His political critique treats the homosocial as proof of the homosexual. Moreover, Beinhart conflates queerness and homosexuality with pedophilia and NAMBLA. And he continues to do so when he cites other vicious indictments. Jessica Salmonson claims that Alger glorified the newsboy population of New York, who were victims of “exploitation ranging from outright rape to ‘willing’ prostitution. . . . The only possible method of earning more than pennies [this population had] was by robbery or by sexually servicing ‘helpful do-gooders’ (as pederasts commonly view themselves, as Alger viewed himself).”¹⁹¹ No proof exists to support her claim, but none is needed.

Both portrayals of Alger, as a gentle boy-lover or predatory boy-rapist, base themselves in the same texts, the same intonations, and the same gossip. But unlike the biographies’ or the Society’s gossip, the NAMBLA/Alger link and child-rape charges are indictments that do not morph; they act as accusations used to criminally defame and condone Alger. The biographies and the Society may defend themselves against idolizing pederasty, but they do not equate Alger’s textual subject with villainous behavior. Perhaps that aspect of the Society’s defense is what Beinhart finds so vexing. As the group “conveying the information,” its gossip provides an ambiguous space for Alger, which must be protected from strict naming. Pederasty may be a part of it, as long as it is not specified. For it is gossip’s ability to remain ambiguous and create a version of the truth that provides the possibilities we seek in Alger.

Figure 3-1. Cover art of James V. Catano’s *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man*. 
CHAPTER 4
FABRICATING THE FAKE SHODDY: NATHANAEL WEST’S PARODY OF HORATIO ALGER, JR.

Only fools laugh at Horatio Alger, and his poor boys who make good. The wiser man who thinks twice about that sterling author will realize that Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks.

—Nathanael West and Boris Ingster, A Cool Million screenplay (1940)

This chapter is not about Nathanael West or his 1934 novel A Cool Million, or The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin. Instead, this chapter addresses how Alger scholarship has misused West’s text for the past forty years. I do not present a true or definitive reading of Million. Rather, I put forward a provisory reading recognizing Million as a prophetic voice that connects homosociality to the heart of Alger’s texts and the American Dream.

This conversation began with Douglas Shepard’s 1965 article “Nathanael West Re-writes Horatio Alger, Jr.,” which describes in exacting detail how West “‘lifted’ portions” of Million from two Alger texts.1 Building on Shepard’s observations, Gary Scharnhorst’s 1965 article “From Rags to Patches, or A Cool Million as Alter-Alger” offers four additional Alger texts, providing a side-by-side comparison to West’s novel. Scharnhorst also argues that West’s novel “merits modest praise” for its “disillusioned comment on the predicament of the American middle class during the Depression, . . . mock[ing] the facile optimism of Americans in their collective epic-dream.”2 According to Scharnhorst, West plays a “practical joke” on “modern” readers who possibly do not suspect that the sardonic “political” commentary “had been originally written a half-century earlier by Alger and revised only slightly.”


concludes that West “enriched” Alger through “deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions” to create a commentary that “consists of little more than Alger’s naïve humor read in a new context, infected by a twentieth century virus.”

Scharnhorst is certainly correct to call attention to Million’s biting critique of the state of American capitalism in the 1930s. But Million goes beyond a typical examination of the dark side of capitalism and simple repetition of “Alger’s naïve humor.” By parodying the relationship between the older business man and younger street boy, Million presents a “new context” for Alger readings that dismantles and reiterates the homosociality in Alger’s texts and our misinterpretations of it. Specifically, Million violently and phobically assaults the homosocial relationships depicted in Alger’s novels and our ability to perceive these relationships. Indirectly, West also challenges our interpretation of Alger as genteel. With these attacks, West’s parody fills the gaps in our absent Alger readings by exposing a homosocial violence that lurks beneath the Alger surface, while simultaneously reconstituting that homosociality by making it the target of parody.

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3 Scharnhorst, “Rags to Patches,” 65.

4 There are many parodies of Alger’s strive and succeed works: the earlier, less recognized texts include William Dean Howell’s A Minister’s Charge (1886), Robert Herrick’s The Memoirs of an American Citizen (1905), Theodore Dreiser’s The Financier (1912); the short and satirical 1899 “A Self-Made Man: An Example of Success that Anyone Can Follow” by Stephen Crane and the 1923 play “The Vegetable, or From President to Postman” by F. Scott Fitzgerald; the epic novels of Paul Goodman’s Empire City (four books written from 1942–1959), William Gaddis’s JR (1975), and Robert Coover’s The Public Burning (1977); Budd Schulberg’s What Makes Sammy Run? (1941), which Schulberg called “the spirit of Horatio Alger gone mad” (Tim Weiner, “Budd Schulberg, ‘On the Waterfront’ Writer, Dies at 95,” New York Times, August 6, 2009); and finally, the strange Dirty Tricks: or Nick Noxin’s Natural Nobility, A Moral Tale by John Seelye (1973) and Hunter S. Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream (1971). These texts deserve their own recognition, but none of the above parodies Alger as astutely as West’s 1934 novel.
West accomplishes his assault through two venues. First, West copies non-canonical Alger texts containing characters who exhibit extreme traits: from a boy who roams New York City with various “dads” to a boy whose success stems from portraying a newsboy on stage and a rich woman’s dead son in real life.\(^5\) As this project seeks to embrace Alger’s multiple meanings, so too does *Million* by pushing us to acknowledge the often ignored oddities in our interpretations of Alger’s texts and Alger himself. Second, and more prominently, West’s parody does not lie in the copied text but in what follows it. Together, Shepard and Scharnhorst provide the exact sentences, paragraphs, characters, and actions from *A Cool Million* that perfectly match at least six Alger texts and thereby exemplify four archetypal Alger scenes: (1) the protagonist’s introduction, (2) his display of bravery, (3) his victimization, and (4) his success in righting a wrong done to him. Alger generally constructs scenes that work to the hero’s advantage: he wins a fight, lucks out in finding money, overcomes injustice, and with a little pluck and help from an older benefactor, becomes moderately successful. But after West’s protagonist Lemuel Pitkin follows the advice of ex-president Nathan “Shagpoke” Whipple, Lem loses his teeth, right eye, leg, thumb, and scalp, is knocked unconscious countless times, becomes embroiled in a Communist/Jewish internationalist conspiracy to overtake America, and is finally assassinated. Where Alger portrays boys and men sharing, caring for, and helping each other, *Million* offers an alternative reading in which exploitation and abuse define the boy/man friendship. Shepard’s and Scharnhorst’s critical readings establish similarities between Alger and West. This chapter investigates the un-Alger-like consequences emanating from the poached passages to argue how *Million* confronts the homosocial trust in Alger’s texts through Lem’s slow and effective mutilations.

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\(^5\) Josh Bascom from Alger’s 1890 *The Erie Train Boy*, and Ben Bruce from Alger’s 1901 *Ben Bruce; or, Scenes in the Life of a Bowery Newsboy*, respectively.
Herbert R. Mayes relied on parody’s negative connotations when writing his Alger biography. In the 1978 reissue of *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero*, Mayes notes that he constructed the earlier 1928 biography as a “take-off” or “parody.” Mayes envisioned his biography as part of a generation of “debunking books about once eminent persons” with authors “belittling and denigrating their subjects.” He equates parody with “burlesque,” a project of “idiocies,” and utter “nonsense.” Despite these claims, Mayes also believes that his parody would allow him to achieve the status of an author:

> Here was a project that with scant trouble I felt I could handle in a matter of months or even weeks. All I had to do was come up with a fairy tale. No research required. Nothing required but a little imagination. Overnight, in effect, I could be an author! Author of a book that would induce critics to approve and declare my book one to put an end, at least temporarily, to the debunking vogue.

Mayes disdains parody. It requires “no research,” can be written in a very short period of time, and does not involve intellectual critical skills, only “imagination.” Yet, through parody he would gain respect as an “author.” His parody, written without research or mental strain, would become the paramount text in the genre of Alger study.

Mayes was not alone in equating parody with belittlement, denigration, and poor writing. Published only a year after West’s highly praised *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million* was reviewed and deemed a thematic success but a stylistic failure. And the failure stems directly from West’s use of parody:

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6 Mayes, “After Half a Century,” vi.

7 Ibid., viii.

8 Ibid., x.

9 Ibid., xii.

10 Ibid., vi.
“A Cool Million” is not so brilliant and original a performance as Mr. West’s extraordinary “Miss Lonelyhearts.” Here he is inhibited by the style he has chosen, a parody of writing the old “success” stories that used to be aimed at firing American youth with the ambition to make money. But as parody it is almost perfect.11

A few weeks prior, John Chamberlain similarly wrote that

the writing in “A Cool Million” is not the burnished, epigrammatic sort of prose that made “Miss Lonelyhearts” . . . so memorable. In satirizing the success story, Mr. West has been forced to use, and to heighten, the tricks of the success story—which is to say he has been forced to descend to the fabrications of the fake shoddy.12

But to myopically focus critique on Million’s literary value ignores its social relevance. In a letter to Josephine Herbst, supposedly dated May 31, 1932, West describes Million as “the breakdown of the American dream. I’m doing it satirically, of course. I’m rewriting the Horatio Alger myth—from barge boy to president or from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in one generation.”13 West clearly sees parody as more than a negative portrayal. He plainly equates Alger’s mythos with the American Dream. His sarcastic rewrite plays on the phrase “from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in three generations,” a saying often attributed to the late-1800s scenario in which a hardworking man amasses a fortune and passes it on to his fortune-squandering son, whose own son must then return to hard labor. But if the parody lies in this action occurring over the course of one generation, it also relies on the first part of the simile, “from barge boy to president.” Parody, then, acts as the specific replication of, as well as a commentary on, the upward mobility that striving for success brings.

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13 Letter from Nathanael West to Josephine Herbst, May 31, 1932, quoted in David D. Galloway, “A Picaresque Apprenticeship: Nathanael West’s ‘The Dream Life of Balso Snell’ and ‘A Cool Million,’” Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 5, no. 2 (1964): 118. This letter, like much of Alger gossip, creates its own life by often being cited but never being attributed to any archive of West’s or Herbst’s.
As Fred W. Householder, Jr. explores in “ΠΑΡΩΙΔΙΑ,” parody is “an imitation of work more or less closely modeled on an original.”14 Parody highlights an aspect of an original, makes it the “target of criticism,” gives it a “new set of functions,” and brings that aspect to the foreground.15 Through Lem’s abuse and exploitation, West violently draws attention to the homosocial relationships Alger depicts but also to our naïve interpretations of those same relationships. Over and over, Shagpoke exposes Lem to dangerous situations. Over and over, Lem trusts Shagpoke’s intentions, much as we trust Alger’s intentions in writing about such phenomena. Similarly, West’s reiterative pattern emphasizes, in Judith Butler’s terms, the absurd notion that an original “only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition.”16 The “parodic or imitative effect” of a parody that “exposes” an absence, or the excess, which the repetition seeks to quell.17 Or, “that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear.”18 For Butler, reiteration illustrates heterosexual anxiety and its own need to produce its originality. Yet its excessive repetition, “incessant and panicked

14 Fred W. Householder, Jr., “ΠΑΡΩΙΔΙΑ,” Classical Philology 39, no. 1 (1944): 1. Other modern lexicographers have taken up Householder’s observations by concentrating on the Greek root word of parody, “para.” F.J. Lelièvre addresses parody as “something sung—or composed—conformably to an original but with a difference,” “The Basis of Ancient Parody,” Greece & Rome 1, no. 2 (1954): 66. As he further teases out the definition, he says that the “techniques of parody” suggest “imitation and differentiation,” 70. Here Lelièvre references the definition of “para” as analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond. Like paragraphs on a page that are different from each other yet written in conjunction with one another, a parody reiterates a similar point and goes beyond.


17 Ibid., 23, 24.

18 Ibid., 25.
imitation of its own naturalized idealization” produces “the instability of all iterability.”\textsuperscript{19} The repetition constitutes the excesses that erupt “within the intervals of those repeated gestures and acts that construct the apparent uniformity of heterosexual positionalities.”\textsuperscript{20}

In mimicking precise Alger sections word for word but altering the protagonist’s luck, West’s parody literally fills in the absences between repetitive texts and themes. It plays on the anxiety of that “which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear” without “incessant and panicked imitation.” Lem’s bravery does not prevent Betty Prail’s brutal rapes. Instead of winning his fights, Lem is repeatedly and grotesquely disfigured. And instead of overcoming injustice and finding money or moderate success, ex-president Shagpoke becomes dictator and Lem is assassinated. Million’s parodic hyperbole engages Alger allegories, identifying the absences and excesses found in the rags-to-riches narratives we unremittingly produce and reproduce as physical and sexual exploitation.

\textit{A Cool Million: Introducing Difference}

\textit{Million} immediately plays on Alger’s themes as the novel introduces Mrs. Pitkin, a widow, and her son, Lemuel, who live in a 1780s antique house on a river. Not only is their setting idyllic and rural, but Lem has, knows, and lives with a biological parent.\textsuperscript{21} Lem returns home from school one day to see Mr. Slemp, the town lawyer, leaving their house after telling Mrs. Pitkin she must pay $1500 or be evicted. As Lem questions why Mr. Slemp upset his mother, the lawyer “exclaimed” “Stand aside, boy!” and “pushed Lem with such great force that the poor

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ib.\textsuperscript{d.}, 28.
\item Ibid., 24.
\item While a few of Alger’s protagonists know and possibly live with one of their biological parents, most are orphaned either by parental separation or death.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
lad fell off the porch steps into the cellar, the door of which was unfortunately open.”

