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Narrative Loss and the Melancholic Reader of *Johnny Tremain*

Eric L. Tribunella

In 2001, *Newsweek* writer Evan Thomas coined the phrase “founders chic” to describe the surge of public interest at the beginning of the new millennium in the Founders and events surrounding the American Revolution. Books about the Founders have enjoyed massive sales and long-term spots on bestseller lists, and also received prestigious awards. Books about the Revolutionary generation and its work in constructing a new nation have received significant awards recently. *American Sphinx: the Character of Thomas Jefferson*, by Joseph J. Ellis, won a National Book Award in 1997. The Pulitzer Prize was given in 1993 to Gordon S. Wood for *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, in 1997 to Jack N. Rakove’s *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution*, in 2001 to Ellis’ *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, and in 2002 to David McCullough’s *John Adams*. This founders chic phenomenon has led historian H. W. Brands to declare in the *Atlantic Monthly* that “our reverence for the Fathers has gotten out of hand” (101). Brands attributes the remarkable popularity of the United States founding moment to a widespread interest in returning to America’s roots at the beginning of a new century and to the heightened mistrust of politics and politicians that had been fermenting since at least the 1970s. These trends have prompted attention to a time that now seems somehow purer, simpler, and more admirable.

It is to be expected, then, that this founders chic would also manifest itself in the domain of children’s culture. In 2002, PBS debuted a fast-paced, animated television series for children titled *Liberty’s Kids*. Accompanied by picture books and a CD-ROM of games and activities, *Liberty’s Kids* follows the exploits of three young reporters whose work for Benjamin Franklin brings them into contact with major figures and events of the American Revolution. The children’s publishing world has

taken note as it continues to churn out fiction for young people set in and around the birth of the United States. Both the “Dear America” series marketed to girls and the “My Name Is America” companion series for boys have featured novels detailing the lives of children in Revolutionary times. Ann Rinaldi, the popular writer of historical fiction for young people, has published at least eight novels between 1991 and 2003 set during the American Revolution.

Coinciding with the beginnings of this surge in interest was the fiftieth anniversary of the 1943 publication of *Johnny Tremain*, the classic of children’s literature written by Pulitzer-Prize winning historian, Esther Forbes. In its report on the anniversary, the *Boston Globe* described the book as “the enduringly popular novel for young adults that defined historic Boston in the popular imagination the way *Gone with the Wind* defined Atlanta, or *Huckleberry Finn* the Mississippi” (Canellos). Even now, visitors to Massachusetts can take a tour called Johnny Tremain’s Boston. Despite historian Christopher Collier’s scathing 1976 critique of *Johnny Tremain*, in which he accuses Forbes of representing an outdated and simplified view of the War, the novel is still widely read by and to children sixty years after being designated the Newbery Medal winner of 1944. Given the founders chic phenomenon and the ongoing readership of Forbes’s novel, *Johnny Tremain* is useful for thinking about not only the appeal of the founding moment in the United States, but what can be learned from how the American Revolution is represented once it enters the sphere of children’s culture.

Sarah Smedman reports that “Johnny Tremain is so real to adolescent readers that they have returned from Boston surprised not to find his mother’s grave in the cemetery, disappointed to realize finally that the boy did not actually live” (86). I would argue that the narrative construction of the novel itself works to make disappointment and loss two of *Johnny Tremain*’s salient features. The novel can be read as a series of anticlimaxes. Considering this repeated absence of narrative closure as representing a kind of loss, albeit a loss of something never possessed, I would like to examine how different kinds of loss—in terms of the text’s structure and the experiences of its characters—function in *Johnny Tremain* to provoke a melancholic reading of the novel.

Freud notes early in his exploration of mourning and melancholia that these experiences are reactions “to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243). In his theory of melancholia, Freud suggests that in cases when a loved object is lost, libido formerly invested in that object can be withdrawn into one’s own psyche in the

form of an identification. The identification with the lost object functions as a way of holding onto the object, and its installation within the ego produces alterations in the character of that ego. Freud later speculates that this process of love, loss, and identification might be a model of subject formation and development. Given the ways in which the event and memory of the American Revolution are so marked by losses of different sorts, we can read *Johnny Tremain* as bearing the traces of melancholia.

