Empire of Birds, Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology, 1807-1814

Laura Rigal
University of Iowa
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I spent nearly the whole of Saturday in Newark, where my book attracted as many starers as a bear or a mammoth would have done.

—Alexander Wilson

In 1807, Charles Willson Peale included a portrait of Alexander Wilson in his painting Exhumation of the Mastodon (fig. 24). In the painting Wilson stands, arms crossed, above a line of laborers who are digging for bones below. In a painting full of pyramidal structures—from the tent in the background, to the shack in the middle-ground, to the machine looming in the foreground—Wilson is positioned at the peak, or pinnacle, of the laborers’ progressive work. Gazing down upon them, he figures in his contemplative stance the end and product of their labor. Among the artifacts of the mammoth excavation, it seems, are not only the restored bones of the mastodon but also this solitary watcher. The summa of productive labor, or so Peale’s painting reads, is this (representation of a) representative man—Alexander Wilson, the author of the first American ornithology, in whose reflective pose work is joined with leisure, labor with spectatorship. This essay considers the great labor of literary production that Peale so admired: Wilson’s illustrated American Ornithology, published in nine volumes by Bradford and Inskeep of Philadelphia between 1807 and 1814.

Like Peale’s museum and its mammoth exhibit of 1801–10, Wilson’s collection of some five hundred bird species was an artifact of productive labor

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Figure 24. Charles Willson Peale, *Exhumation of the Mastodon* (1807); oil on canvas, 127 x 158.8 cm. Maryland Historical Society.
earnestly and eagerly performed. It was also, however, an artifact of western expansion and exploration that displayed new western species from the continental interior (Tennessee, Mississippi, and the Louisiana territory) together with species long familiar on the east coast (blue jay, robin, oriole, bluebird, and so on). Like Lewis and Clark, Wilson took the exhibitionary practices of Jeffersonian science on the road, bringing the representational devices of the Peale museum to the fields and streams of the western interior. At the same time, Wilson relied heavily on Peale's Philadelphia collection of more than seven hundred bird species, mounted and exhibited in the upper floor of Independence Hall (then the Pennsylvania State House). A quintessentially federalist work, Wilson's *Ornithology* unites myriad local specimens within an explicitly national collection. But, even more centrally, as a mammoth performance of production, *American Ornithology* joins labor with looking, visual with verbal genres, framing its readers and viewers as producers and spectators—by exhorting them to learn to see federalist-style, or from the elevated (and diffused) point of view that would constitute them as independent, self-regulating subjects and objects of the state.

In his essay “On Manufactures” in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson celebrated the American husbandman, or agricultural producer, as the source of collective independence and virtue. It is the husbandman, Jefferson writes, who “keeps alive th[e] sacred fire” of virtue “which otherwise might escape from the face of the Earth.” Relying upon his own labor rather than upon “the caprice of customers,” the farmer is the privileged working man of Jefferson’s landscape: “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.” In this classic statement, Jefferson grounded independent nationhood on the virtuous labor of the husbandman. But, in fact, Jefferson’s agrarian republic was never merely the product of agricultural labor; it also depended crucially upon graphic and visual art to frame the landscape of solitary producers that, he imagined, would preserve national independence. And this is what the illustrated text of Wilson’s *Ornithology* brings home: the visual as well as verbal structures of representation (the techniques of collection classification, publication, illustration, and museum display)—by which Jeffersonian federalism construed its subjects not only as productive workers, or assembly-men, but as viewers and spectators as well. It is here, then, where art and science converge in the framing of human subjects, furthermore, that we must consider the arts and sciences not only as modes of representation, but as technologies, or means

of production. It is thus that we find in the visual and linguistic forms of Jeffersonian science that we find the deep structure of American federalism as a species of empire.