This scene comes from Alger’s 1905 posthumously published *Forging Ahead*. Although Alger’s Lawyer Ross does not physically harm Andy (he “replied” “Stand aside, boy!” and sneered), West’s violent introduction of Lem parallels Alger’s introduction of Andy. By the time Lawyer Ross threatens the Gordon family, Andy, who works as a janitor at the town schoolhouse to pay for his schooling, has already fought with Herbert Ross, a classmate and bully, who hit Andy on the shoulders with a broom handle. Of course, Andy won his fight against the rich and uppity Herbert, who happens to be Lawyer Ross’s son. Lawyer Ross retaliates against Andy by threatening to levy the Gordon’s furniture to pay off a debt that Widow Gordon’s husband settled before his death. And so the Alger story goes.

Within the first two pages, *Million* emphasizes what Alger’s narratives introduce as commonplace, fighting bullies. The physical violence in *Forging Ahead* occurs between two boys, as it does in most of Alger’s texts. Million’s first physically violent act takes place between Lawyer Slemp and Lem, signaling how *Million* dismantles the gentle, philanthropic nature of these crucial same-sex relationships, both within the text and for the reader who often overlooks them. Within a few pages, West has sutured the reader into the story. The extreme

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23 *Forging Ahead*, according to as much factual information as can be gathered, is not one of Edward Stratemeyer’s Alger’s published between 1900 and 1908. It is a reprinting of Alger’s “Andy Gordon, or, the Fortunes of a Young Janitor,” first serialized in *Golden Days for Boys and Girls* in 1881. For more, see Bill and Mary Roach’s “Horatio Alger, Jr.: Precursor of the Stratemeyer Syndicate,” *Journal of Popular Education* 37, no. 3 (2004): 450–62.


25 A few rarely cited instances exist of man on boy violence, the most infamous being the padrone welting Ludovico’s “naked flesh” with a stick in *Phil, the Fiddler*, 57.
action of an adult male shoving a young teenager off porch steps and into a cellar provokes sympathy for Lem and ill will toward Lawyer Slemp. Additionally, West inserts the first of many authorial asides that directly address the reader. These moves gain the reader’s trust (the aside claims, “I was right”). As the story progresses, the violence becomes more and more outlandish. In doing so, Million amplifies what it interprets as our Alger distortions.

West’s first chapter continues to amplify Alger themes when Lem decides to see Mr. Nathan Whipple, president of the “Rat River National Bank,” to ask for help in saving their house. Mr. Whipple happens to be the former “President of the United States, and was known affectionately from Maine to California as ‘Shagpoke’ Whipple.” More importantly, “Mr. Whipple had often shown his interest in Lem.”26 Much like Alger’s texts, an older gentleman takes an “interest” in the young protagonist. West’s ex-president and current bank president’s “often shown” interest recalls both the financial and capitalist critiques that populate academic discussions of Alger, along with the homosocial relationships vital to his stories.

The two characters and themes become further entwined when Lem visits Shagpoke’s house (where Shagpoke literally invites him in by saying, “Come into my den”). Although he does not lend Lem any money, he encourages Lem to “go out into the world and win your way. . . . the world is an oyster that but waits for hands to open it. Bare hands are best, but have you any money?” Lem has “less than a dollar.” Shagpoke replies, “It is very little, my young friend, but it might suffice, for you have an honest face and that is more than gold. . . . Have you any collateral?”27 Combining the typical honest-faced protagonist with “security for a loan,” their relationship supports Michael Moon’s proposal that “Alger’s reformulation of domestic fiction

26 West, 70, emphasis added.

27 Ibid., 73.
as a particular brand of male homoerotic romance functions as a support for capitalism.”

Alger’s boys attract “the attention of a well-to-do male patron, usually through some spontaneous exhibition of his physical strength and daring”: “this ‘interest’ is taken in a manner that is made thoroughly congruent with the social requirements of corporate capitalism on the sides of both parties: boy and potential employer alike ‘profit’ from it.”

_Million_ strips away the physical strength and daring, exposing Shagpoke’s interest in Lem’s “young” “honest face” and “bare” hands. Shagpoke insists Lem leverage the family cow for collateral even though his “honest face” is worth “more than gold.” Left with no other choice, Lem gives Shagpoke the ownership note and Shagpoke gives Lem “thirty dollars minus twelve per cent interest in advance.” Thus, their “interest”-based transaction is “made thoroughly congruent with the social requirements of corporate capitalism.” And unlike the mutually profitable relationships in Alger’s texts, Shagpoke will profit at Lem’s expense. Or put more bluntly, Shagpoke screws over Lem. Alger’s paternal-wealthy figure helps the down-on-his-luck boy by providing a job, an opportunity to prove his work habits, or even start-up capital. Shagpoke, instead, takes capital from Lem. Shagpoke never physically harms Lem, unlike nearly every other older male in the novel. Rather, Shagpoke exploits Lem’s trust to put Lem in dangerous situations that inevitably lead to his physical harm. In this type of relationship, Shagpoke will continually abuse Lem’s and the reader’s trust.

As Lem heads home, he sees Betty Prail, “a girl with whom he was in love in a boyish way,” being “pursued by a fierce dog.” Armed with a stick, Lem heroically “brought the knob

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28 Moon, “‘Gentle Boy,’” 88.

29 Ibid., 101.

30 West, 82.
down with full force on the dog’s back” and again “with great force on the dog’s head.” As “the animal fell, partly stunned, his quivering tongue protruding from his mouth,” Lem “dealt the prostrate brute two more blows which settled his fate. The furious animal would do no more harm.”31 Besides switching the order of “animal” and “brute,” these sentences appear word for word in *Tom Temple’s Career; Or, A Struggle for Fame and Fortune* (1888).32 Likewise, in both texts the dogs’ owners show up (Ben in *Tom Temple*, Tom Baxter in *Million*) and ask, “What have you been doing to my dog?”33 After Lem and Tom answer “Killing him,” the two protagonists fight their respective enemies, predictably prevail, and offer their hands in friendship to their bullies. But where Tom Temple and Ben become boxing buddies and friends, Lem’s bully Tom Baxter “jerked” Lem “into his embrace and squeezed him insensible,” eventually dropping “his victim to the ground.”34 Where Tom Temple walks Mary Somers home safely, Betty faints during the altercation and Tom Baxter, whose “little pig-eyes shown with bestiality,” “undresses the unfortunate lady,” rapes her, and leaves her naked under a bush.35

31 Ibid., 75.


33 Ibid., 64; West, 76.


35 West, 78. Unfortunately, Betty has been raped before, by Tom’s father, Bill, when a twelve-year-old Betty “was a well-formed little girl with the soft, voluptuous lines of a beautiful woman,” 79. Bill Baxter was the Ottsville Fire Company chief and raped Betty while her parents burned alive in a house fire. Orphaned until fourteen, Betty then worked as a maid for Mr. Slemp, the town lawyer who is foreclosing on the Pitkin’s house. Mr. Slemp “beat [Betty] twice a week on her bare behind with his bare hand” and took a “great deal of pleasure in these bi-weekly workouts,” 80. To show his appreciation, “Lawyer Slemp, although he was exceedingly penurious, always gave her a quarter when he had finished beating her,” 81.
In 1964, West’s friend and frequent correspondent Josephine Herbst said of West’s stories, their “only valid currency is suffering.” A few years later, Budd Schulberg reminisced that “there was friendly coexistence between Pep West and the realistic proletarian writers, whose work he quietly or privately dismissed. He was strangely divided between a social life committed to positive political action and a creative life committed to alienation, a bone-dry negativism, a terrible (because so very real) sense of doom.” This last scene with Lem unconscious and Betty raped, narrated in a straightforward and prosaic fashion, certainly illustrates West’s perceived negativism. But its parodic connection to Alger elevates it beyond a simple pessimistic view of humanity. Million specifically yields Lem’s becoming “insensible” and Betty’s rape and history of sexual abuse from Tom Temple’s Career. Alger presents Tom Temple as a bully who learns that thieves at a security company ruined his father’s estate. Tom travels from New York to California to track down the men responsible for his father’s financial losses, turns them over to the police, receives his inheritance, reimburses the security company, marries Mary Somers, and lives a “bold, enterprising and successful” life. Tom Temple’s conclusion summarizes our assumptions and mythic notions of success: “the bold, aggressive qualities which once made him a bully have been diverted to business, and have made him energetic and enterprising. So we leave him better than we found him, and with every prospect of a happy and prosperous career.”

Million attacks these assumptions, providing a shocking alternative that emphasizes our absent interpretations. Tom Baxter’s brash bully behavior is animalistic and brutal, not

38 Alger, Tom Temple, 211.
“energetic and enterprising.” In Million, these two sets of words have identical meanings: being merely energetic rarely moves one up the corporate ladder. One must embody some aggressive tactics, be they brutal or animal-like, to achieve in a dog-eat-dog world. Lem’s naïveté does not charm anyone or prove advantageous. His naïveté in helping a bully up off the ground is just that, and it leads to him becoming “insensible.” Unable to fight, Lem’s naïveté leaves Betty vulnerable to Tom Baxter’s attack. More than simply offering negativism, Million critiques the values in Alger’s texts and how we interpret them. Lem’s unquestioning behavior results in his complete physical dismemberment—not in success or luck or pay raises. And as the novel progresses, his relationships with older gentlemen increasingly become the core of his dismemberment as these gentlemen use Lem and his missing pieces to their advantage.

**Next Stop, Dismemberment**

While Betty is kidnapped, taken to New York City by white slavers, and sold to Wu Fong’s “house of ill-fame,”

39 Lem regains consciousness and boards a train for New York City. In a typical Alger scene—particularly mimicking Joshua Bascom in the 1890 text *The Erie Train Boy*—a professional pickpocket swindles Lem. At first, Joshua and Lem mirror one another in terms of luck: the pickpocket who steals their money inadvertently leaves in their respective pockets a “handsome gold ring set with a neat stone”

40 and a “diamond ring.”

41 Both sell their rings on the train for more than the value of their stolen items. But from here their similarities become more complex. Both are country boys on their way to New York City for the first time. After acquiring money for the sale of his thief’s ring, Joshua appears exiting a saloon “under the

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39 West, 91.


41 West, 86.
influence of liquor” “arm in arm” with a “jolly, sociable chap” who “wouldn’t let [Joshua] pay for” any of the “milk punch” he drank. 42 Joshua refuses to go to “a little card party” with his “nice fellow,” 43 and we next see him confronted on the street by his pickpocketer, who accuses Joshua of stealing. The police haul Joshua off to jail where Fred, the literal Erie train boy, shows up to vouch for Joshua. But the experience overwhelms him. The next day Joshua boards a train back to his hometown where he is picked up, as the text states, by “the ‘dad’ to whom Joshua had frequently referred.” 44 These oddly constructed scenes between Joshua and his daddies are actually not that odd at all; but their explicit portrayal in Alger is. The Erie Train Boy manifests the physically intimate inter-generational relationship many of Alger’s works allude to—the same that West makes explicit with Shagpoke’s “interest” in Lem and in scenes to follow. 45

But first, Lem’s train ride. As soon as he received $50 from the pawnbroker for the ring, “a squad of policeman armed with sawed-off shotguns enter” the train car and grab Lem “roughly by the throat. Handcuffs were then snapped around his wrists. Weapons pointed at his head.” 46 They take Lem to the station at the next train stop, calling him “sweetheart” while twice beating him unconscious. 47 Lem goes to trial, is found guilty, and sentenced to “fifteen years in the penitentiary.” The warden orders Lem’s teeth removed because “teeth are often a

42 Alger, Erie, 34.
43 Ibid., 35.
44 Ibid., 41–45, 48.
45 For only a few specific examples, see Uncle Whitney and Ragged Dick in Ragged Dick, 76–80; and Mr. Preston and Paul Hoffman in Paul, the Peddler; Or, The Adventures of a Young Street Merchant (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), 77–79.
46 West, 87.
source of infection.” To fight “morbidity,” he must also endure a “series of cold showers,” which actually give Lem a “bad case of pneumonia.” His sickness reintroduces Lem to Shagpoke, incarcerated because his bank failed after “Jewish international bankers” and “Communists” loaded his bank with “European and South American Bonds,” making Shagpoke “the victim of an un-American conspiracy.” Lem asks about his mother’s well-being; unfortunately their house was foreclosed and his mother “disappeared.” Shagpoke tries to cheer up Lem by saying that Lem can profit from their jail time by working on “several of my inventions.” Shagpoke also coaxes Lem to continue his quest for success, declaring he has “an almost certain chance to succeed because you were born poor and on a farm. Let me now tell you that your chance is even better because you have been in prison.”

A revitalized Lem travels to New York City and arrives “all intact;” that is, after being released from jail with a pair of used false teeth that fall out whenever he tries to speak. His teeth end up “deep in the mud of the bridle path,” and a “flying pebble” injures his eye after he stops two runaway horses from stomping “the president of the Underdown National Bank and Trust Company.” When Mr. Underdown offers Lem no reward, job, or a place to stay, the text introduces Sylvanus Snodgrasse, who witnessed the heroic rescue. Minus the “e,” Snodgrasse comes from Ben Bruce; Or, Scenes in the Life of a Bowery Newsboy (1901).