In considering how the functioning of narrative can be understood in terms of psychic functioning, Peter Brooks uses Freud's theories of the pleasure principle and death drive to understand the workings of plot. The movements, repetitions, and divergences of plot as it unfolds toward an ending mirrors the development of the organism, guided by the pleasure principle, toward a desired death. He argues that the conventions of plot work to bind textual energies and thus delay the gratification experienced by reaching the end, which is a kind of death. However, the beginning, presupposes this ending, and the reader initiates reading in anticipation of this end:

The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature, and by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them order and significance of plot. (Brooks 94)

Because the end is effectively a precondition of the beginning, we might consider that the ending is assumed and present at the outset; the subsequent failure of the expected ending actually to appear represents a loss. The ending is “had” in that the certainty of it makes a notion of beginning possible, but when the text or a narrative sequence fails to end properly or to end as the reader might expect, then it is as if the reader discovers that the end was in a sense never had. This experience of disappointment, of discovering that one does not have what one thought or expected, can be understood as a kind of loss.

It is in this sense that I want to consider the repeated failure of *Johnny Tremain* to provide narrative closure as a kind of loss, the loss of an ending the reader anticipates and desires. According to Anita Tarr, “*Johnny Tremain* is a children’s novel, but it is not simple (as most children’s books are decidedly not simple)” (179). Indeed, the extent to which the novel resists a simplified representation of the American Revolution is heightened by its repeated refusal/failure to run its narrative course. It instead makes a number of decisive shifts that prevent the

resolution of plots or the delivery of confrontation promised by the presentation of earlier narrative material. If *Johnny Tremain* represents the construction of a new nation premised on a set of principles or ideals laid out in the course of the founding, and Johnny as a young white boy struggling against his family history in order to come of age figures that founding, then the novel's structural peculiarities and the boy's personal disappointments also represent something about the history and development of the United States as nation and the individual as citizen. Through its multiple narrative failures, that potentially defy expectation, produce disappointment, and prompt the reader's imagined fulfillment of the novel's failed promises—those absences or gaps that demand to be filled—*Johnny Tremain* can be read as producing a reader-relation characterized by melancholia in which the reader is encouraged to reenact, reconstruct, or complete the narrative in order to supply the elements that would realize the expected climactic moments. In other words, the reader is left to be(come) what both Johnny and *Johnny Tremain* fail to be(come). In this way, the novel triggers the reader's own melancholic development, which might account in part for the emotional resonance and canonical status of the novel.

Wolfgang Iser understands these kinds of gaps or failures of expectation as key transactional moments between reader and text:

If one regards the sentence sequence as a continual flow, this implies that the anticipation aroused by one sentence will generally be realized by the next, and the frustration of one's expectations will arouse feelings of exasperation. And yet literary texts are full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations. Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only because no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (280)

Iser calls the reading process the “fulfillment of the potential” of a text. While every reader might fulfill this potential differently, we might still consider how the shared contexts of reading work to promote a particular way of filling those gaps. In the case of *Johnny Tremain*, that shared context, for U.S. readers, is a national one marked by a recent history of renewed popular interest in the founding, the phenomenon of founders chic, with which I began. The events of September 11, 2001, triggered a resurgence of patriotic fervor in the United States that no doubt further affects the reader's experience of Forbes's novel. Considering that many readers will encounter *Johnny Tremain* in schools, we cannot ignore

either the nationalizing function of educational institutions or the curricular context of American history in which the novel is likely to be situated.

Given the prominence of the coming-of-age narrative in fiction of the American Revolution, a text of this genre is particularly useful for examining the connection between melancholia and development to understand how the qualities of different kinds of lost objects affect developmental trajectories and outcomes. As Joel Taxel argues, the rite of passage experienced by the protagonists of Revolutionary War literature for children functions “as a metaphor for the experience of the nation itself” (71).¹ Johnny Tremain clearly figures the nation in Forbes’s novel. Thus understanding the process and outcome of his maturation illuminates not only expectations of the nation, but also the ways in which individual and national development are often read through each other, with the health and vigor of one imagined as reciprocally affecting the health and vigor of the other.