As early as 1786, Jefferson himself had described the thirteen former colonies as a “nest” from which the entire continent would be peopled. By the mid-1780s, emigration west (to Kentucky and Ohio in particular) had raised fears that the confederation was growing too fast and would simply fragment as its political authority extended over too great an area. In the following passage, Jefferson tries to counter these fears by figuring the Anglo-American emigration to Kentucky as natural extensions of a national “nest” through a peaceful diffusion of settlement comparable to a migration of birds:

Our present federal limits are not too large for good government, nor will the increase of votes in Congress produce any ill effect. . . . Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South is to be peopled. We should take care not to think it for the interest of that great continent to press too soon on the Spaniards. Those countries cannot be in better hands. My fear is that they are too feeble to hold them till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them piece by piece.3

Here, bird migration is a metaphor for the peaceful and gradual replacement of a “feeble” Spanish empire by settlers moving west in the form, presumably, of Anglo-American freeholders or husbandmen. Together with his idealized yeoman farmer, Jefferson’s metaphor of the former colonies as a nest is his most telling figure for territorial expansion. The nest not only harmonizes a familial subject with agricultural production; it also naturalizes the grid of property formation. Jefferson’s husbandman was always an agent of expansion; as Jefferson himself put it, “we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman.”4 But, as the metaphor of the nest implies, the establishment of (this state of) cultivation depended not merely upon the mobility of Anglo-American farmers but also upon the containment and rationalization of their labor by art and science. Here, where agrarian political economy is figured by the nest, cultivation becomes acculturation, and the family circle of Jeffersonian fantasy is revealed as a device for the containment as well as the diffusion of productive labor.

It is this metaphor of the nest—of union as a phenomenon of production and its migratory reproduction—that Alexander Wilson's bird books carry to its logical republican extension. Hauling his sample volume of *American Ornithology* from city to city, from settlement to settlement, in search of new subscribers and new bird specimens, Wilson traveled through virtually every city “from the shores of St. Laurence, to the mouths of the Mississippi,” from the Atlantic ocean to the interior of Louisiana. He described his journeys through the United States and the territories of the interior as a “zigzag” from “one country to another.” As a result, however, his nine-volume collection of the “manners and migrations” of American birds is something more than an oversized field guide to the birds. It is, instead, a fragmentary kind of panorama, unrolling the expansionist inner state of production’s reproduction during the years of Jefferson’s and Madison’s presidencies (1801–16).

Wilson’s *American Ornithology* was, above all, a collective commodity—a self-consciously all-American assembly and display of United States materials and productive power. As its author proclaims in the preface to his fifth volume, its “engravings are a monument to the merits of Messr’s Lawson, Murray and Warnicke, the elegance of the letter press a high honor to the taste of the founders Binney and Ronaldson, . . . while the paper, from the manufactory of Mr. Ames, proves what American ingenuity is capable of producing when properly encouraged.” The colors of the plates were inconsistent with this objective, however. Although all the other “materials and mechanical parts of this publication have been the production of the United States,” the author was “principally indebted to Europe” for his colors—except for the “beautiful native ochres” mixed in “the laboratory of Messr’s Peale and Son.” However, Wilson adds, “the spirit for manufactories, every day rising around us,” offers hope that American artists and authors will shortly be rendered “completely independent of all foreign aid” and enabled “to exhibit the native hues of his subjects in colors of our own, equal in brilliancy, durability and effects to any others.”

The appropriation by the United States of the continent’s midsection is still popularly recounted as a historical narrative, according to which exploration of the western interior and incipient settlement (by scouts, traders, and “white savages”) led sequentially to general immigration, cultivation, and domestication. According to this narrative, the interior was first penetrated by


7. Ibid., vol. 2 (1810), vi.
solitary white men who fought, traded, and often intermarried with Native Americans, and only then were followed by families of homesteaders and, finally, by the institutions and artifacts of national culture: towns, laws, churches, commerce, and consumer goods. Wilson's Ornithology, however, makes it clear that, on the contrary, these imaginary processes were not narratively or temporally sequential but simultaneous: territorial expansion was always inseparable from the production, distribution, and marketing of consumer goods—from shoes, clothing, hats, and guns, to books, magazines, and pictures—by an American manufactory that produced not only things but also persons (including the Alexander Wilson of Peale's Exhumation of the Mastodon) as representative commodities.