48 Ibid., 90.
49 Ibid., 95–96.
50 Ibid., 97. Emphasis added.
51 Ibid., 99.
52 Ibid., 105, 104.
53 Again, like Forging Ahead, a reprinting from Argosy (1892–1893), and not a Stratemeyer Alger. See Roach, “Precursor,” 450–62.
possesses overt quirks similar to *The Erie Train Boy*. The narrative follows Ben from newsboy to actor playing a newsboy in an Off-Broadway production. After a successful run, Mrs. Hardcourt hires Ben to play her dead son Edwin, so she can keep her allowance and inheritance. When she dies, Ben inherits $40,000 and a yearly income of $10,000. Though acting may be hard work, Ben literally achieves success by portraying a newsboy and not actually being one. His acting skills persuade Mrs. Hardcourt to hire him to play her dead son. And by acting as her wealthy, aristocratic heir, he becomes a wealthy, aristocratic heir who frequently travels to England and who “deserves his prosperity.”

In *Ben Bruce*, Sylvanus boards at the same house as Ben. He is a short story writer who hopes to “acquire fame” and “live in the hearts of future generations” with bad stories entitled “The Ragpicker’s Curse.” Despite employment, he asks Ben repeatedly for money to pay for rent and dinners, even convincing Ben to hock his watch in the hope that Ben will use the money to treat Sylvanus to the theater and “ice cream.” When Ben returns with his inheritance, Sylvanus wants to write a story about him and have him finance a magazine that Sylvanus would run. Ben refuses, but does give him $6 to pay his rent and buys him a new suit.

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54 Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ben Bruce; Or, Scenes in the Life of a Bowery Newsboy* (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), 225.
55 Ibid., 78.
56 Ibid., 85.
57 Ibid., 97.
58 Ibid., 100–2.
59 Ibid., 206–8.
In *Million*, Sylvanus successfully uses Lem as a source of income despite being “a poet both by vocation and avocation.”\(^{60}\) He writes an ode to Lem’s heroic horse deed on the spot, distracting the gathered crowd while his “confederates circulated freely among its members and picked their pockets.” (The later point is made in another authorial aside to the reader.) By choosing *The Erie Train Boy* and *Ben Bruce*, *Million* draws attention to the oddities in Alger’s own canon, the oddities our interpretations do not always acknowledge. That *Million* uses a character from this Alger text who lauds imitative success again illustrates the parody’s nuance. A real unsuccessful newsboy who successfully portrays a newsboy on stage and then successfully acts as a dead child for financial gain does not fit Alger’s typical rags-to-riches formula, like the animalistic/brutal and energetic/enterprising comparison. Ben succeeds in and excels at imitation, not necessarily the hard work of a bootblack or a match boy. *Million* emphasizes these imitative oddities through Snodgrasse (a thief masquerading as a poet), though to better effect later in the novel.\(^{61}\)

During Sylvanus’s oration, Lem faints from the pain of his eye, and after “several blows in the groin failed to budge him,” the kicking officer calls an ambulance. Doctors remove his “severely damaged” right eye and release him from the hospital. With no money (“Snodgrasse’s henchmen had robbed him”), he wanders the city until he sees Shagpoke on a street corner wearing a “coonskin hat.” The hat is one of Shagpoke’s prison infirmary inventions that he “perfected” himself when Lem left prison early.\(^{62}\) It is also part of the uniform of the “National

\(^{60}\) West, 106.

\(^{61}\) Scharnhorst notes that West caricatures Walt Whitman in Sylvanus Snodgrass, “a writer of sensational fiction who frequents a Pfaff’s-like New York restaurant with a coterie or devoted followers and whose alliterative name even contains a derisive allusion to *Leaves of Grass.*” See “Rags to Patches,” 65.

Revolutionary Party, popularly known as the ‘Leather Shirts.’” Mixing Davy Crockett and fascism, the Leather Shirts—also named “Storm Troops”—wear “a deer-skin shirt and a pair of moccasins” and their “weapon is a squirrel rifle.”63 Even though Shagpoke created the Party without Lem, he needs Lem to further the Party’s campaign. Under the guise of being “still very interested in” Lem’s career and wanting to maintain Lem’s trust, Shagpoke tells Lem that “America has never had a greater need for her youth than in these parlous times.”64 He initiates “Commander Pitkin” into the Party and asks Lem for a “soapbox” so he can stand and address the crowd.65 Unbeknownst to anyone, an “enormously fat” man wearing a “tight-fitting Chesterfield overcoat” observes this Party event. He leaves the crowd and places two phone calls, identifying himself as “Operative 6384XM” and “Comrade Z;”66 as a result of his phone calls, the “international Jewish bankers and the Communists converged on the meeting,” and hit Shagpoke with “a terrific blow on the head with a piece of lead pipe.”67


64 West, 109.

65 Ibid., 111.

66 Ibid., 114.

67 With these second and forthcoming mentions of the “international Jewish bankers,” West appears to comment on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The propaganda, proven to be a hoax several times over, purports an international Jewish plot to achieve world domination. Henry Ford used his Dearborn Independent newspaper to publish articles drawn from Protocols as evidence of the Jewish threat. He eventually issued an apology, but only on the verge of losing a libel case and after publishing The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem in 1922. See Hadassa Ben-Itto, The Lie that Wouldn’t Die: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (London:
False Advertisement and Sexual Misadventure from Chinatown to California

Lem escapes and lives on the street as an Algeresque “bundle of old rags” until Mr. Hainey, a professional criminal, offers him a job. Mr. Hainey’s interest in Lem centers on his physical lack: he will hire Lem if he can wear a glass eye. As luck has it, Lem needs an eye, and so begins Lem’s short career as a grifter. Lem visits jewelry stores, pretends to lose the eye, and has the stores offer a reward for its return. Mr. Hainey then scams the stores for half the reward money. After the police catch Lem, his defense attorney tries to swindle him, so the prosecuting attorney becomes Lem’s counsel. During their meeting, the most bitter and entertaining exchange of the novel takes place:

“I’m innocent!” repeated Lem, a little desperately.
“So was Christ,” said Mr. Barnes with a sigh, “and they nailed him.”
… “But I’m innocent,” repeated Lem again.
“Maybe, but you haven’t got enough money to prove it.”

Before the police catch him, Lem loses his eye all over town and spends his ill-gotten money at Chinatown theaters. Betty Prail, country girl turned prostitute extraordinaire, sees him on the street and quickly throws a bottle with an S.O.S. in it at Lem’s feet to get his attention.

Unfortunately, Wu Fong’s associates notice Lem too and capture him at knifepoint.

West sharply critiques prostitution and capitalism by equating the two and illustrating their mutual artifice. The enterprising Wu Fong decides to profit from, instead of kill, the “nice-looking American boy.” As such, Wu Fong exaggerates Shagpoke’s “interest” in Lem and what

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68 West, 115–16.

69 Ibid., 135–36.
physical and financial intrigue Lem’s relationship with Shagpoke entails. Where Mr. Hainey employs Lem because of his physical lack and for pure financial gain, Wu Fong utilizes Lem’s physical and sexual desirability. Million does not copy Alger texts here. Instead it replicates what Alger’s works already possess: an attractive protagonist and others’ ability to exploit that attractiveness. But this deviation produces a strikingly homophobic response that diminishes Million’s until now strong parodic examination. Lem’s captors “prepare him” and force him to “don a tight-fitting sailor suit.” They place him in a room “paneled in teak . . . compasses and other such gear in profusion,” make him sit on the edge of a bunk bed and wait for “the Maharajah of Kanurani, whose tastes were notorious.” The Maharajah “minced” over to the bed, “put his arm around the lad’s waist” and “lisped,” “Thom on, pithy boy, giff me a kith.” Lem feared the repercussions his physical interest merited after realizing the Maharajah “think[s] me a girl.” “[I]nstead of swooning,” Lem opened his mouth to scream and his “teeth fell clattering to the carpet. . . . When Lem bent awkwardly to pick up his teeth, the glass eye that Mr. Hainey had given him popped from his head and smashed to smithereens on the floor.” Lem’s oral misfortune was actually not enough for the Maharajah to feel cheated; only the ocular mishap “was too much for the Maharajah.” “Extremely vexed,” Wu Fong orders his men to

70 In the fall of 1932, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., began running stories on the front pages of his twenty-seven newspapers touting the need to “Buy American.” Hearst encouraged the anti-foreigner movement that Depression-riddled America proffered as the reason for its economic troubles. See Dana Frank, Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), esp. 58–77. West parodies Hearst with Wu Fong. During Betty’s stay and as “the Hearst papers began their ‘Buy American’ campaign he decided to get rid of all the foreigners in his employ,” obtain nine American girls, and redecorate each of their rooms in a distinctly American style: from Lena Haubengrauber, a Pennsylvanian, whose room was filled with “painted pine furniture” and whose customers could “eat roast ground hog and drink Sam Thompson rye,” (126) to Princess Roan Fawn, from an Oklahoma Indian reserve, who “did her business on the floor” and “baked dog and firewater” (128). For more, see West, 126–28.

71 West, 130.
“strip him of his sailor suit,” “beat him roundly” and throw Lem out on the street, making sure to preserve the suit and its potential for future enterprise.\(^{72}\)

This scene purposefully and outrageously illustrates West’s mimicry of the Alger narrative. It attacks the reader’s and American culture’s imagined Alger, while simultaneously depending on this imagined Alger for a successful narration. It is also violently homophobic. \(\textit{Million}\) challenges the naturalness of the American Dream, its repetitive narrative, and its desexualized and out-of-context re-creation of Alger’s mythos. Until now, the interest and profit exchange between Lem and the older male benefactors has been based on attraction and usefulness: Shagpoke’s interest in Lem’s “honest face” or Hainey’s need of a disfigured accomplice. Wu Fong reiterates these relationships in explicit terms by asserting “he could well use a nice-looking American boy” because the Maharajah’s “tastes were notorious.”\(^{73}\)

Through imitation and exaggeration, this reiteration highlights certain elements ever-present in Alger’s stories. \(\textit{Million}\) forces Lem to take part in the physicality that the American Dream glosses over with words and phrases like “hard work,” “luck,” and “strive,” themes that \(\textit{Million}\) represents as dismemberment, sexual exploitation, and eventual martyrdom. However, this scene depicts homosexual sexual expression as pedophilic, “unfeigned delight,” and “a thing of evil.”\(^{74}\) When the Maharajah asks, “What kind of pretty boy was this that came apart so horribly?” the text asserts that the Maharajah’s pedophilic desire causes the “pretty boy” to come apart. The “evil” of the same-sex desire, equated with pedophilia, overshadows the possibility of Lem’s coming apart because of a system of commercial abuses. As the Maharajah

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\(^{72}\) Ibid., 130–31.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 130.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 132.
minces and lisps and stalks his young prey, the text exposes America’s absent interpretation of Alger. The parody questions our creation of an imagined Alger and our dependence on him for success stories; likewise, it questions how our culture ignores the obvious relationships Alger describes and the possible abuses of such relationships that Alger does not mention. Yet, the strong phobic violence focuses the critique on an expressed sexual deviancy rather than the same-sex nature of the narrative’s relationships.

Simultaneously, to reduce *Million* to a phobic response misinterprets parody and its many aspects. Parody is not only, as Mayes suggests, a “belittling” tool; it is, as Householder suggests, a more complex apparatus that gives a “new set of functions.” When Lem viciously kills the dog to protect Betty, the text is not simply for animal cruelty or canine-phobic. I cede that animal violence does not play as prominent a role in Alger’s texts as same-sex relationships. At the same time, *Million*’s violence follows the very Algeresque scenarios that our collective interpretations gloss over most frequently: the attack of a dog, the expectation that a bully will play nice, or the assumption that all inter-generational same-sex relationships are free from abuse. Just as Lem trusts Shagpoke and Mr. Hainey, Lem continues to trust Wu Fong, until his intentions become obviously unsafe. An additional layer of trust exists here, as well—that of the Maharajah trusting Wu Fong to provide for his “tastes” and Lem’s fulfillment of his “tastes.” The breakdown that occurs represents the exploitation of the consumer and the consumed. Both are manipulated into taking part in a system of exchange where the end result is neither productive nor satisfying. Likewise, this scene portrays the consumers of Alger’s texts as naïve for not recognizing such abuses and for continually reinforcing these possibilities through our continual consumption of Alger’s texts. Perhaps like customers at a whorehouse, readers of Alger know what we like and like what we know. This interpretation is strongly worded; I do
not see Alger as a purveyor of pornography or false promises. Instead, I see him as a writer of stories endowed with mythic power through repetitive restatement. West’s scene just happens to have more teeth.