As with most novels of war, *Johnny Tremain* is permeated with loss. Johnny is an orphan and an apprentice of Ephraim Lapham, whose family functions as a surrogate for Johnny. After the accident that maims his hand and renders him useless as a silversmith, he is eventually abandoned by the Laphams, and loses them as well. When he attempts to reconnect with his mother’s blood relations, he is coldly rebuffed. One of the most critical losses in the novel, the one that finally compels Johnny to have his hand examined and to undergo the surgery that will repair it, is the death of his friend Rab, who assists Johnny when he is desperate and homeless. On another level, a novel of the American Revolution cannot help but also invoke the loss of the “mother country.” From the perspective of twentieth and twenty-first century readers in the era of founders chic, the founding moment itself can evoke a nostalgic experience of loss with regard to the mythically pure and noble motives of the Revolution and to the optimism and hopefulness in the prospects of nation-building.

John Rowe Townsend describes *Johnny Tremain* as a milestone of children’s fiction, claiming that “in the years immediately after the Second World War, American historical fiction for young people stood in the shadow Esther Forbes’s *Johnny Tremain*” (178). Townsend also claims that the novel has “true classic quality,” despite noting its flawed execution:

The book’s main fault is a slight lack of cohesion between its two components: the personal story of Johnny, the smart apprentice whose expectations are dashed by injury, and the broad general subject of the

rebellion. The first few chapters might be the start of quite a different kind of book (136).

In fact, what I want to argue is that the novel's lack of coherence and failure to meet the expectations produced by the earlier chapters might inadvertently create a useful entry point for reconsidering the way American history itself is represented and powerfully encourage the novel's young readers to reproduce Johnny's model citizenship even in ways that Johnny himself cannot. To understand how this works, we need to examine more closely what expectations the novel does construct and how the narrative fails to meet them. These are the gaps about which Iser writes. We can read these as producing a sense of loss that readers are left to manage through their own melancholic development as the fulfillment of the text's potential.

The "different kind of book" to which Townsend alludes would no doubt deliver the plot of the family romance at which the early chapters of Forbes's novel hint. We learn that Johnny, who knows nothing about his father, has been orphaned upon the death of his mother. Before her death, she signed a contract with Mr. Lapham placing Johnny in his service as an apprentice silversmith. Now, Johnny sleeps in the attic of the modest Lapham house with two other boys; Mr. Lapham's daughter-in-law and four granddaughters share another room below. Johnny is the most talented and responsible of the boys. Since the aging Mr. Lapham has grown increasingly concerned with the next life, he has left Johnny to worry about the daily operation of the business. Johnny develops an amorous friendship with Cilla, one of Mr. Lapham's granddaughters, to whom he reveals that his mother was related to the Lytes, a wealthy merchant family. As proof, Johnny possesses a silver cup with the crest of the Lyte family, given to him by his mother with these instructions:

Johnny, if there is not one thing left for you and you have no trade and no health, and God Himself has turned away His face from you, then go to Merchant Lyte and show him your cup and tell him your mother told you before she died that you are kin to him. He will know the kinship . . . and in pity he may help you. (Forbes 29)

The reader can understandably expect that, since the cup has been introduced into the story, something dire will occur forcing Johnny to reveal it, thereby enabling him to move from the difficult position of an indentured servant to one of acceptance into the privileged circle of the Lytes. Such a narrative would reproduce Freud's notion of the family romance nearly perfectly: a child fantasizes that he does not really belong with his ordinary parents and that his real parents are rich and powerful, perhaps royalty.

The novel disappoints these expectations, however. After the accident that renders Johnny useless as a silversmith, he is gradually forced out of the Lapham house and onto the streets, where his pride prevents him from taking other work he can still manage with a crippled hand. Desperate, Johnny decides to approach the Lytes and reveal his possession of the cup. When he does so, Merchant Lyte proves unsympathetic and disbelieving; he charges Johnny with theft. Only the intercession of Cilla and Rab, Johnny's new friend, manages to save him from being convicted and imprisoned. He then attempts to sell Merchant Lyte the cup, but Lyte simply takes it from him instead. Later, when Johnny has the opportunity to take it back after the Lytes flee their home to avoid mob violence, he refuses. He disowns his connection to them in a move that critics have noted represents the colonial rebellion against England (Tarr 179).