There is no question that Wilson aimed to bring himself forth from obscurity, together with the birds he classified, by virtue of his enormous labor of collection and assemblage. In doing so he embraced, like Peale, a Jeffersonian plan of union through exemplary self-production or yeoman independence within the eye of the state; in the process, he also extended the federal republic with its "elevated" views (that is, disinterested, representative, virtuously synthetic) and its reproductions of production, into the interior. With his mammoth American Ornithology, Wilson took the federal roof on the road, as an exemplar of its representational principles and practices. In doing so, however, he also revealed the sharp, violent, and ragged limits of federalism's applicability—the limits, that is, of the productivist principles of American manufacturing as the frame and fabric of a universal, natural history of the world.

Wilson's Ornithology was only one of a number of enormously ambitious, expensive, multivolume publishing projects that were undertaken in Philadelphia at about the same time. In his address to the new Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1810, Joseph Hopkinson, the son of federalist poet Francis Hopkinson, noted the remarkable growth of Philadelphia publishing since 1776. According to Hopkinson, the number of engravers in the city had increased from three to sixty since the American Revolution, owing to a remarkable boom in book-making. By 1810, the labor of virtually every

8. George Dekker has provided the best account to date of this tradition in The American Historical Romance (Cambridge, 1987), 73–98.
9. Joseph Hopkinson, "First Annual Discourse to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts" (Philadelphia, 1810), 15–16. The Academy of Fine Arts would serve as both a school and a professional organization for American engravers. Most Philadelphia engravers became members of the Pennsylvania Academy, where some, such as the silver engraver/trompe l'oeil painter William Harnett (1848–92), would also find training in other arts. By contrast with the Pennsylvania Academy, the British Royal Society of Sir Joshua Reynolds established itself as an academy of fine arts by virtue of its exclusion of (mechanical) engravers. See Alfred Frankenstein After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870–1900 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), 29–33.
engraver active in the United States had been required by one or another of the publishing projects under way in Philadelphia: in 1790 Thomas Dobson began to print the first American edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which, by 1803, would be completed in twenty-one volumes with six hundred copperplate engravings; between 1795 and 1796, Bioren and Madan of Philadelphia published the first complete American edition of Shakespeare in eight volumes (probably edited by Joseph Hopkinson); and, in 1798, William and Thomas Birch began to engrave their series of twenty-eight *Views of Philadelphia*, published in 1800 for subscribers in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore. But even these ambitious projects were dwarfed by the American edition of Abraham Rees's *Cyclopedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, published between 1810 and 1827 by Samuel Bradford (with Wilson's help as agent) in forty-seven volumes, with over fourteen hundred engravings.\(^{10}\)

Bradford and his New York partner hired Wilson as book agent and assistant editor to the *Cyclopedia* and paid him nine hundred dollars a year. In so doing they piggybacked the publication of Wilson's *American Ornithology* onto the larger project of the *Cyclopedia*, enabling Wilson to travel across the continent in search of subscribers and information not only for the *Cyclopedia* but also for his own projected *Ornithology*. Travel was critical to the completion of both projects, not only for the purposes of collecting specimens and data but also in order to contact local bookdealers, and to scour the continent for subscribers wealthy enough, and willing, to capitalize such expensive commodities.

Illustrated with almost one hundred plates (drawn by Wilson, engraved by Alexander Lawson, and hand colored by men and women hired by Wilson), Bradford and Inskeep's edition of *American Ornithology* was in every sense a luxury commodity; its price of $120.00 (or $12.00 per volume) was prohibitive for all but the wealthiest individuals, and institutions such as library companies, learned societies, and colleges. Wilson's subscription list, published in the ninth volume of the *Ornithology*, crosses partisan lines, replicating, as a list of names, the portraits of republican worthies that lined the wall of the Long Room in Peale's Museum (see figure 50 in Linda Partridge's essay in this volume). The list exhibits the names of New England federalists Jedediah Morse and Josiah Quincy, Virginians Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, as well as Thomas Pinckney, Nicholas Biddle, Benjamin Smith Barton, Rufus King,

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Robert Livingston, and Gouverneur Morris. Such elite individuals chiefly comprised the subscribership of 448, broadened only slightly by institutions: eleven city libraries, five learned societies, six universities, an agricultural society, a state legislature, a hospital, and a Scottish Museum.