Betty walks out of the house while Wu Fong and his henchmen deal with Lem. They reunite on the street, go to Grand Central to sleep, see Shagpoke, and join him on his way to California to dig for gold to “finance the further activities of the National Revolutionary Party.”75 Along with Jake Raven (who owned the mine and joined Shagpoke at the earlier recruitment event), they stop in Chicago to change trains. Lem tries to buy a new eye and teeth during the layover but is kidnapped by an agent of “the Third International,”76 the same “enormously fat” man wearing a “Chesterfield overcoat,” “Operative 6384XM” or “Comrade Z,” who broke up Shagpoke’s rally.77 The text confirms his membership in the conspiracy of Jewish bankers and Communists that Shagpoke blames for losing his bank. Like all other adult men in Million, he has been using Lem, specifically, to track Shagpoke. With a “pistol” to Lem’s head, he demands to know where the California mine is. Lem struggles, their limousine crashes, and the ambulance doctor who arrives removes Lem’s thumb.78

Eventually, the four arrive in California and encounter “the man from Pike County, Missouri,” another character taken directly from Alger’s Joe’s Luck; Or, A Boy’s Adventure in California. Both Pike County men drink too much whiskey and eat more than their share of food. In Alger’s text, Joe (“a boy”) and Joshua (“a full-grown man”) dig for gold when the “Pike

75 Ibid., 140.
76 Ibid., 143.
77 Ibid., 114.
78 Ibid., 145.
County Man” joins their camp along the trail. Joe and Joshua allow the Pike County Man to join them despite the revelation that, as a boy, he shot his schoolteacher. After two days, Joe and Joshua wake up to find their good horse and food stolen and the Pike County Man nowhere in sight. The pair eventually catches up with and punishes him by tying “his head to the horse’s tail” and whipping it off into the sunset.

In Million, Lem, Shagpoke, and Jack Raven go to the mine, leaving Betty and the Pike County Man at the camp cabin immediately following the Pike County Man’s same schoolteacher-murder confession. Jake goes back to camp for more explosives. After being gone for several hours, Lem returns, remembering the Pike County Man’s “policy [to] always shoot an Injun on sight.” Lem finds “Jake Raven lying on the ground. He had been shot through the chest.” Lem grabs an ax and runs to the cabin to see “the Pike County man busily tearing off Betty’s sole remaining piece of underwear.” Being the brave and bold Alger hero, “Lem raised the ax high over his head and started forward to interfere.” However, the Pike County Man set “an enormous bear trap inside the door” and “its saw-toothed jaws closed with great force on the calf of [Lem’s] leg, cutting through his trousers, skin, flesh and halfway into the bone.” Betty faints when she sees “Lem weltering in his own blood.” But “in no way

79 Horatio Alger, Jr., Joe’s Luck; Or, A Boy’s Adventure in California (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), 139–41. This odd pairing begins as Joe, sixteen-year-old restaurant owner in California, strikes up a conversation about mining with a patron, Joshua, twenty-one. Says Alger of this relationship, in “California friendships ripened fast. There was more confidence between man and man . . . [they] are bound together by more friendly ties, and exhibit less of cold caution than at the East” (131).

80 Ibid., 143.

81 Ibid., 164.

82 West, 148–49.
disturbed, the Missourian went coolly about his nefarious business and soon accomplished his purpose.” He then throws a “hapless” Betty over his saddle and rides off toward Mexico.83

The Excess of (the) West

The final six chapters of Million do not borrow directly from Alger’s novels. Nevertheless, they are an extension of Alger’s work and our absurd expectations and created conventions. In particular, the “Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities” contains and critiques physical representations of our cultural mythologies and absent interpretations. Before arriving at the Chamber, Shagpoke returns to find Lem scalped, unconscious, but “his heart still beat.”84 He takes Lem to a hospital where he visited Lem “every day,” bringing him “an orange to eat” and some “wild flowers which he himself had gathered.” Eventually, this gentle and kind Shagpoke disappears. The doctors remove Lem’s leg and equip him with a wooden one from the knee down. As soon as Lem can walk normally, Shagpoke markets Lem as “the last man to have been scalped by the Indians and the sole survivor of the Yuba River massacre” to make some much-needed money.85

Unable to “arouse” a crowd, they interview for jobs with the Chamber, managed by none other than Sylvanus Snodgrass.86 The “museum”-like Chamber is actually a “bureau for disseminating propaganda of the most subversive nature,” but not for entertainment or necessarily for money. Snodgrass runs the Chamber as an “agent” of the same group that employs Operative 6348XM/Comrade Z/the enormously fat man in the Chesterfield overcoat.

83 Ibid., 154.
84 Ibid., 158.
85 Ibid., 159.
86 Ibid., 160.
The primary goal of the Chamber is to attract Shagpoke and the Leather Shirts. And it does. But within the novel, Snodgrasse and the Chamber reference the imitative and insidious analogy of the American Dream. Snodgrasse became an agent “because of his inability to sell ‘poems.’” In truth, “his desire for revolution was really a desire for revenge.”

In charge of a propaganda machine disguised as a museum and hiding his revenge behind a revolution, Snodgrasse represents a complete breakdown of meaning, the dissociation between appearance and function that the Chamber enhances. The “Inanimate” objects lining an entrance hallway are plaster sculptures of “a Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen, a copy of Power’s ‘Greek Slave’ with elastic bandages on all her joints, a Hercules wearing a small, compact truss.” The hallway leads to a salon lined with tables that “displayed collections of objects whose distinction lay in the great skill with which their materials had been disguised. Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and, finally, glass like paper.” Other tables held “ingenious” instruments, such as “pencil sharpeners that could also be used as earpicks, can openers as hair brushes. Then, too, there was a large variety of objects whose real uses had been cleverly camouflaged. The visitor saw flower pots that were really victrolas, revolvers that held candy, candy that held collar buttons and so forth.” These disguised objects surround the centerpiece of the exhibit, “a gigantic hemorrhoid that was lit from within by electric lights. To give the effect of throbbing pain, these lights went on and off.”

Differentiated imitations and “cleverly camouflaged” recognizable objects line the Chamber walls, and their multiple functions ultimately render the objects useless. Their

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87 Ibid., 162.
88 Ibid., 163.
deceptive and illusory appearance breaks down their repetitive use and reiterates a culture, as Rita Barnard astutely states, “where all original materials are transmuted and even plainness becomes an elaborately contrived style.” These objects serve “fabricated needs”: you cannot see out of an opaque window or eat steel cheese; Venus de Milo, provided the clock works, becomes function rather than aesthetic; the gun rots teeth instead of pierces flesh. A hernia support nullifies Hercules’s mythic strength, suggesting that even the most foundational of stories are ultimately productions. “[T]he great skill with which their materials had been disguised” makes these objects distinct. These embellished productions encircle the throbbing hemorrhoid. As the persistence of the American Dream suggests, our incessant need to have and create cultural narratives of success does not push the envelope or exist outside the proverbial box. Instead of being revolutionary, the objects’ and the Dream’s swollen and repetitive functions merely result in a large, pulsating sore.

The Chamber represents Million’s critique of our created mythologies and marks another critique of the homosocial relationships inherent in Alger’s texts. The “Animate” exhibit is a pageant featuring “short sketches in which Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death.” The exhibit ends with a playlet featuring a grandmother and “the three small sons of her dead daughter” who get swindled into buying “Iguanian Gold Bonds.” The final scene shows two millionaires who sold the bonds nearly tripping over “four dead bodies” in the street. This play changes Shagpoke

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90 West, 163.

91 Ibid., 164–65.
and his relationship with Lem. Until this point, Shagpoke’s interest in Lem had directly led to a loan, the inspiration to succeed, and the marketing of Lem’s physical maladies for financial survival. Indirectly, it has dismembered Lem’s physical body while forming a political entity that will require Lem’s assassination, to which Lem remains oblivious.

The text uses these results to scrutinize Lem and Shagpoke’s relationship. Lem questions Shagpoke about “capitalists” because he “was especially disturbed by the scene in which the millionaires stepped on the dead children.” Shagpoke defends capitalists and calls the scene “ridiculous by the fact that no one can die in the streets. The authorities won’t stand for it.” Pressed further by Lem, Shagpoke states the true intent of his political movement: “the distinction must be made between bad capitalists and good capitalists, between parasites and creators.”92 “Henry Ford” is a good capitalist; and more so,

Capital and Labor must be taught to work together for the general good of the country. . . . Both must be made to realize that the only struggle worthy of Americans is the idealistic one of their country against its enemies, England, Japan, Russia, Rome and Jerusalem. Always remember, my boy, that class war is civil war, and will destroy us.93

Lem “innocently” suggests asking Snodgrasse to stop the playlet. But Detroit is not the place to “denounce” the show, Shagpoke replies, “too many Jews, Catholics and members of unions.” They will wait until they reach “some really American town” in the South and then “we will act.”

And act Shagpoke does, connecting his and the text’s previously unconnected jabs at anything foreign. Shagpoke “whispered” to the town barber of Beulah, Mississippi, who quickly assembles a town meeting “under a famous tree from whose every branch a Negro had dangled

92 Ibid., 166.
93 Ibid., 166–67.
at one time or another.” All of Beulah’s “not colored, Jewish or Catholic”\textsuperscript{94} denizens gathered to hear Shagpoke, billed as a man who “ain’t no nigger-lover, he don’t give a damn for Jewish culture, and he knows the fine Italian hand of the Pope when he sees it.” Shagpoke gives a rousing “I love the United States” speech and convinces the crowd to “lynch” Snodgrasse, whose “insidious propaganda” pits “brother against brother, those who have not against those who have.”\textsuperscript{95} One wonders how the throbbing hemorrhoid creates this conflict, but the crowd does not: “a good three-quarters of its members did not know whom it was they were supposed to lynch. This fact did not bother them, however. They considered their lack of knowledge an advantage rather than a hindrance, for it gave them a great deal of leeway in their choice of victim.” They “put a rope around Jake Raven’s neck because of his dark complexion,”\textsuperscript{96} and “the heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of a local Catholic priest was raped.”

Lem escapes the race-baited, stereotypically angry, ignorant Southern mob and through a series of hitched rides and hobbled treks, gets to New York City “ten weeks later.” But like Joshua from \textit{The Erie Train Boy}, he finds it a harrowing experience. He lives in a “piano crate” in Central Park and once again looks “ragged.”\textsuperscript{97} His physical difference attracts Riley and Robbins, who hire Lem as a “stooge” for their “Fifteen Minutes of Furious Fun with Belly Laffs Galore.” Essentially, two actors beat Lem with newspapers, which he has to purchase, until his

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 170.
toupee, eye, teeth, and wooden leg fly into the audience. Lem’s stage role replicates his dismemberment daily on stage for any and all paying customers to view, probably twice on Sundays.

After one such performance, Lem reads from the offending newspapers’ headlines, “WHIPPLE DEMANDS DICTATORSHIP” and “LEATHER SHIRTS RIOT IN SOUTH.” Shagpoke’s National Revolutionary Party has won the South and West, every place to which he and Lem traveled. Only New York City resisted Shagpoke “because of its large foreign population.” One day “Storm Trooper Zachary Coates” visits Lem at the Bijou Theatre to reveal that Lem is not a lemming but “one of the original members of the party.” Lem’s “wounds” and how they “were acquired” are known to the Party, and the Party’s main purpose “is to prevent the youth of this country from being tortured” as Lem was. Coates also reveals Lem’s role as “one of the martyrs of our cause.” Perhaps not knowing that martyrs must be killed, Lem eagerly asks what Shagpoke’s orders are for him. Coates gives Lem a speech that Shagpoke wrote “expressly” for him to read on stage while the Party and Shagpoke march on City Hall to demand control of the city. Lem goes on stage dressed in the “uniform of the ‘Leather Shirts’” for the evening show and reads his Shagpoke-written speech. “I am a clown,” he began, “but there are times when even clowns must get serious. This is such a time. I . . .” Before Lem can finish, the “enormously fat” Operative 6348XM shoots Lem with an “automatic pistol.” Lem “fell dead, drilled through the heart by an assassin’s bullet.” Martyr does not correctly

98 Ibid., 173–74.
99 Ibid., 175.
100 Ibid., 175–76.
101 Ibid., 176.
describe Lem because he is killed for others’ beliefs, not his own. There exists no self-statement in Lem’s death, only Shagpoke securing his position and strengthening his Party’s standing.

Alger’s novels typically conclude with the protagonist securing a better position in the world, aided by an older man’s desire to help an attractive young boy. But Million concludes by emphasizing Lem’s steadfast eager naïveté and Shagpoke’s ability to use him. To his death, Lem trusted Shagpoke’s intentions and Shagpoke exploited Lem’s trust. In the final scene, “it is Pitkin’s Birthday, a national holiday, and the youth of America is parading down Fifth Avenue in his honor. They are a hundred thousand strong. On every boy’s head is a coonskin hat complete with jaunty tail, and on every shoulder rests a squirrel rifle.” “Dictator” Shagpoke stands on a stage along with the Widow Pitkin and Shagpoke’s secretary, Betty Prail. The hundred thousand boys sing “The Lemuel Pitkin Song” while Shagpoke extols martyr Pitkin’s death as an example

“... Of the right of every American boy to go into the world and there receive fair play and a chance to make his fortune by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens. ... Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this county was delivered from sophistication, Marxism, and international capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American.”

“Hail the Martyrdom in the Bijou Theater!” roar Shagpoke’s youthful hearers when he is finished.

“Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!”

“All hail, the American Boy!”

In the middle of Million, West presents a scene with no bearing on the plot that exemplifies his parodically replicative technique, highlighting the homosociality in Alger’s texts through the

102 Ibid., 177–78.

103 Ibid., 179.
use of Alger’s own words. After Lem begins working for Mr. Hainey, he secures a place to live and meets Sam Perkins, who works in a “furnishing goods store.” Sam invites Lem to Chinatown, and Lem expresses an interest in inviting Mr. Warren, a fellow boarder. Sam exclaims that Mr. Warner is a “crank . . . Pretends that he is literary and writes for the magazines . . . [D]id you ever see such shabby neckties as he wears?” After Sam asks “How do you like the tie I have on? It’s a stunner, isn’t it?,” he declares, “the girls always notice a fellow’s necktie.” The only people who notice their neckties are other boys. Only boys ask boys how they look because there are no girls in their rooms, at their work, on their streets, or in their lives. Purposefully excessive, A Cool Million follows Alger’s formula word for word and scene for scene to portray the small-town boy whose quest to save his family home dismembers and kills him, while an interested older male uses this boy’s plight and abuses his trust to rise from ex-president to dictator.