At this point, the family romance arc of the novel becomes drastically subordinated to Johnny's increasing work on behalf of the Sons of Liberty. It emerges much later, and only briefly, when Lavinia, Merchant Lyte's daughter, confesses to Johnny her father's mistake and explains his mother's history. He learns that his mother was disowned for marrying a French Catholic who was being held in Boston as a prisoner of war. His father had changed his name because of the dishonor. The Lytes thought Johnny's mother died in France and knew nothing of Johnny's existence. Because Johnny possesses his father's true name, they do not recognize him. Following this revelation, the loyalist Lytes leaves for England in the hopes that the colonies will lose the war. Johnny, however, continues to participate in the Revolution as the novel unfolds. The family romance plot never fully climaxes and is ultimately overshadowed by Johnny's work in the service of the Rebellion. Johnny never confronts merchant Lyte, positioned in the novel as a potential villain, once he learns his true origin. Merchant Lyte simply vanishes from the book without having suffered any consequences of his rejection of Johnny.

In fact, a number of potential villains are introduced into the novel, yet none of them fulfills the narrative expectation of providing Johnny with the opportunity for heroic confrontation and triumph. When Johnny maims his hand while making the silver sugar bowl for John Hancock, it is his fellow apprentice Dove who hands him the cracked crucible responsible for the accident. Dove is depicted as lazy and mean-spirited in contrast to Johnny, who is hard-working and earnest, even if prideful. After the accident, when Dove must assume Johnny's responsibilities, despite his inferior skill, while Johnny merely looks on unable to handle

the tools, Dove taunts him by asking for help: "Thank you, Master Johnny. I know I'm not as good as you are. Won't you show me just how I should hold my crimping iron?" (Forbes 44). Later, during the Boston Tea Party, Dove is spotted by Johnny dropping tea into his pants, rather than overboard as he attempts to steal it and profit personally from its sale, thereby marring the symbolic act the other Rebels are undertaking. Johnny swears to get revenge on Dove for the accident, declaring, "If I have to, I'll wait ten years to get that Dove" (49). Nevertheless, when Dove reappears in the service of the British army and Johnny notices the way that the Redcoats abuse him, he begins to develop a protective posture toward Dove. His resentment fizzles: "He was like a man who owns a dull, mean dog. He may punish it himself, but resents it if anyone else punishes it. For better or worse Dove was now his own private property" (198). Ultimately, Dove slowly fades from the book and never proves to be an adequate foil to Johnny.

In addition to Dove and Merchant Lyte, Forbes introduces yet another potential villain, Johnny's replacement in the Lapham household. Given Ephraim Lapham's age and Dove's lack of talent, the family must search for someone to assume the duties of the chief silversmith. Mrs. Lapham discovers Tweedie, and when Johnny meets him, he is repulsed: "He had a queer, squeaky voice. Johnny disliked him even more than he expected. Such impotence, such timidity in a grown man irritated the boy" (58). Not only does Tweedie replace Johnny as Lapham's main help, but Mrs. Lapham also plans for him to run the business and marry Cilla, the daughter whom Johnny loves. None of her daughters will submit to marrying Tweedie. Mrs. Lapham must finally do it herself to keep the business in the family. The marriage is mentioned casually by Cilla while talking to Johnny. Tweedie never fully materializes as a romantic rival to Johnny, who simply loses interest in confronting Tweedie after his marriage to Mrs. Lapham. Although Tweedie becomes the silversmith Johnny wishes to be, Johnny finds his work in the Rebellion more meaningful anyway. As with Dove, the need to confront and triumph over Tweedie dissolves.

Esther Forbes introduces a number of possible romantic triangles, but none builds more than the slightest tension or results in a climactic confrontation between rival lovers. In addition to the Johnny-Cilla-Tweedie triangle, there is another involving Cilla, Johnny, and Lavinia Lyte, whom Johnny finds remarkably beautiful. Lavinia, as the only child of a wealthy merchant, is spoiled and snobbish. Yet, Johnny finds himself captivated by her whenever their paths cross. She is always quite cold and curt with Johnny, whom she treats like a servant boy. The tall, thin,

dark-haired Lavinia is clearly established as a contrast to the humble, hard-working, and conventional Cilla: “If, the winter of seventy-three, Johnny Tremain had a romantic attachment to anyone, it was to that black-haired and, as far as he knew, black-hearted, bad-tempered, disagreeable conceivable ‘cousin’ of his Miss Lavinia Lyte. Certainly not Priscilla Lapham” (Forbes 123). Nevertheless, no romance develops between Johnny and Lavinia. The two never secretly court. His physical attraction to her succinctly ends when he learns definitively that she is his mother’s first cousin. While the narrative might tease the reader with the possibility of a confrontation between these two women over Johnny’s affection, no such confrontation happens. When Lavinia “adopts” Isannah, Cilla’s younger sister, as a plaything, Cilla accepts employment as Lavinia’s servant to keep an eye on her. But when Lavinia decides to take the increasingly obnoxious child to London to groom her as an actress, Cilla hardly puts up any resistance, despite her heartbreak.