Sharply restricted in terms of class and profession, Wilson's subscribers constitute a group that was, nevertheless, geographically extensive, assembled by a Philadelphia publishing firm with expanding, or federal, marketing range. Prior to the canals and turnpikes of the 1820s, publishing was, like so many American enterprises, a profoundly local affair. Only Philadelphia and New York could claim a growing book trade with the southern and western interior. The Ornithology's subscribers represent Pennsylvania (with 114 names), New York (60), Connecticut (3), Massachusetts (14), New Hampshire (8), Maryland (16), District of Columbia (20), Virginia (34), North Carolina (11), South Carolina (36), Georgia (21), Kentucky (15), Mississippi Territory (23), Louisiana (60), and finally “Europe,” with 15 subscribers (from England, including London and Liverpool; Scotland; and Russia). It is a list remarkable for the number of subscribers from the southwest interior—namely Kentucky, the Mississippi territory and Louisiana (the last, in particular, had as many subscribers as New York). The first volume of Rees's Cyclopedia would similarly evidence the reach of an increasingly national, Philadelphia/New York publishing axis, listing associated booksellers in Boston, Salem, Portsmouth, Portland, Baltimore, Washington, Georgetown, Alexandria, Fredricksburg, Richmond, Petersburg, Charleston, Savannah, Augusta, Pittsburgh, and Lexington, Kentucky.

11. The subscribers were listed, at the end of volume nine in the the first edition of the Ornithology, according to state or territory. Individual subscribers are listed in letters from Wilson to Daniel Miller written from Washington, 24 December 1808 (see Letters, 296); and to Samuel Bradford from Savannah, 8 March 1809 (Letters, 312). A list of the Virginia subscribers is included in Robert Cantwell, Alexander Wilson: Naturalist and Pioneer (Philadelphia, 1961), 277, 305.

12. After 1790, and prior to the coming of the railroad in the 1830s and 1840s, Philadelphia and New York established, and came to dominate, the book trade in the southern and western interior; see William Charvat, Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850 (Philadelphia, 1959): “Philadelphia publishers began to control the southern book-buying market, and New York the territory west of the Hudson, both cities sharing the trade of the Ohio valley.” It was the leading publishers of Philadelphia and New York, rather than landlocked Boston, who, in the age of steamboats and canals, sought “the trade not only of the coast but of the interior”—and who, as Charvat argues, thereby “discovered (in a sense, established) the common denominator in the literary taste of the whole country.” Charvat summarizes the transformation from diffuse to centralized and nationalized literary publishing with figures from fiction sales: “In the first decade of the nineteenth century, almost fifty per cent of our native fiction was published outside of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—in the 1840s, only eight per cent” (pp. 23-24, 26).

13. Five of these subscriptions were for two or three copies; twenty-one were for institutions: city or college libraries, Athenæums, learned or medical societies, and, in the case of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Legislatures (three copies) and the Pennsylvania Hospital (two copies).
Given its demographically elite but geographically extensive range, Wilson’s *Ornithology* was, like Peale’s museum, not only definitively Jeffersonian but also definitively federal—and federalizing. In the decades after the revolution, federalism was more fiction than fact. As Trish Loughran has argued, union was irreducibly virtual—a matter of fantasy and projection—in the founding, or federalist, period when the United States embraced a geography of communities so profoundly local and specific, so intensely diverse and disjunct, as to be actually unrepresentable. In several of his travel letters, Wilson describes his reception on the road, not only by the “gentlemen” to whom he displays his sample volume but also by backcountry crowds who simply stare at the stranger in their streets, as if both the Philadelphia salesman and his bird book were “a bear or a mammoth,” as he put it—a singular, portable museum display:

I have laboured with the zeal of a knight errant in exhibiting this book of mine, wherever I went, traveling with it, like a beggar with his bantling, from town to town, and from one country to another. I have been loaded with praises, . . . shaken almost to pieces in stage coaches; have wandered among strangers, hearing the O’s and Ah’s, and telling the same story a thousand times over. . . .

I spent the whole of this week traversing the street, from one particular house to another, till I believe, I became almost as well known as the public crier, or the clerk of the market, for I could frequently perceive gentlemen point me out to others as I passed with my book under my arm. . . .