West’s novel recognizes the homosociality in Alger’s texts, setting it alongside other commonplace occurrences like fighting bullies, being scammed, forming inter-generational bonds, gaining employment through attractiveness, and excelling by striving for success. By following these lifted sections with blatant and often grotesquely phobic violence, Million stresses our misinterpretations. With each scene A Cool Million copies, the narrative reverberates with extremely un-Alger-like repercussions, using these banal and shoddy scenes to highlight our misinterpretations of Alger and illustrate how homosociality resides at the heart of our Alger myths and American Dream clichés.

104 West, 122; Alger, Andy Grant’s Pluck (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2003), 115. Andy replaces Lem in Alger’s text.

105 West, 123; Alger, Andy Grant, 115.

106 West, 123; “notice your necktie” in Alger, Andy Grant, 116.
CHAPTER 5
THE PERSONAL IS PARTIC’LAR: THE HORATIO ALGER SOCIETY’S NETWORK OF
INFORMATION

My name is Aaron Talbot, and I am Partic’lar Friend 1088.¹ I became interested in
Horatio Alger in my late twenties as a Ph.D. student at the University of Florida. I own fifty-two
Alger titles, with five duplicates and four Stratemeyer Algers. Alger’s novels attracted me
because of the interdependent male relationships that sustain his stories. Also, to borrow a line
from Michael Moon, “It is comforting during graduate school to read stories where everything
always works out in the end.” I also collect state quarters from the Philadelphia and Denver
mints.

Above are my answers to the questions asked whenever one joins the Horatio Alger
Society (the Society). You do not have to answer them, nor do you have to own any Alger books
to join. The only requirement is a general Alger interest. I answered them because, like other
Society members, I am interested. Our interest, our curiosity, and our desire to know and share
are what keeps the Society together and alive after more than forty years. I begin on a personal
note because my years as a graduate student, this project, and the Society’s dominant Alger
interpretations all mirror the personal nature of Alger scholarship. In graduate school and
academia at large, it is all too easy to isolate oneself into small circles of people who know
exorbitant amounts of information and whose conversations are defined as elitist ivory-tower
rhetoric. For the most part, we do not seek out fame and fortune, but a simple rise to
respectability. We look to share our information with others and have them recognize our
personal stake in that knowledge.

¹ Briefly, the term “Partic’lar Friend” comes from Alger’s character Ragged Dick, who used it to
evoke a familiarity with anyone from the Duke of Newcastle to the newsboy Mickey Maguire. I
will discuss this term in more depth as this chapter progresses.
The Society officially began in 1962 with the meeting of two Alger devotees, Kenneth Butler and Forrest Campbell, but its roots encompass a myriad of people, time periods, and geographic regions. It would be reductive to label the Society and what it does nostalgia or hero-worship, though those are certainly aspects of its purpose. More than a group of fanatic collectors and retired hobby seekers, the Society functions as a network of devoted individuals who see Alger as a living social value. As a group, the Society is self-protective, self-policing, and not necessarily self-interested. Its members personally invest themselves in Alger’s life, during the nineteenth century and now. Some of their personal histories and writings match Alger’s myths. While their writings affirm Alger’s presumed commentary about the current state of our society, youth, and politics, the members’ emulation of him never degrades into claiming to be him.

I shift from “our” to “they” in this last paragraph to illustrate two points and not to distance myself from the Society, though such a shift is inevitable. First, while we share an Alger interest, I believe that to include myself in their community distracts from their purpose. In this final chapter, I focus on several specific time periods in the life of the Society using personal letters from both well-known and run-of-the-mill members. It is easy to misconstrue the context of letters written by living people and portray an individual in a contrary or negative light. I do not intend to make claims about any person’s character, positive or otherwise. Rather, I want to narrate a history of the history the Society builds around Alger. Its function as an interest-bound group provides a unique view of the role belief plays in the creation of historical records, and how a personal quest for truth, while biased, need not be written off or ignored as fantastical, fictional, or unimportant.
Second, in this chapter I am ultimately a voyeur as I read, use, and analyze personal correspondences. In doing so, I replicate what Alger scholarship has done for many years: Herbert R. Mayes, John Tebbel, and Ralph Gardner all used a fake Alger diary or Alger’s own texts as their main source material, repeating exact phrases and interpreting personal words written long ago to deduce a personality and an ethos. Scholars, members, and non-members eventually questioned the diary’s existence and mostly disproved the biological information. Repetition and reiteration are inescapable when researching Alger and those who researched him. Alger study is personal and repetitive, but those aspects ultimately strengthen Alger research and should be incorporated into any approach, analysis, and contribution to his scholarship.

During the summer of 2005, I was the Horatio Alger Fellow at the Northern Illinois University Horatio Alger Collection. I steeped myself in Algerania and the archives of the Society, which contain hundreds of letters, memorabilia, annual conference materials, and hand-drawn tracings of every first edition cover. This chapter examines the networks of information found in that archive, my own hesitations and enthusiasms, and the ownership of and personal relationship with information about and around Alger. I limit my examination of the archive to letters and Newsboy issues from the 1960s, the late 1980s, and early 1990s. I do so to focus on the foundations of the Society and a rival 1989 Alger newsletter, Bootblack. What emerges from the Partic’lar Friends’ papers is an Alger devoid of sexuality or sexual contact but intensely active in proffering the social values that the Society espouses in their construction of Alger. These various texts construct Alger as a poster-boy cure for what ails America and a man whose active, moral sense of work, right, and wrong deters any sexual incursion—heterosexual or homosexual, real or imagined. When accounts surface of possible heterosexual love affairs in
Europe, Society members dismiss them as youthful indiscretions or false rumors and immediately emphasize the good Alger brought to their lives and the lives of countless boys. However, Alger’s pederasty charges present a distinctly painful challenge for the Society. Their desire for an informative truth triggers all defenses of Alger’s altruism, tutoring, mentoring, advising, inspiring, and caretaking, as well as his contributions to nineteenth century boys in New York City and the remembered 1930s youth who eventually formed the Society. Unlike accounts of the European flings, historical, Society, and church records support—though do not necessarily prove—Alger’s pederastic past. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, the Society’s desire for this information causes a schism.

By addressing the Society’s simultaneous desire for, fear of, and attraction to information, I again do not intend to make claims about any individual’s sexuality. I do, however, want to explore how the Society’s desire regulates Alger, their mythic creation of him, and their existence as a group. As members write letters, construct newsletters, and attend annual conventions, they must maintain an active Alger to justify their bona fide and worthy attraction. In “Don’t Look Now—the Male Pin-Up,” Richard Dyer examines male and female Hollywood pin-up posters and posits that where “the female model’s gaze stops at that boundary, the male’s looks right through it.” Dyer contends that the viewers of male pin-ups are “caught up in a system that does not so much address them as work out aspects of the construction of male sexuality in men’s heads.” For this reason, “images of men are often images of men doing something,” to “disavow this element of passivity.”² Their action, “straining and striving,”³ allows male pin-ups and their viewers to remain in line with the “dominant ideas of masculinity-

³ Ibid., 63.
as-activity.”

In the same manner, Alger’s activity and the Society’s constant reiteration of his values and contributions avert Alger’s sexual possibility. Constructing a sexually vacant and morally active Alger keeps their idolization of and attraction to him and information about him one dimensional, free of any possible impurities or negative possibilities. Making Alger active combats sexual intonations while also working out the Society’s identity and mission. More than a sexual cleansing—though quite easily read as such—the Society seeks out Alger through its own striving and active construction of his valued contributions. An actively asexual Alger means a valued Alger. A valued Alger means that desire for and attraction to Alger information are valuable and desired by others, as well.

**Everything Alger**

Before the inaugural issue of *Newsboy* in July 1962 and the Society’s incorporation in 1965, Forrest Campbell and Kenneth Butler corresponded with other Alger fans. The earliest letters between Campbell and a future Society member are those written with Milton Salls, dated April 14, 1962 through September 3, 1965. From the start, their communication integrates Algeresque scenarios and language, using Alger and information about him to connect. Campbell tells Salls that he and Butler, “a hometown boy who made good,” “recently joined the Horatio Alger Club but we are disappointed in its inactivity.” Though the inactivity is not due to lack of interest (rather “the heart attack of the secretary”), Campbell writes that he, Butler, and Ralph Gardner will “join forces” to start an organization and newsletter dedicated to Alger

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4 Ibid., 66.
collectors. Near the conclusion of his letter, Campbell says, “I enjoy hearing from my Alger friends; do hope we can become united in some fraternal way.”

Many Society members collect the works of other authors or belong to other literary and collecting clubs. Campbell mentions Salls’s interest in Edgar Rice Burroughs; others are interested in G.A. Henty, Arthur Conan Doyle, Oliver Optic, and the collection of coins and stamps. Their friendly brotherhood unites around Alger and their combined interest saturates their intense quest for informational truth. A handwritten letter captures a debate about whether Alger smoked, drank, gambled, or took snuff. As “all 3 biographers are agreed” that he did not, Salls believes they are correct. Here the consensus of sources leads to an agreed truth, a scenario on which the Society relies heavily. Salls suggests getting Gardner to republish *Snobden’s Office Boy* since Gruber doubts that Alger’s “*Snobden’s Office Boy* was ever published and Enslin admits he has never seen or heard of a copy in existence.” One has to wonder how to print or reprint a book that was never published before, yet still referred to by two biographers. But more importantly, Salls’s letter reveals the Society’s intricate depth of knowledge. At this time, only two official published biographies existed: Herbert R. Mayes’s 1928 *Alger: A Biography without a Hero*, and Frank Gruber’s 1961 *Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Biography and Bibliography of the Best Selling Author of All Time*. The third biography Salls refers to is actually a bibliography, “A Checklist of Horatio Alger, Jr.” by Morton Scott Enslin in *Antiquarian Bookman*, July 6–13, 1959 (referred to in many letters as “Enslin’s AB” list). Only 750 copies of Gruber’s biography were printed in Los Angeles. Yet Campbell and Salls’s awareness of it should not be surprising given, their participation in a network that would have

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5 Forrest Campbell to Milton Salls, 14 April 1962. All letters, unless otherwise stated, are from the Horatio Alger, Jr. Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University Library. All emphasis, unless otherwise noted, are contained in the original letter.
access to and mention Gruber’s work: *Antiquarian Bookman*, used bookstores, and other Alger enthusiasts.

After re-reading “all 3 of my Alger biographies,” Salls believes that Campbell’s “correspondent Max [Goldberg] gets most of his information from Mayes,” who tends to “downgrade Alger’s success in life.” The Alger-fan translation would mean Mayes tends to get his facts wrong because Mayes does not respect Alger. Salls doubts other information in the biographies because they too downgrade Alger’s success in life. This equation exists in other letters. After Salls purchases and reads Tebbel’s *Rags to Riches*, he writes to Campbell on the sales receipt: “I think you would like to read it even tho [sic] you don’t subscribe to the theory that Alger may have had himself a fling at times.” While Tebbel’s stature as an “important writer” reflects Alger’s “esteem,” it does not verify or prove what Tebbel sets forth as fact, even a possible “fling”: “if the facts that this and the Mayes biography set forth are not true it is time somebody went about correcting them, with concrete evidence.”

But what is their basis of doubt? In response to Salls’s letter, Campbell writes that he would like to review Tebbel’s book “even if I did not agree with his viewpoints. I believe that the people who write about uncomplimentary facts of famous people, such as Alger, sincerely believe that all people are eager to read of any scandal that can be brought to light, even to the point of fabrication.” It should be noted that the scandal here has nothing to do with the pederasty charges revealed in the 1970s, but Alger’s supposed aforementioned heterosexual “fling[s].” Even if the life-long bachelor did have a few female sexual partners, Campbell “will concede that it is possible and it may be true, and if so, I will still defend Alger, since he is only

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6 Salls to Campbell, 11 February 1963.

7 Salls to Campbell, 18 December 1963.
human, the same as you and I and the other fellows.”

The “uncomplimentary” European female fancies Tebbel addresses, which Mayes writes about, make the biography a “fabrication.” Though Campbell does not explicitly state so, Society membership, or at least an Alger interest, overrides these facts or fabrications—being a member confirms and validates an interest in Alger; non-members’ information is and will remain suspect.

Campbell writes that “Alger’s name is used quite a lot recently, but too often in a degrading manner,” specifically by Brooks Atkinson and Thomas Meehan, writers for the *New York Times* and *New York Times Magazine*, respectively. According to Campbell, they make reference to Alger as “an attention getter by way of insulting remarks and slander.” Atkinson called Alger “a ‘hack’ (whatever that means),” which Campbell turns into a compliment: “I suppose his terminology means unorthodox, because Alger with his Harvard education chose to write for boys instead of the elite. It is said that the majority rules, so, since Alger delighted millions of readers (adults as well as juveniles) it seems to me that there are still a lot of poor losers around.” Atkinson is a “typical Alger bully” who “kick[s] a man when he’s down.” Alger “of course cannot fight back, except through his admirers.”