The novel includes yet a third aborted romantic triangle that positions Cilla between Johnny and Rab. Johnny, of course, admires the older boy who helps Johnny find work and treats him kindly after the accident with his hand. Rab seems calm, mysterious, and mature to Johnny, and he finds himself jealous of Rab’s way with women. He notices that all the girls at a country dance want to be with Rab, while Johnny looks on in disapproval (Forbes 111). When Johnny returns to the printing shop to find Rab and Cilla enjoying each other’s company, his jealousy is enflamed, but so are his feelings for Cilla: “She was so pretty Johnny could hardly think where all this prettiness came from, and sourly he thought it came from Rab. He had a way of lighting people up, showing them at their best” (147). Later that evening, Rab walks Cilla home while Johnny waits. When Rab does not return immediately, Johnny becomes worried and angry. Johnny learns later that Rab meets secretly with Cilla, taking her for walks and buying her sweets. When Cilla confesses this to him, she also implies that she prefers Johnny to Rab. The young men never confront each other over their shared interest in Cilla. The reader never hears from Rab himself about the possible romance. When the British attack Lexington, any possibility of Rab and Cilla meeting again ends. Just as with its villains, the novel’s romantic triangles never provide the opportunity for Johnny to confront his rival and prove victorious.

As with these story arcs, the culmination of the novel’s primary developmental narrative is merely suggested. Although this narrative builds toward Johnny’s coming-of-age, the key event that would signal his maturation will occur, the reader can only assume, after the novel’s end. At first, Johnny is described as an impatient and prideful bully. One

of the reasons he inspires Dove's animosity is because the younger Johnny orders around the members of the Lapham household. The pious Mr. Lapham repeatedly warns Johnny about the dangers of pride; he reads to him from the Bible about the sin and judgment of the prideful. When Johnny maims his hand while breaking the Sabbath, which he feels is necessary to complete John Hancock's order, Mr. Lapham considers this the punishment of God. Not only is he prevented from performing work that suits his talents, but he must also bear the stares, pity, and disgust his scarred hand evokes in others. Once Johnny is thrust out onto the streets, he must learn to fend for himself, and thus his pride is slowly broken. Thanks to Rab, Johnny is hired to deliver newspapers for Rab's uncle. Through this work, he comes to be associated with the Sons of Liberty in Boston who begin to use Johnny to deliver messages. Johnny finds Rab to be a good influence, since Rab encourages him to treat others more kindly and provides him with work Johnny finds meaningful.

As the momentum of the conflict between colonists and crown builds, the reader is slowly led to believe that Johnny will play a key role in the Revolution, and that through his participation in the War he will master his temper and pride and achieve maturity. As a result of his association with Rab, Johnny finds himself at a number of key events in the early days of the Rebellion. First, he participates in the Boston Tea Party. Later, he is present at a meeting of the Sons of Liberty where James Otis gives his rousing speech about the reason for the Revolution: "We give all we have, lives, property, safety, skills . . . we fight, we die, for a simple thing. Only that a man can stand up" (192).² Johnny even delivers key bits of intelligence to Paul Revere, who then rides off to warn the Minutemen about British activity. After the fighting breaks out at Lexington and Concord, Johnny carries word about British troop movements in and out of Boston to Rebel leaders. Through his participation in these significant events, Johnny will overcome the flaws of his childhood self.

The final chapter of the novel, "A Man Can Stand Up," indicates more explicitly the gendered nature of Johnny's development. While acquiring a British uniform to slip across enemy lines, Johnny is asked by the sympathetic servant of the Lyte family whether he is old enough to be putting himself in danger. Johnny tells her that he is sixteen: "'And what's that—a boy or a man?' He laughed. 'A boy in time of peace and a man in time of war'" (Forbes 249). Despite his reply, Johnny does not yet prove his manhood until he learns of Rab's death. This is the first key event in Johnny's transformation into an adult citizen-soldier. When he

first learns that Rab has been wounded, the worried Johnny is told by Dr. Warren, “Rab played a man’s part. Look that you do the same” (261). Even on his deathbed, Rab’s manliness is upheld as a model for Johnny.