I reached Newark that day, having gratified the curiosity and feasted the eyes of a great number of people who repaid me with the most extravagant compliments, which I would have very willingly exchanged for a few simple subscriptions. . . . I spent nearly the whole of Saturday in Newark, where my book attracted as many starers as a bear or a mammoth would have done.

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15. The first paragraph quotes a letter from Wilson to Daniel Miller, 26 October 1808 (*Letters*, 286); the latter two a letter from Wilson to a friend, Boston, 10 October 1808 (*Letters*, 276).
It was because of Wilson's journeys on behalf of *American Ornithology* that, some seventy years after Wilson's death, Henry Adams used his travel writings to help introduce his own nine-volume *History of the United States of America during the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson to the Second Administration of James Madison*. Specifically, Adams used Wilson's letters to support his contention that the sprawling Jeffersonian state was without adequate transportation, largely impenetrable, and—particularly in its far-flung interiors—an unenlightened, backward, even medieval place. By Adams's account, Wilson himself was a cultivated but somewhat eccentric specimen—an "ornithologist, a Pennsylvania Scotchman, a confirmed grumbler, [and] a shrewd judge," but "the most thorough of American travellers." What Adams fails to note, however, is that Wilson traveled not simply because he wished to but also because he had to. This compulsion derived in part from the literary market; not only did Wilson work for Bradford and Inskeep but, in imagining and designing his collection, Wilson also explicitly imitated other celebrated literary travelers: particularly his friend William Bartram, whom he met in 1803, and Lewis and Clark, who left for the Pacific in the same year. In fact, on the heels of Lewis and Clark's departure, Wilson had written to President Jefferson, hoping to be appointed to another government-sponsored western expedition up the Red River. Neither this expedition nor Wilson's appointment would materialize, but Wilson continued to aspire to the status of the celebrated traveler. Conveniently for Wilson, Jefferson ordered the animal specimens collected by the Corps of Discovery to be sent to Peale's museum in Philadelphia: volume 3 of *American Ornithology*, therefore, exhibits some of the new western species gathered by Lewis and Clark (Lewis's woodpecker and Clark's crow) together with western species collected by Wilson on his own solitary expeditions (the Louisiana tanager, swamp sparrow, Savannah sparrow, water thrush, painted bunting, Mississippi kite, Tennessee warbler, Kentucky warbler, prairie warbler, Carolina parrot, blue-green and Nashville warblers, and so on). Both Wilson's nine-volume *Ornithology* and the forty-seven-volume *Cyclopedia* were eventually completed, but at a steep price. By 1818, the *Cyclopedia* was still unfinished and the project had cost $200,000, bankrupting the firm of Bradford and Inskeep. The remaining volumes of the *Cyclopedia* were completed by a syndicate of engravers in 1827, and the unsold volumes

dispensed by lottery. Wilson, however, did not live to see even this equivocal outcome. Having assembled a remarkable seven volumes in just six years, zigzagging the eastern half of the continent in order to collect, describe, classify, and illustrate more than three hundred bird species, he died in 1813, quite literally of overwork—of “heart palpitations,” chronic dysentery, and chronic poverty. When Peale painted *Exhumation of the Mastodon* in 1807, Wilson had just finished the first volume of his *Ornithology*; by the summer of 1813, he was in the midst of work on his eighth volume. He wrote to his father in Scotland: “Intense application to study has hurt me much. My 8th volume is now in the press. . . . One volume more will complete the whole.” After Wilson’s death in 1813, the eighth and ninth volumes were completed by Charles-Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon Bonaparte’s expatriate nephew. The connection to Napoleon is more than coincidental. If the collections of Italian and German art brought back to Paris by Napoleon’s armies were mementos of empire in Europe (and if Alexander Von Humboldt was only the latest voice of centuries of colonialist investment in South America), then Wilson’s *Ornithology* is the peculiar expression of Jeffersonian empire in North America. Despite its rural or pastoral aspect as a field, the specificity of American *Ornithology*—its Jeffersonian/federalist stamp, so to speak—lies in its character as a performance of production, in its attempt to constitute not only American birds but also its author as both representative producer and celebrated employee of the federal state.