Salls, for his part, does not see the press’s uncomplimentary treatment of Alger. He quotes a *Sports Illustrated* article that describes Bill Bradley as “ambitious, courteous . . . . another Horatio Alger except that his father is wealthy.” More important to Salls is the information and the truth about Alger, whatever that may be: “I even feel that the other two biographies are mostly complimentary even if they dig up a little dirt on the side.”

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8 Campbell to Salls, 25 January 1964.
9 Campbell to Salls, 3 December 1964.
10 Salls to Campbell, 10 January 1965.
actions: he “chose to write for boys.” And he wrote about values. Campbell, outside his sarcasm, anchors Alger as an admirable person to be defended “through his admirers” because of what he did and what he produced. Alger’s actions as a writer for common boys “instead of the elite” speak to Alger’s mythology of bootstrap-pulling, striving, and succeeding. Thus, he administered values to those boys who encountered his writing after his death. His actions, or rather his imagined intended actions as a writer for common boys, make him valuable and invulnerable to slander.

For example, Campbell mentions that Salls researched “Horatio’s personal habits,” a follow-up to their previous conversation. On that note, Campbell is “quite certain that he did not smoke, at least I have never read any references that would lead me to think otherwise. However, I would not hold it against him, if he did.” Next, Campbell reaches the heart of the Society’s Alger defense. Salls previously mentioned that he thought Max Goldberg, PF-008, perhaps quoted Mayes for his Alger knowledge. Even in 1964, this “charge” meets authoritative words:

I am afraid that Max would be offended if he were charged with the guilt of quoting Mayes as an authority. He has told me repeatedly that he has spared no expense to bring me the truth and I believe him. He has local contacts [in Revere] which he believes to be an accurate source. It is possible that on some occasions, Mayes obtained some gospel truths which we must concede as being true facts. But if Max has made a statement which parallels Mayes writings, it is because that Max has found it to be true from local sources. I myself must believe what I read, however, I may make a choice as to what source seems to be most reliable, and in this case I choose Max.\footnote{Campbell to Salls, 24 February 1964.}

Goldberg’s interest in Alger can never be questioned, because his interest in Alger is unquestionable. Mayes is not a member and his slanderous writing only further proves his non-
But Goldberg “has spared no expense” to bring “gospel truths” to the Society since its inception, and to Campbell personally. In other words, Goldberg actually sought to inform and bring information to the group. Undoubtedly, Goldberg feels as Campbell does about Alger. He performs a yearly funeral service at Alger’s grave and has been a member since before the Society incorporated. Their personal connection to Alger unites them, and produces admiration such as the following: “I do not see in Horatio a perfect man, but one whom I admire and knowing the pitfalls through life and the many forks in the road, I know that it is humanly possible to err.” Campbell, above all else, is a believer in Alger and a believer in his belief. He knows Alger did not smoke or have random sexual encounters in Europe, because he believes what he knows. Faith and belief become facts when Alger is one’s subject of faith and belief.

“This I Believe”

In the 1950s, Edward R. Murrow’s radio program, “This I Believe,” brought three minutes of “comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism, and racial division.” Murrow’s program sought “to point to the common meeting grounds of beliefs, which is the essence of brotherhood and the floor of our civilization.” Along with prominent Americans, his show featured dentists, teachers, housewives, and cab drivers expressing “the guiding principles by which they lived.” The Society replicates this sentiment, and one of its

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12 In the mid- to late 1970s, the Society offered Mayes an honorary membership. Mayes responded in an updated version of his Alger biography, “in view of the problems I have caused Alger devotees, how much more appropriate would have been the offer of a dishonorary membership.” “After Half a Century,” xxxv.


14 Campbell to Salls, 24 February 1964.

15 “About This I Believe,” http://thisibelieve.org/aboutus.html. NPR recently resurrected this show and it continues presently.
worries was American youth. If Alger’s father “ruined” Horatio’s life by insisting on seminary school, writes Salls, “it would be very nice if some of our present day young folks could be ‘ruined’ in the same way.” Campbell published numerous editorials, such as “The Generation Gap: How to Close It,” and the Society sponsored multiple Junior Alger Reading Clubs, which sought “to bring the beneficial influence of Horatio Alger in the nation” by enrolling “boys and their dads.”

Parents of teenagers would begrudgingly agree that goalless youth are less daunting than an atomic U.S.S.R. But the Society’s bunker mentality and members’ desire to hold onto their beliefs—those “guiding principles” highlighted by Murrow’s program—were just as strong. Even so, the Society should not be ridiculed or dismissed as fanatical, because their belief contributes to and fuels Alger scholarship. First and foremost, members’ beliefs in Alger add a critical, if biased, eye to Alger study. After reading Gardner’s book, Salls notes “that the biography skips entirely many of the things elaborated by the other two books but does not necessarily rule them out.” No word on what “the things” are; perhaps the sexual encounters Salls and Campbell wrote about previously. Whatever they are, Salls wants more information. He also wants confirmation by others, seconding the information he already believes. Salls critiques the rags-to-riches tagline, stating, “Alger never aspired to have his fictional heroes rise to high government positions or even to extreme wealth.”

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16 Salls to Campbell, 11 February 1963.
17 Forrey, “Religious Experience,” 100.
19 Salls to Campbell, date unknown, between 27 March and 3 December 1964.
20 Salls to Campbell, date unknown, between 12 May and 3 August 1965.
Gardner, *Newsboy*, and Gardner’s book: “Incidentally you [Campbell] have a footnote in the July issue as follows: ‘(*Naturally Ralph Gardner—has all 119 stories—).’ In his [Gardner’s] book he states that ‘the Library of Congress owns the only known copy of ___________. I’ll skip the title and give you the fun of checking.”21

Society members’ admiration fuels their scrutiny of all aspects of Alger’s publication history. When Salls points out that his favorite Alger story is *The Young Book Agent*, Campbell quickly writes within a few weeks that his choice is “of course one of the Stratemeyer books. Which has been questioned whether or not Alger wrote any part of them.” Society members frequently question Alger’s authorship. After re-reading *Tom Brace*, Campbell wonders, “if Alger ‘farmed out’ certain stories to be completed by another person.” Campbell elaborates and relates his own authorship with knowing and believing in Alger’s ability as a writer:

Alger, or the writer (?) wrote himself into a spot in chapter XXVI for which he did not seem to have an answer. (please read if you have a copy) The hero gets out of a tight spot, by just happening to meet up with the man who gives him the price of a railroad ticket, and quote, “and did not see each other again.” This is the type of unrealistic situations [sic] that Alger critics dwell upon, and the gullible readers of such ‘Critic’ reviews, actually believe that all Alger stories are patterned accordingly. This is not so. I know my situations in *The Young Postmaster* are well thought out in advance and there are no “just happened to” situations. I believe that Alger was entirely capable of providing realistic situations. Therefor [sic] I cannot accept the plot mentioned above as a typical Alger situation. Nough said.

Campbell knows that *Tom Brace* was originally “published as a serial in *Argosy* (1889),” well before Alger’s death and the first Stratemeyer Alger in 1900. But Campbell finds “certain portions . . . quite unlike the usual Alger style.”22 Though a later article by Bill and Mary Roach

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21 Salls to Campbell, 3 August 1965. I added the colon and interior quotes for clarity.

22 Campbell to Salls, 22 January 1965.
actually quantified the difference between Alger and Stratemeyer, Campbell intrinsically felt a difference. His personal connection to Alger, as a fellow author, admirer, and most of all a believer, led him to his conclusions.

So again, I return to the issue of belief and academic study. I do not want to question or necessarily embrace Campbell and the Society’s belief in their construction of Alger. Instead I ask, what does their belief do and how does it function? Besides uniting the members, the Society’s belief provides a unique and fanatical critique of what is said about Alger, as seen in many issues of Newsboy. During the same time they exchanged these and other letters, Campbell published the Society’s personal connections in Newsboy, a monthly newsletter “conceived as a medium to serve all people who were interested in Horatio Alger.” These connections include everything from the nit-picky to the grandiose. Campbell provides news of members in Alaska during the earthquake of 1964, members in automobile crashes, new members’ hobbies, and current members’ growing Alger collections. Overall, Newsboy dedicates itself to Alger information of all forms, including intense Alger critiques.

After Gardner publishes his Alger biography in 1964, Campbell writes that

Gardner invites the criticism of the Newsboy subscribers after reading his book, quote, “as they probably know more about Horatio than do most professional book reviewers and literary critics—I’d also be most eager to know of press comments Newsboy readers send

23 “Precursor,” 450–62. “Using word counts and the statistical model for listing the equality of two proportions” (451) the Roaches “subjected Alger electronic texts to function word frequency analysis” (453) to create a base Alger word formula. From there, they confirmed the books Alger wrote, Stratemeyer wrote, and those republished and edited by various publishers after Alger’s death. (456)

24 4, no. 6 (1965): 1.


you on my book, as they are all over the country, they’ll possibly come across a lot that I’ll miss.”

Two months later, George Raviler writes Newsboy to point out an error: “(S-77) who owns a copy of Grand’ther Baldwin’s Thanksgiving, and in checking his copy with the description given, discovered that the description states ‘Bushel’ of Wheat instead of ‘Sheaf’ of Wheat. Only a holder of this rare copy could have discovered this error. Thanks, George.” Members’ attention to detail fosters—and is in turn supported by—a market of ideas and an exchange of products. They create a code for Alger books based on Gardner’s bibliography so members can list books (mostly lower-grade duplicates) in Newsboy that they want to sell, trade, or give to “our less fortunate members.” Members with pages missing from their Alger novels can contact Gilbert Westgard, who “will provide photographic reproductions of members’ missing pages.” Members also submit Alger short stories from their private collections, some of which had not been in print for over eighty years, which Campbell then typesets for all members to enjoy. They name the journals, volumes, issue numbers, and pages where these short stories are located so others can find them and, presumably, verify their authenticity.

After four years the Society had grown to approximately 178 members and had established an annual conference and a monthly newsletter. Most importantly, it built members’ personal attachment to Alger into a social network dedicated to recovering Alger, informing others about

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27 Newsboy 2, no. 10 (1964): 2.


31 Membership based on number of PF’s issued to new members, as noted in the Newsboy 4, no. 12 (1966): 1.
him, and confirming their desire for and belief in Alger information through the very information
they sought to recover and disseminate. Over the next decade the Society grew more prominent
and made several contributions to correcting Alger’s history, as the next section discusses. In
doing so, the Society’s social network begins to strain as personal attachment and scholarly
endeavor are placed at odds with each other.

From “Interest” to Information

Kenneth Butler declares in his monthly column “Presidential Ponderings” that collecting is
only “one phase of the hobby.” He solicits members for articles and offers several suggested
topics: “a list of some of Alger’s boners or mental lapses . . . the errata in his stories”; “which of
the Alger titles were issued, at one time or another, by the largest number of publishers?”;32 and
information on “any Negro characters in the Alger novels.”33 The information, no matter how
formal it may appear, is personal. Butler explains that the only way for the Society to change
Alger’s reputation in the world is to illustrate its personal relationship with him and reiterate the
personal aspect of Alger information: “I feel that there is a lot of wonderful information on
Alger tied up in the notes and memories of our members and that we need to bring this to light
through the columns of our newsletter.”34 Members “should do more research and publish it, as
the followers of Sherlock Holmes do.”35 Butler admires the “Sherlock Holmes fans,” known as
the Baker Street Irregulars (BSI), because he sees “in print” that “they have left no stone
unturned in relating the eccentricities, foibles, statistics, and oddities that can be gleaned from


reading and study of Conan Doyle’s famous detective character.”36 Indeed by this time the Baker Street Journal, the “premier publication of scholarship about Sherlock Holmes,” was already twenty years in publication.37 But Butler’s call for research and publications foreshadows the detachment many members feel in the 1980s, as there are several key differences between the two organizations and the objects of their affection.

Christopher Morley founded the BSI in 1934 when he and a few other Sherlock Holmes fans gathered to celebrate the fictional character’s January 6th birthday, which he then wrote about in the Saturday Review of Literature.38 Within one year, they created by-laws, a constitution, and instituted an annual dinner held on Holmes’s birthday. They also created the Sherlock Holmes Crossword Puzzle “as the BSI’s entrance exam,” still used today.39 This exam means that “petitioners are rarely admitted at their first request.”40 However, their testing does not diminish their fantastical passion. The BSI believe their sleuth is alive, or was never fiction: one of their “basic assumptions” is the “conviction that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are historical figures, and that Doyle is a figment of their imagination—or at best acts as Dr. Watson’s literary agent.” The Baker Street Journal “makes this assumption very plain.”41 The


very first journal issue opens with the declaration that “Sherlock should be honored by the
publication of a journal devoted to the critical analysis of his life and times.” The
“disappearance” of his literature, “to mankind’s irreparable loss, can be ascribed only to the fact
that the master had no regular, ready, and sympathetic repository for the products of his pen.”
Not Doyle’s pen, but Holmes’s.42 While BSI’s belief may perhaps be a “game,” to devotees “it
is a high and serious sport.” The Society idolizes Alger as a creator and source of values, where
the BSI seemingly ignores Doyle in favor of his characters and makes his creations part of their
“extended family.” Some even claim Holmes “is still alive, his eyesight dimmer but his wit as
nimbly astringent as ever. . . . He now lives in Sussex, England, where he keeps bees and is
completing his life’s work, ‘The Whole Art of Detection.’”