As Rab lay dying, he and Johnny share a final tender moment. Rab excitedly bequeaths to Johnny the musket he has carefully refurbished. Rab himself has not been given the opportunity to fire it, but he hopes that it will serve Johnny well. Of course, with his maimed hand, Johnny is prevented from firing a weapon. This leads to Dr. Warren having the first good look at the hand as Johnny fingers Rab’s gun. For the first time since the accident, he feels free of shame and permits Dr. Warren to examine him. The Doctor explains that Johnny’s thumb became affixed to his palm by scar tissue because the burn was treated improperly. Dr. Warren is able to determine that it can be repaired by cutting through the scar tissue in order to free the thumb. Rab’s sacrifice provides Johnny with the courage to allow the operation—without anesthetic. Johnny insists he doesn’t even need anyone to hold his arm still during the operation, which will enable him to fire a gun and hence take Rab’s place on the battlefield as a soldier.

Rab’s death directly leads to this turning point in Johnny’s development. His wound will finally be healed; he will be able to assume his roles as a soldier and a man. The exchange of the weapon symbolizes and facilitates Johnny’s transformation. That exchange cannot take place, nor does Johnny have a compelling model of sacrifice, until he loses the friend he loves. Rab’s death opens up a space for Johnny to occupy, which he can only do by becoming like Rab, or like what Rab failed to become. Johnny’s maturation is achieved through love, loss, and identification. Johnny’s expected development into a man, a soldier, and—through the success of the Revolution—a citizen of the United States is a melancholic one. That is, through his attachment to and loss of his friend Rab, Johnny is propelled into adulthood, which is signaled by the suppression of his pride in allowing his hand to be examined and the demonstration of his courage by submitting to the surgery. This achievement might very well not occur without Rab’s death as a catalyst and without the figure of Rab as a lost object for Johnny to interject, thereby enabling his (re)formation.

Nevertheless, it seems crucial to note that the novel ends before the surgery takes place and this transformation occurs. This is, of course, consistent with the numerous other absences of narrative climax. As we’ve seen, the novel repeatedly constructs expectations without delivering the critical event that would complete the narrative arc. And as I have suggested, this quality of the novel has the capacity to produce profound

effects on the reader and the reader relation. With respect to the reader, these failed expectations can themselves function as losses. According to Freud, melancholia occurs in cases when the libido must be withdrawn from the object “owing to a real slight or disappointment” and that rather than simply displacing the free libido onto another object it is “withdrawn into the ego” (249). This withdrawal of libido into the ego serves to produce an identification with the lost object. The ego then takes the place of what is lost and can carry on for what is lost. Since Rab is lost to Johnny, he can become like his friend by taking his place as a soldier and as a man. His inheritance of Rab’s gun literalizes this process of replacement. But since the novel ends before the expectation of Johnny as soldier and citizen is realized, the loss, or foreclosure, of this conclusion has the potential to trigger the reader’s disappointment and hence melancholic reaction to the novel itself. To complete *Johnny Tremain*, the reader must in his/her own psyche become what Johnny was meant to be. Every narrative failure or disappointment can be read as prompting the reader to enact its completion.³

What I want to argue is that the extent to which readers have responded enthusiastically to *Johnny Tremain*, and critics and awards committees have praised its virtues and impact, is a function of the novel’s capacity to prompt its readers’ melancholic identification and development. Arguably, it is this quality of the novel to which readers powerfully respond. Given the ways in which Johnny’s expected development is coded in gendered and nationalized terms, the novel cannot help but prompt the (re)formation of analogously gendered and nationalized readers. The work of the text is to encourage the reader to become an adult citizen, and a particular kind of citizen, of the nation we see being birthed in *Johnny Tremain*. The extent to which such a subject is desired at all no doubt fuels the appreciation of a text that works to form such a subject.

That this novel of the American Revolution is ultimately about an unrealized possibility, about a development that proves incomplete and that remains as a potential to be achieved by others, is what makes *Johnny Tremain* a compelling representation of not only the founding moment, but also the United States itself. That is, the history of the United States is, perhaps, best understood as a history of always unrealized potential, a process of ongoing efforts to deliver on the promises of the Revolutionary ideals. Some of those ideals that now seem central or foundational to the United States—ideas of such civil liberties like the freedom of speech and religion, or the practice of democracy through universal suffrage, not to mention the notion of

“liberty for all”—are, and continue to be, contested, achieved, defeated, or undermined. At the same time, they are retrospectively imagined as having been present from the nation’s very inception in the same way that readers might recall *Johnny Tremain* as being “about” a boy who fights in the Revolution, something Johnny never actually does.