**National Characters/Representative Birds**

Despite the fact that John James Audubon saw his work as an imitation of, and in competition with, Wilson’s *American Ornithology*, it is Audubon’s *Birds of America* (London, 1827–38) that has been the more widely known and reprinted work. Audubon successfully represented himself as an adventuring frontiersman of science; his great birds have been viewed as a place where Romantic art meets natural science, where history painting meets book illustration, and even where artistic genius on a grand scale came into contact with the (supposedly mechanical truth of) particular detail, elevating these illustrations almost—but often, crucially, not quite—to the level of high art.

Like Wilson, Audubon also wrote an ornithological text, his *Ornithological Biography*, published in Edinburgh between 1831 and 1839, a five-volume series of short sketches in which—as in Wilson’s text—self-advertising merges

fascinatingly with travel literature and anecdotes of natural history. The *Ornithological Biography* deserves more study than it has received from students of literature and culture, least of all because it elaborates and complicates the Romantic myth of Audubon the frontiersman, the ornithologist in buckskin. But this text is little read or known in comparison with his famous prints, especially those in *Birds of America*, which is viewed primarily as visual art, as a collection of beautiful pictures: it was produced in England for wealthy patrons on gigantic paper called “elephant folio,” and then sold—separately from its ornithological/biographical text—in sets of five prints each. Overall, it has been as a great painter rather than writer of birds (birds painted, moreover, in the grand style by an artist who reportedly studied with the history painter Jacques Louis David) that Audubon has come to represent “American ornithology” and American nature in general in the imaginations of many North Americans: it is not for Wilson, after all, that the Audubon Society is named.

What this comparison should foreground is not that a hard-working Alexander Wilson has been treated unfairly by history in comparison to the more flamboyant Audubon, but that Wilson was, first of all (though not only), a writer and, more particularly, a poet: in Wilson's *Ornithology*, the linguistic text is as crucial to and as much a part of the ornithological project as are the engravings. Indeed, Wilson did not learn to draw until the age of forty, with help from William Bartram and Bartram’s niece Anne. The *Ornithology* is a text written and illustrated by a man who saw himself as a literary traveler rather than as a visual artist or painter per se; it is in the tradition of Bartram and of Lewis and Clark (as well as British naturalists Gilbert White, Thomas Bewick, and Edward Latham)22 that his *Ornithology* should be read—and viewed.

22. See W. B. Carnochan and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Gilbert White and the Natural History of Selborne* (Stanford, Calif., 1989). Writing in his journal in Liverpool, thirteen years after Wilson’s death, Audubon described the British naturalist Thomas Bewick as “the Wilson of England” (entry of 4 August 1826, *The 1826 Journal of John James Audubon*, ed. Alice Ford Norman [Tulsa, Okla., 1967], 79). Thomas Bewick was a naturalist and engraver whose remarkably popular History of Quadrupeds had been published in 1790. This was followed by his two-volume History of British Birds (1797–1804), with its famous series of wood engravings. Audubon's comparison of Bewick to Wilson is significant because, like Wilson, Bewick had worked self-consciously to make his History of British Birds “a great national work.” In his Memoir Bewick writes of his respect not only for John Ray (a British taxonomist who “led the way to truth and to British Ornithology”) but also for the ornithological works of Gilbert White, Thomas Pennant, and Edward Latham. Latham, whose system of classification would be adopted by Wilson, seemed particularly to Bewick to “have wound up the whole.” At the same time however, Bewick “often lamented” that Latham's work “was not—by being embellished with correct figures—made a great national work, like the Count de Buffon’s”; see Memoir of Thomas Bewick, 1822–1833 (London, 1924), 131–32. Bewick sought to amend this defect with his own British ornithology. Numerous editions of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (in forty-four volumes) of 1749–1804, as well as translations and adaptations from it (such as Oliver Goldsmith’s eight-volume *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* [1774]) had initiated a growing popular interest in natural history that Bewick, Wilson, and later, Audubon would exploit and extend.
Certainly, Wilson’s drawings can be viewed or framed alone; but ultimately his *American Ornithology* must be considered as an illustrated text, one that is much more profoundly mixed generically than anything Audubon would produce. Each essay was composed of fragments of, or forays into, various other genres: poems, anatomical analyses, theater reviews, travel anecdotes, sketches of curious characters, moral lessons, and transcriptions of bird “dialects” as well as letters and parts of letters from Jefferson, Bartram, Samuel Latham Mitchell, and other reputable American “gentlemen.” Formally and stylistically, Wilson’s *Ornithology* is an uneven rag-bag, resembling in its disjunctively woven way the architecture of the birds’ nests he describes: “formed of a little loose hay, feathers of a guinea fowl, some wool, hanks of thread, hog’s bristles, skeins of silk, pieces of cast snake skins, and dog’s hair, . . . bits of rotten wood, fibres of dry stalks of weeds, pieces of paper, commonly newspapers, . . . the whole tightly sewed through and through with long horse hairs, interwoven with the silk of caterpillars and the inside lined with fine dry grass.”