Both clubs, however tongue-in-cheek, believe in and proselytize a life that those outside
their group would not see nor understand. But the differences between these two organizations
reflect the Society’s personal attachment to and investment in Alger. They see their Alger-less
world as a worse place, seek to create an admirable repository, and actively place Alger back in
conversation with the morals and values they see Alger as representing. Their annual
conventions take place in Heartland towns or cities where members can go book hunting and
swap first, second, and rare editions. The BSI’s banquet is “strictly by invitation” at the
Algonquin Hotel in New York City.43 There is also the matter of their name, chosen only a


January 19, 2000. The Algonquin Hotel also played host to the Algonquin Round Table, also
known as the Vicious Circle, from roughly 1919 to 1929.
month after their first dinner in February 1934. 44 The original Baker Street Irregulars were a group of street urchins “recruited by Holmes for searching London.” 45 These kids “go everywhere, see everything, overhear everyone.” The Irregulars received “a shilling a day with a guinea bonus to the one who found the object of their search plus expenses.” All they desired “was organization,” which Holmes “provided them to his own advantage.” 46 Holmes used the Irregulars to go where he could not and to do his dirty work. The BSI’s current status as an exclusive knowledge-based organization mirrors the Irregulars’ function in Doyle’s texts: they congregate and discuss the Sacred Writings (as Doyle’s works are called) to the advantage of keeping Holmes in the press. Holmes does not assert any values, besides those needed to solve crimes. The Irregulars want to be involved in its solution: their conventions and meetings regularly re-create a crime from a pre-selected text that the members must re-solve and then complete a quiz. 47

Society members originally had the designation “S” for “subscriber” before their membership number. Only after four years of Newsboy, around 1965, did Campbell begin addressing and signing his personal letters “To/Your Partic’lar Friend.” Butler writes that this “trademark” is the “type of creative thinking which will add zest to our organization and help


46 Ibid., 23.

make it memorable.” The titular character in *Ragged Dick* used the phrase as “a term of affection.” Its use among Society members signals a fraternal bond to one another and to Alger. Partic’lar Friends embody Alger’s notion of friendship, camaraderie, and trust. It denotes people united in their vision and action to increase our culture’s knowledge and respect for Alger. And like the BSI’s publications, Butler, Gardner, Campbell, and others set out to prove and print their research. But, while productive, Butler’s desire to mimic a “critical analysis” of Alger, like the BSI, eventually removes the Society’s particular strength: their personal attachment to Alger.

In the April 1966 *Newsboy*, Butler writes about their lengthy “good-natured debate with the *World Almanac* which has carried the incorrect 1834 birth date of our hero.” Andrew Fisher, editor at the time, “denied our evidence,” the Mayes, Gardner, Tebbel, and Gruber biographies. Fisher cited academic sources, such as the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and other volumes of information. But Fisher’s sources did indeed have the wrong birth information. The members cited records printed by Harvard College, “the dates on the graveside monument at South Natick, and the fact that Horatio, the first born, could scarcely have been born less than two months after his younger sister, Olive Augusta, whose birth date is


51 “‘Annals of the Harvard Class of 1852’ by Grace Williamson Edes (Cambridge 1922), Horatio Alger, Junior,” *Newsboy* 2, no. 11 (1964): 3–4. Though reprinted in *Newsboy* two years prior, where this text comes from is a mystery. Gruber first mentions it in a January 3, 1954 letter to Stanley Pachon (PF-087). He says it “probably had a total circulation of about 22 copies” and was published in 1922. He “borrowed” his copy from “someone.” It seems this work has circulated among a few Society members, probably because it disproves “90% of the data Mayes gives in his book,” including Alger birth data.
Nov. 19, 1833.” Having Alger’s birth date corrected takes on crusade-like parameters for the
Society. After the Society clears away the “misconception once and for all,” they will “unleash
our battalions on the aforesaid encyclopedias just as soon as World Almanac is brought to
heel.”

And they are “brought to heel” not one month later. Gardner’s letter to Fisher recounts the
evidence they have to support Alger’s correct birth date, January 13, 1832. He explains that the
1834 mistake comes from an *Encyclopedia of American Authors* published years ago and
repeated despite Gardner’s contradictory facts. Gardner says that “my factual birth date comes
not from standard references but from careful examination of Alger family and church records;
Horatio’s letters and other documents.” Fisher, having “received a number of letters,” writes
Gardner, “I concede the battle” and agrees to correct Alger’s birth date, taking Gardner’s “word
that you have checked the documents of the Alger family and am convinced.” By possessing
Horatio’s birth date, Gardner counters the Almanac with his personally acquired information, not
the “so-called ‘standard reference sources.’” Campbell’s unmistakable sense of personal
vindication fills his combat-heavy revelation of why correcting Horatio’s birth date is important.
As the Society has worshipped and portrayed Alger as a hero, the

historical records on the life of Horatio Alger have been allowed to crumble with
uncertainty and disrespect within the lifetime of millions of people who read his stories
and liked them, and loved the man for his principles and what they stood for, yet as
individuals we were helpless to defend him.

53 Ralph P. Gardner, “To: Mr. Andrew A. Fisher, World Almanac, New York City, March 29,
Through the medium of our Society we can combine our individual defenses and mold them into a mighty weapon to combat a wave of untruths which until recently, have been allowed to remain unchallenged. . . . Remember, as individuals we are helpless, but as we grow in membership, we can restore the respect Horatio Alger once enjoyed.56

This cumulative statement illustrates the Society’s fervor and fortitude. Undoubtedly, its members are part of the imagined “millions” who watched Horatio’s respect “crumble.” They are also certainly the keepers and defenders of Horatio’s principles and it is their “mighty weapon” that must restore Alger to his rightful and respectable place.

The information always centers on a permutation of Alger, his books, and his imagined life. The Society purposefully fights misinformation, what it perceives as attacks against Alger, and combats them with a “truth” that is either consensual or repetitively accepted. Much of what the members trade back and forth is secretive, if only because of its limited audience. But within their intended audience, members write other members to intentionally share, question, or critique the information, facts, and stories about Alger. They outwardly direct their fervor in their letters and quest for truth. Society members may dispute first editions or publication facts, but they do not attack each other via their Alger knowledge. Their information attracts fellow Alger admirers and is a mutual attraction expressed through admiration or nostalgia, and the search for more to admire. The Society has an insatiable appetite for information used to make the outside world “heel,” wielded to inflict not pain or punishment, but factual justice. Gardner possessively calls Alger’s correct birth date “my factual birth date”57 and Fisher conceded. Not because he fact-checked Gardner; rather he took Gardner on his “word.” A “word” endorsed by


57 Gardner, “To: Mr. Andrew A. Fisher,” 5.
the volume of letters he received, the “mighty weapon” the Society molded, and the information collected through the Society’s personal attachment and attraction to Alger.

The information acts as a conduit through which the members interact, gather, exchange letters, and read newsletters. Alger information pulls the Society together and is their “medium” for interaction and attraction. And as Campbell and Salls illustrated, their “medium” must remain free from erotic content. Campbell fights sexualizing Alger, perhaps because his shared information and interaction would become tainted. They espouse Alger’s principles, his values, and his good name. His good name and their interaction cannot suggest any hint of sex, sexuality, or even sensuality. However, their interaction speaks to a desire, a want; their quest for factual representation speaks to a satisfaction that can be reached. The Society began when Butler’s parents set up a meeting for Campbell and Butler; they celebrate or at least mention the “anniversary of the day when 2 Alger collectors get together.” Their desire for Alger information may not mean a desire for Alger himself or each other, but it certainly indicates a want or craving for more. Their desire for increased respect, increased dialogue, and increased information motivates their actions. As with physical desire, the only thing that can satiate this need is the physical consummation or acquisition of more information.

A Pederastic Past, An Uneasy Future

Pointing out the similarities in desire and its structure does not call the Society members motives or sexuality into question. Instead, it illustrates just how the attachment functions as a mode of exchange, a realm of expression, a medium of fulfillment. I said earlier that the Society

59 Ibid., 1.
60 Newsboy 4, no. 6 (1965): 1.
policies itself and protects its members. Its third creed is to “create good will among Society Members.” But when Alger’s pederasty charges are unearthed, and several members insist that the Society acknowledge and accept them, the Society experiences a schism caused by the very quest for information the Society proffers and desires.

The Brewster records first appeared in Richard M. Huber’s *The American Idea of Success*, even though Alger’s pederastic history had long circled around like an open secret that no one wanted to accept or acknowledge. Many Society members thought that the historical records should be published in *Newsboy*, since the Society lauds itself as the Alger authority. Others, mostly the older members who had been involved since the 1960s, thought the records were slander. That Huber, Yale graduate, American studies professor at Harvard, and non-member, revealed these secrets more than likely played a part in older members’ dissatisfaction. As with the incorrect birth date, those who desired more information wanted access to historical records kept in Brewster that few members had been able to obtain. Even fewer members who had copies of the records wanted to publish them for all members to see. After the records were published, members wrote protest letters, speaking of values, Alger’s pure intentions, and the insulting nature of these revelations. Yet, as it turns out, they are a “truth,” proved in the same manner the birth date was proved, through members’ personal desire for information.

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62 44–46. The footnote on page 469 thanks “Mrs. Curtis Eldridge, clerk of the First Parish in Brewster, for church documents requested.” Many members, including Gardner, admit accessing these records. And he, like others, regarded them as untrue. As Gardner says in an April 11, 1975 letter to Herbert Mayes, “I showed the transcript of this record (actually, just several vaguely-worded lines) to churchmen and legal people. They both said that, although one could and probably would infer the worst, it was far from conclusive—let alone legal—proof. So I avoided it.”
In the December 1979 issue of *Newsboy*, editor Jack Bales published an article by Gil Westgard titled “Following the Trail of Horatio Alger, Jr.” The article contained the complete records of the Unitarian Church in Brewster, “where Horatio was a minister from December, 1864 to March, 1866.” Bales had wanted to publish the Brewster records for several years, and “as could be expected, I ran into some opposition.” He expresses disappointment that the records appeared first in Huber and not in *Newsboy* “since we are reportedly the world’s only publication devoted to studying Alger, and my definition of studying does not include omitting items which we don’t want to look at.” He is also disappointed that the “defenders of Alger maintain . . . that the author’s personal life has nothing to do with the writing he produced.” Most importantly, Bales, having earned his master’s of science from the University of Illinois Library Science Program, is “a scholar, and I simply abhor censorship,” particularly censorship of an “ACCOUNT OF A REAL OCCURRENCE.”

Until now, Society descriptions and discussions of Alger focused on his values, what he brought to the world, what the world should be doing to reflect him, how they could garner more respect for Alger, and what they could do to make Alger more relevant. Their perspective particularly stands out when comparing the non-Society and Society-produced biographies’ descriptions of Alger’s possible sexual flings. In Mayes, Alger was to marry Patience Stires, but his father convinced him not to, illustrating Alger Jr.’s “mediocrity.” Alger runs away from his “bare” landlady, an attractive girl on the street, and acted like “a virgin girl,” not a “man.”

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63 Westgard, “Following the Trail,” 5.
64 Bales, “Incident,” 3.
66 Ibid., 52.
The lurid European affairs with Elise and Charlotte end with Alger cowardly running “like the devil” from them so they could not find him.⁶⁹ Tebbel’s Alger was essentially sexually abused. Alger Sr. said “no, flatly and unequivocally” to him marrying Patience,⁷⁰ Elise was “the aggressor and teacher, Horatio the passive learner.”⁷¹ Worse, with Charlotte, Alger again acted like a girl: his “biology was reversed” as “he was her mistress.”⁷² Of course Hoyt’s book begins with Brewster, quotes Alger’s charge of “unnatural familiarity with boys” on the back cover, and says Alger “had all the makings of a homosexual.”⁷³ Gardner’s Alger performs grand gestures of kindness as opposed to lust-filled failures. His actions involve pioneering the end of white-boy slavery in little Italy, bringing attention to the needy boys of New York City, and giving more of himself to help the Newsboys’ Lodging House. Gardner concentrates on Alger’s values and contributions to society. Even the female love at the end of his life, Kate Down, is motivated by Alger wanting to watch after her two sons, John and Edward.⁷⁴

The other member-produced biography, Scharnhorst and Bales’s, was published after the Brewster letters appeared in Newsboy. Both were Society members since the early 1970s, but both were also scholars. As such, their attraction to Alger was, for Society members, not personal. They make no mention of any European affairs, except to say that Paris is a

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.
⁶⁹ Ibid., 84.
⁷⁰ Tebbel, Rags to Riches, 38.
⁷¹ Ibid., 50.
⁷² Ibid., 52.
⁷³ Hoyt, Horatio’s Boys, 21.
⁷⁴ Gardner, American Hero Era, 281–82.
“licentious” city because the “majority” of shops are open on Sunday. Brewster saturates their first chapter, and they uncover personal letters about important men in Alger’s life, including sixteen-year-old Bostonian Joseph F. Dean, the “Jamie” poem, and another poem written “from the point of view of a woman” about unrequited love. Further, Scharnhorst equates Gardner’s work with Mayes’s, reflecting the conversation between Salls and Campbell twenty-five years prior. Gardner admits in his introduction that “some situations were dramatized and dialogue created, but always within the framework of existing facts.” Scharnhorst declares that Gardner made up “flattering episodes that he could not have known had happened while excluding the pederasty episode, which he had known very likely had.” He also charges that Gardner “perpetrated a kind of hoax in his biography that compares to the hoax Mayes perpetrated.” But Mayes was not a member, did not have an attachment, and therefore did not care about Alger. Despite all that Gardner fabricated, he did care, he was attached, and he wanted Alger’s respect restored; he openly shared his personal connection and what he wrote was inspired by that connection. As Alger cared about and for his boy characters, so did Gardner mirror that affection. His personal attachment to Alger is evidenced on every page and in every episode he attributes to Alger, both factual and fictional.