In fact, *Johnny Tremain* is contemporaneous with, or even predates, the national developments often assumed in the popular imaginary as having been complete at the nation’s founding moment. The history of free speech in the United States is particularly telling. The Sedition Act of 1798, passed by the Revolutionary generation and signed into law by John Adams, made illegal the writing, printing, uttering, or publishing of anything deemed scandalous or malicious about Congress or the president. It further barred any speech that would bring these government officials into contempt or disrepute or that would excite resistance or opposition to any laws.⁴ Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, freedom of speech would evolve very little and lack the prominence in public discourse it would possess in the twentieth century. In the context of World War I, the severe restriction of speech would reappear in the form of the Sedition Act of 1918, which prohibited any speech deemed disloyal to, or critical of, the form of government, the Constitution, or military forces and activities. It further barred support for any country with which the United States was at war. Though repealed in 1921, the free speech debates engendered by protests surrounding World War I would trigger some of the most significant reevaluations of the First Amendment in American history.⁵

The decade following the publication of *Johnny Tremain* would come to be remembered as one of the most critical periods in the conceptualization of free speech in the United States. In 1947, as the Cold War was ignited in the wake of World War II, the House Committee on Un-American Activities began holding hearings into the Communist ties of certain Hollywood figures. Joseph McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin, would extend the investigation into the activities and speech of Marxists and civil rights leaders in 1951. Though McCarthy would be discredited by 1954, the intense hostility to speech deemed un-American would persist until the growing momentum and influence of the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s that would demand the protection of speech critical of government actions and dominant ideologies, especially concerning gender and race.

The notion of universal suffrage, now thought fundamental to U.S. citizenship and a legacy of Jacksonian democracy, only gradually unfolded over the course of U.S. history. It came to exist in its most

recent form during the 1960s. In the election of 1792, nine of the fifteen states had property requirements for voting. Three others required voters to be taxpayers, while only three had no property or tax requirements at all (West 116–17). It was another eighty years before the 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment granted suffrage to black men. Women, who had possessed the right to vote in some colonies prior to the Revolution, gradually lost that right state by state between 1777 and 1807. Not until the final decade of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth did women begin re-winning the right to vote in some states. The Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote in all states, was ratified in 1920. With the 1964 ratification of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment prohibiting poll taxes for federal elections, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 intending to add further enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment, and the 1966 Supreme Court decision (*Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*) invalidating poll taxes in state elections, the practice of universal suffrage was thought to be ensured for adult citizens. These key developments, along with a series of court decisions upholding the 1965 Voting Rights Act, finally constructed a notion of voting rights that had not existed at the time the country was established.

One of the recurring questions about the founding has been about the extent to which it failed to extend its ideals to slaves. At the very least, the founding articulated the ideas that would later be mobilized in the service of emancipation and civil rights. In this way, the founding created an expectation on which it failed to deliver immediately. Rather than the exception to the promise of the founding, the relationship between Revolutionary ideals and the problem of slavery might be taken as emblematic of the accomplishment of the Revolution. Forbes represents this through the very narrative structure of *Johnny Tremain*: the construction of a possibility to be realized by others.

As Hamida Bosmajian notes in her reading of *Johnny Tremain*, the cracked crucible responsible for Johnny's injury is a key symbol in Forbes's novel: "The real slaves remain marginalized, a crack in the crucible the colonists themselves were conscious of in their fight for liberty and independence" (55). Although Forbes fails to address the issue of slavery in any direct or meaningful way, Bosmajian argues that the occasional reference on the part of the Sons of Liberty to their "enslavement" to the British is meant to be taken as Forbes's consciousness of the ways slavery represents a failure in the promise of the Revolution. Of course, the question of slavery would preoccupy much of nineteenth-century American thought. It would be a central factor in

many of its key political debates and cultural trends, including the expansion westward, industrialization (with its need for labor), and the evolution of civil rights. Moreover, race, race relations, and civil rights would come to dominate domestic politics and public life over the course of the twentieth century.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West ask, “Who could imagine the American Century,” by which they mean the twentieth, “without the African-American experience at its core?” (xii). They cite contributions to music, literature, political thought, film, sports, and comedy to support the centrality of African Americans to American culture.⁶ Gates and West argue that one of the most significant aspects of the twentieth century is the expansion of “democratic sensibilities,” both in the United States and abroad. They note the ways in which the African American experience has played a defining role in shaping how the United States understands democracy and democratic citizenship:

The ethical precondition for democracy is to allow every voice of the citizenry to be heard in the basic decisions that shape the destiny of its people. The political prerequisite for democracy is to secure the rights and liberties for every citizen, especially the most vulnerable ones. And the economic requirement for democracy is fair opportunity to every citizen. The African American Century was first and foremost the black struggle for these ethical, political, and economic conditions of democracy in the face of vicious antidemocratic practices. (xiii)

If by the end of the twentieth century access to public education, for instance, and the expectation that it would provide a means of upward mobility seemed intrinsic to American life, this can be seen as one effect of the legacy of slavery and the long civil rights struggle on the part of African Americans. First literacy, and then public education, would be seen as key access points for the promises of American ideals, and this vision would provide one of the most significant influences on the widespread faith in education in American culture (Quarles 197). Here again, though these developments are absent at the founding moment, their possibility is suggested. Their enactment is left to others who experience that disappointment as a loss or incompleteness to be corrected.

This pattern, in which the loss or failure of one—be it person or nation—occasions the development of another through a relation of identification, is a version of melancholia that is reproduced by the narrative of *Johnny Tremain*. To participate in the construction of a new nation is, for Johnny, to construct himself. That is, to collaborate in the work of nation-building provides Johnny with an external model for his own self-fashioning. Neither process sees its completion in the novel.

The reader is left to imagine the expected ending. That imaginative act necessarily involves the production in the reader's own psyche of those images, and given the positive affect associated with the projected outcomes—Johnny as man, soldier, and citizen—it is difficult for the reader who is reading sympathetically not to view them as desirable or also to invest libidinally in these psychical models. In imagining these outcomes, there is also the impulse to imagine them in their ideal manifestation; in this impulse is the potential for the reader to identify with the ideals and to attempt their enactment. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence, then, that the publication of *Johnny Tremain*, given the novel's work to encourage precisely this kind of melancholic development, occurred during the childhood of a generation that would demand the United States better deliver on the ideals of the founding moment.

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Notes

¹ In his 1983 content analysis of Revolutionary War literature for children, Joel Taxel finds the genre marked by its repeated invocation of a coming-of-age narrative: "The initial, youthful weakness and dependence of the protagonist is a defining characteristic of this genre in that the action of virtually every novel results in the character's transformation to a stronger, more independent individual" (69). According to Taxel, the protagonist's involvement in the Revolution occasions his or her maturation, with the experiences of war functioning as a rite-of-passage.

² A number of critics have commented on Otis's speech. Tarr reads it as a "reaffirmation of Satan's rebellious spirit" in the tradition of *Paradise Lost* (182), whereas Taxel takes it as evidence of the novel's portrayal of the War as an "ideologically motivated struggle" as opposed to an economic one (67). Bosmajian argues that such "simplistically formulated slogans" need to be called into question (55).

³ Alternatively or coincidentally, the novel might prompt a kind of lingering desire for what Johnny will become that is experienced as a desire for the other to enact Johnny's development. In other words, I do not want to suggest that the novel produces merely a single reader relation characterized by identification or only identification. It might also work to induce desire either as an alternative to or alongside that identification.

⁴ The Sedition Act was allowed to expire in 1800.

⁵ For example, the case of *Schenck v. United States* (1919) decided against Schenck for distributing antiwar literature to men of draft age during World War I. It is in the decision of this case that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes articulated the “clear and present danger” test that set a bar to the restriction of free speech. Although in the case of *Abrams v. United States* (1919) the Supreme Court upheld the convictions of Jacob Abrams and other anarchists for distributing literature criticizing U.S. troop involvement in defending Czarist Russia against the Bolsheviks, the Holmes/Brandeis dissent proposed the “marketplace of ideas” notion that argued for the right to publicly present ideas for the consideration of others. This dissent called for a stricter interpretation of the “clear and present danger” test. These cases, along with *Debs v. United States* (1919), all decided in 1919, marked a turning point in the interpretation of the First Amendment in the years following World War I.

⁶ To this list we might add the more “everyday,” but essential, contributions of child-rearing and domestic work.

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