A poet first, Wilson had published a volume of dialect and English-language *Poems* in Paisley (printed by J. Neilson in 1790), prior to his emigration to Philadelphia. Forced to flee Scotland in 1794 for participating in revolutionary Paineite politics, he worked variously in Pennsylvania and New Jersey as a weaver, peddler, and schoolteacher until meeting Bartram and deciding to make “a collection of all our finest birds.” But, having begun his climb to authorship as a Scots dialect poet, Wilson included in *American Ornithology* not only natural history sketches but also long poems.

Wilson’s longstanding ambition of being “distinguished in the literary world” had involved the assumption and abandonment of a series of authorial “personae.” Wilson had first imitated Robert Burns, hoping to appeal to a British literary market which, increasingly, produced and distributed poems and poets as native productions. In the United States, ten years later, it was literary travel rather than poetic “genius” which was crucial to the establishment and proliferation of post-war American literary markets wherever they intersected with European imperial expansion. Wilson therefore made himself a literary traveler. He first imitated Thomas Moore, in 1804. Moore had visited Philadelphia and made a journey to Niagara in 1803, describing both in verse; Wilson himself, then, immediately made a journey to Niagara, in order

to write his own, much longer travel poem, “The Foresters: A Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in 1804.” As Elizabeth McKinsey describes the tradition of Niagara, “Thomas Moore and Alexander Wilson inaugurated what would be a torrent of poetry about the Falls. . . . soon there would be plays and tales . . . as well as countless magazine and occasional prose pieces that focused on the cataract.”

26 After imitating Moore, Wilson next became a naturalist, emulating Alexander von Humboldt (who had also visited Philadelphia in 1804), Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, and above all Bartram, the celebrated literary traveler to the countries of the Creeks, Choctaw, and Cherokee.27

As a traveler, Wilson was familiar with the newest technologies in water travel. An acquaintance of Robert Fulton, Wilson knew very well the benefits of steam.28 But when he was finally able to make his own expedition west in 1810, he did not navigate the Ohio River in any of the new mechanical boats; instead he embarked from Pittsburg in a one-man “bateau,” which he self-consciously dubbed “The Ornithologist.” There was a kind of precedence for travel by bateau in Wilson’s journey to Niagara in 1804, when (according to his poetic account in “The Foresters”) he and his companions traveled in a skiff dubbed “The Niagara.”29 However, Wilson claimed that the idea for traveling west in this solitary and Romantic way had been suggested to him in 1806 by the Philadelphia typefounder Mr. Ronaldson—who had traveled down the Ohio to St. Louis “with one companion in a small Bateau,” where they purchased “a quantity” of the lead needed for making type.30 At any rate, what is obvious here is that the boat inscribed with the name “The Ornithologist” was