While their thorough research exponentially expanded Alger study, Scharnhorst and Bales’s personal attachment was perhaps not as prominent as other members’. When Bales published the Brewster records, Scharnhorst “hailed the act as an invaluable service to scholars.”

75 Scharnhorst with Bales, Lost Life, 52, quoted in New York Sun, February 24, 1861.
76 Ibid., 56–57.
77 Ibid., 33, 56–57.
This act, or truth or motivation, is what unsettled many Society members, because excessive information ultimately split the Horatio Alger Society. Or rather, not enough personal attachment to information. After the Brewster records appeared in *Newsboy*, Campbell wrote Bales and told him he would have never printed the records: “‘I repeat,’ Campbell wrote, ‘I would never let that happen, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER.’” When Bales retired as editor in 1986, he wrote a friend saying, “Dammit, I’m getting fed up with all these people and their personal vendettas.” But the “personal” was the point. To decrease the personal degrades their attachment to Alger, to information, and to each other. It devalues the Society that battled the *World Almanac* and changed Horatio’s birth date, the Society that united and worked for the principles of Alger. Removing the personal attacked the very core of the Society that did something for Alger, for its members, and for society at large.

In fact, Westgard’s inability to understand the importance of the “personal” after becoming *Newsboy*’s next editor would eventually lead to his ouster from the post. Almost in answer to Butler’s call more than twenty years prior, he quickly made *Newsboy* less of a collector’s personal fan letter and more of an academic study in Algerania. Enlarging the publication to thirty-two pages or more, Westgard shifted the magazine “away from idolatry to iconoclasm,” publishing “Horatio Alger, Jr. and Unitarianism,” an article filled with facts and figures but lacking any direct personal appeal. Lengthy articles from the 1880s and 1890s on newsboys also appeared, along with a plethora of papers on student life at Harvard, all prefaced with “(From the Collection of Gilbert K. Westgard II).” In the 1960s when *Newsboy* published stories or

79 Forrey, “Religious Experience,” 106.


articles from Westgard’s collection, the members seemed to enjoy them. Westgard was fervent and obsessive, but he and the members had similar desires. Even in 1982, Society secretary Hartmann acknowledges that Gil “has done much for the HAS but does take some getting used to. He is extremely smart and a great researcher but . . .”82 “Researcher” would seem the equivalent of a black eye since it is not the same as an avid Alger enthusiast. So as Hartmann respects and admires what Gil has “done,” his language presumes to know Gil’s impersonal relationship. And by 1988, there was a revolt. In the July–August Newsboy, Westgard reports being “ambushed” at the convention by several “Partic’lar Friends” who, at the Society business meeting, passed a resolution that Newsboy be “no more than 16 pages, and limited ‘filler’ material to three pages.” The “filler” was anything outside of the Bookmart, letters to the editor, member news, and the occasional reprinted Alger short story. Westgard loudly defended his editorial choices by insulting the Society members: “I do not consider anything printed in Newsboy to be ‘filler,’ and am of the opinion that anyone who does is either displaying their abounding ignorance, or demonstrating their lack of interest in learning more about Alger and the background of his stories.”83 Despite letters of support from director emeriti Ralph Gardner and Bob Bennett, president George Owens appointed Jim Ryberg editor on August 18, 1988.84 Owens claims

Gil refused to go along with the vote and insisted on publishing what he wanted. He also refused to publish articles sent in by some of our members, in other words censoring. In another instance he refused to publish a list of Alger items for sale by an honorary member

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82 Hartmann to James J. Lowe, 6 July 1982.


while at the same time trying to get the list of books from this member so that he could buy them without giving the membership a chance to buy. This was very unethical.\textsuperscript{85}

The convention ambush, Westgard’s accusation of members’ “lack of interest,” the “unethical” behavior Owens claims Westgard exhibits, and the inability to sustain the personal connection to information led Westgard to publish a rival Alger magazine, \textit{Bootblack: The Horatio Alger Magazine}. Debuting only four months later, \textit{Bootblack}’s first letter in the “Letters to the Blacking-Box” is from Bob Sawyer, former Society president. By this time, the personal became mean-spirited. He writes, “You must be nuts. Why would I pay $24 to read the crap that I refused to read when you published it in \textit{Newsboy}. You should have your head examined. Have a nice Christmas.” Westgard replies, “Bob is the Alger World’s leading authority on crap, having pawned off on a number of buyers what he calls ‘The Sun Series.’ Too bad he didn’t know genuine crap when he produced piles of it himself!”\textsuperscript{86} Though not wanting to “become involved in any mud slinging,” Owens does say that Westgard has not returned the “Horatio Alger Society owned typewriter” and other “Society owned property.” He also comments on Westgard’s new venture: “I have just read the ‘premier’ issue of ‘Bootblack’ and except for the first few pages relating to Alger’s home, it was nothing but a lot of pages reprinting an Alger story that we have already read. This is the same type of ‘journalism’ the members of the Society unanimously turned down.”\textsuperscript{87}

Other members agreed with Owens, or at least that is what Ryberg printed in the “Letters to the Editor” section. Jack Bales writes, “You’ve brought back MY favorite aspect of it—all the

\textsuperscript{85} George Owens, “President’s Column,” \textit{Newsboy} 27, no. 4 (1989): 93.

\textsuperscript{86} “Letters to the Blacking-Box,” \textit{Bootblack} 1, no. 1 (1989): 2.

\textsuperscript{87} Owens, 93.
stuff about members, letters to the editor, etc. It’s so important.”

Gardner says he is “very comfortable with the 16 pp., and it’s got a lot of member and Alger related news and info.” Bob Williman says, “Job well done” on a “return to the old ‘folksy’ style.”

Bill McCord, PF-360, states best what the readers and members want most, which Jim Ryberg’s first and continuing issues had:

The first issue of Newsboy under your direction is great. I believe that all of us want:
A. Letters to the editor
B. Newsy items of the members
C. Articles by members or aspects of Alger and his writings
D. A President’s page
E. Articles by the experts, i.e [sic] Ralph Gardner, Bob Bennett, Jerry Friedland, etc.
F. News of “special finds” and book finding trips.

Members felt too disconnected from Alger with Westgard’s Newsboys. The information lost its attraction, no matter how interesting it was, when the personal aspect of reading was removed.

What Alger Hath Joined Together, Let No Information Put Asunder

Westgard continued publishing Bootblack for another two years, calling into question the Society’s principles and assumptions. In the debut issue, he published Robert Forrey’s “The Horatio Alger House: The Anatomy of a Myth,” which upended the Society’s belief that Alger was born at 88 Beach Street in Revere, Massachusetts. Forrest Campbell talked about his visit to the “birthplace of our hero” and feeling “welcome” in “Horatio’s boyhood home” in the first issue of Newsboy. Like the Society’s battle with the World Almanac, Forrey cited land ownership records and Revere Journal articles proving the house was built post-1844, after the

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89 Ibid., 83.
90 Ibid., 82.
Alger family left Revere. Forrey traces the growth of 88 Beach Street from the first *Newsboy* through Scharnhorst and Bales’s *Lost Life*. And he takes particular pains to point out their “error”:

In their 1985 book *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales excoriate those who have passed on misinformation about Alger without bothering to check out the so-called biographical facts, but it appears Scharnhorst and Bales, as least in regard to Alger’s birthplace, may have committed the same sin—if sin it is—in their book.92

Forrey continues his critique of the authors by attacking the crucial aspect of Alger information: its faithful repetition. What troubles Forrey is their failure to document or acknowledge [their] sources. Scharnhorst and Bales take every hard line in *The Lost Life* with those who have used unattributed information about Alger, especially with those who have used unattributed sources that later proved false. . . . Where did the authors of *The Lost Life* get their misinformation about Alger’s alleged birthplace? . . . If Scharnhorst and Bales had examined the records at the Suffolk Registry of Deeds, instead of doing some rehashing of their own, they would have discovered that Alger could not have been born at 88 Beach Street. . . . But no biographer can personally check the veracity of every single fact. He or she has got to accept some things on faith.93

The rehashing of Alger information is what makes it true for Society members, as long as the repetition reinforces what they believe. To go against that belief amounts to libel, or as Forrey asserts in his later article “The Horatio Alger Society: A Variety of Religious Experience,” heresy. In perhaps his most damning article, Forrey calls the Society a “small, quasi-religious sect” with its “own informal creed, rituals, and revered texts” who profess a “privileged relationship to the saintlike creator” and are “so deeply and blindly committed to a system of

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93 Ibid., 6–7.
conservative religious and political values, identified with Alger, that they could not incorporate facts that threatened that system.”

As true as that may be, their system has produced the correct birth date, two biographies, and connected hundreds of people through their belief in a man dead to the literary and academic worlds. Even if the biographies are mostly fiction (Gardner) or contain fiction (Scharnhorst and Bales), that fiction still contains a truth: belief in a myth that contributed to remaking, repeating, and reiterating the values of Horatio Alger, Jr., no matter how fake or real. Their fiction reveals their intensely personal attachment to values that they saw Alger as representing, values they revered, values that connected them, and values that perhaps Alger wanted to proffer. Their fiction and personal attachment are not less valuable or truthful.

In the Brewster Newsboy, Bales intriguingly proclaims that many defenders of Alger, who do not want the records published or do not believe them, maintain “that the author’s personal life has nothing to do with the writing he produced.” While I could find no such declaration, Bales’s point does resonate in Goldberg’s “In Defense of Horatio Alger, Jr.” Originally published in the December 1981 Dime Novel Round-Up, it was his response to the published church records in Newsboy. What stands out is Goldberg’s listing of many actions Alger did while alive that prove his status as a good and moral man, actions that center on boys:

For 30 years, Alger, Jr. had served the Lodging Home boys, as Chaplain and advisor. . . . Take the Seligman instance. Here were five highly intelligent brothers. He lived in their home and tutored them. He played billiards with them. . . . What about the boys in Natick, whom he used to read to in the park. Bought them candy in Bailly’s hotel and entertained them.”


95 Bales, “Incident,” 3.
From all of these instances “not a word comes from them stating anything immoral!”96 But what is striking about this defense is the preceding paragraph, which claims that if one is called gay, one can never escape the label: “It is said that ‘a leopard never changes its spots.’ Neither does a ‘Gay.’ Neither psychoanalysis nor psychiatric treatment show any results. Once a Gay, always a gay.”97 Afterward, Goldberg again reiterates: “There is a saying that one swallow doesn’t make a summer, neither does ONE accusation in a life time, prove a guilty overt act, especially when it is one sided, with no judicial verdict.”98

Nothing here is explicit, but Goldberg’s words rely on several layers of defensive explanations that stem from his personal relationship with Alger. Goldberg has been a member since the Society’s inception, taken countless trips to Alger’s grave to conduct services, and helped spearhead the Junior Alger Clubs. So for an accusation to surface—even one over one hundred years old—to which Alger cannot speak, Goldberg jumps to his defense. But this odd defense claims on one level that Alger could not possibly have had inappropriate relationships with boys because he had so many relationships with boys. Beneath that, Goldberg capitulates that labeling Alger “gay” would forever change who Alger is, what he did, and how Alger and his actions are perceived: “Once a Gay, always a gay.” To transform Alger’s myth would in turn change Goldberg’s and the Society’s relationship to Alger, and how that relationship is perceived by outsiders. A Society that touts the actions of a man who is “always a gay” therefore touts a gay Alger and his interactions with boys. Doing and knowing become intimately tied to sex and sexual activity. And for a Society that lauds Alger’s actions, it would

96 Goldberg, “Defense,” 34.
97 Ibid., 33.
98 Ibid., 34.
also have to worship and idolize Alger’s “gay” actions, his sexual activities, his sexuality, and his possible “gay” desires. In that sense, “once a gay, always a gay” is true: what would people think of a group who idolizes a gay man who had acknowledged relationships with boys? They would most likely implicate themselves. I do not mean to call Goldberg homophobic, nor the Society. However, a homo-erasure does exist. It is bound to the ever-present personal relationship the Society has with Alger, and how the personal is indeed partic’lar.

The Society continues to exist today. *Newsboy* is still published and yearly conventions are still held. The articles in *Newsboy* remain a mix of academic reprints and fan discoveries. Though much of the original membership has died or become inactive, throughout its duration, no member would deny an active enthusiastic attachment to Horatio Alger, his books, and his stories. Once a year, Bradford Chase, Society ex-President, stops by the Horatio Alger Society Collection at Northern Illinois University to donate boxes of books he has collected, bought, or received from members. And with the members’ actions and active measures to maintain his words, his values, and his persona, Alger remains, like his archive, very much alive.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in Gainesville, Florida, Aaron Talbot graduated from the University of Florida twice (BA in 1997 and Ph.D. in 2009), with a stint at California State University, Los Angeles in between (MA in 2002). He and his husband currently reside in Jacksonville where they share a large house with two cats. All four still complain that they do not have enough space.