27. Seeing “by the papers,” Wilson wrote Bartram in 1806, “that Mr. Jefferson designs to employ persons to explore the shores of the Mississippi,” Wilson’s first plan was to travel from Wheeling to New Orleans as the “companion and assistant” of Bartram himself. In January of 1806 he asked Bartram what he thought “of laying our design before Mr. Jefferson with a view to procure his advice and recommendation to influential characters in the route. Could we procure his approbation and patronage, they would secure our success”; Wilson to Bartram, 27 January 1806 (Letters, 247). When Bartram, then seventy, refused, Wilson turned to Jefferson in the hope of being appointed to the projected government expedition “up the Red River.” To Wilson’s disappointment, Jefferson never responded to his letters, and the expedition was canceled. Wilson’s letters to Bartram and Jefferson show that his efforts to be appointed to an expedition were tied to the task of gathering specimens for his Ornithology; Wilson to Jefferson, Kingsessing, 6 February 1806 (Letters, 249–50).
28. In 1807, Fulton had launched the first commercially successful steamboat in New York. Wilson himself called on Fulton in New York on October 2 of that year, in order to ask the engineer to verify “some particulars” in the New Cyclopedia entry on canals; see Hunter, “Life of Alexander Wilson” (Letters, 81–82); and Wilson to Samuel F. Bradford, New York, 2 October 1807 (Letters, 265–66).
part of Wilson's performance of production, a performance framed at the intersection of word and image, visual and verbal self-production. It was precisely this performative side of Wilson's ornithological pose that would later appeal to Audubon. In 1823, over a decade after Wilson's death, Audubon made his own pilgrimage from Philadelphia to Niagara Falls, after having visited Wilson's publishers, engraver, and editor in Philadelphia—where Audubon was "coldly received." At Niagara, Audubon recalled Wilson's long employment by Bradford and Inkeep when, signing the register at his inn at the Falls, he wrote after his name, "who, like Wilson, will ramble, but never like that great man die under the lash of a bookseller." Immediately after leaving Niagara for the southwest, Audubon again imitated Wilson's performance of ornithological self-production—by buying a skiff, or batteau, in Pittsburg to take him down the Ohio River.31

Wilson invariably attempted to represent himself as a visible object, framed to his own view, upon an imaginary international stage or display case. Like all works of natural history in the Linnaean mode, the productivist and representational artifacts of American Ornithology aspired to the Enlightenment status of the international, the global, and universal, and universally applicable. It was on this international stage or museum that Wilson wished to display himself as a new specimen: "the first" American ornithologist.

As an expression of extended republicanism, whereby federalism identified itself with "its" continent, American Ornithology pushes the trope of the "elevated" point of view to an ornithological extreme—in the form, so to speak, of the "bird's-eye view." The pun of the bird's-eye view may sound facetious as a way of describing this imperial elevation and extension of the national "roof," but, as Peale reflected in his gothic, taxidermical way (and as Constance Rourke recognized long ago in her studies of the tall tale), the punning conjunction of the outrageous and the actual marks much of the art/work of the early United States as forms of world-making.

Consider the king bird, or tyrant flycatcher (fig. 25). Wilson's king bird migrates every winter to the interior of Spanish South America, specifically Peru, where the "vast Maragnon" River flows to the Amazon. While celebrating the American king bird and his annual return from the "torrid regions" of South America to the more "temperate" North, Wilson produces an international moral geography: "Impelled by the powerful impressions of love, and the dictates of nature, [birds from South America] have winged their way to our more temperate and abundant regions, to rear their young in safety, and

Figure 25. Tyrant flycatcher (no. 1), from Wilson, *American Ornithology*, volume 2 (1810). Huntington Library.
conduct a joyous progeny back to southern climes.”32 In *American Ornithology* the (Spanish-American) “South” is a place parents might return with their adolescent progeny for vacation or an educative tour. But the original nest-home is located in the North (“our more temperate regions”). As “torrid” places of (racial, moral, and vegetable) “color,” South America and the Caribbean are exoticized objects of suspicion throughout *American Ornithology*, where color is “enjoyable” only so long as it can be incorporated and contained by the social taxonomies of the North. The scarlet tanager, for example, is “one of the gaudy foreigners (and perhaps the most showy) that regularly visits us from the torrid regions of the south”: “While we consider him entitled to all the rights of hospitality, we may be permitted to examine a little into his character, and endeavour to discover whether he has anything else to recommend him, besides that of having a fine coat, and being a great traveler” (*Ornithology*, Jardine, 1:192). Dressed in a coat of “the richest scarlet, set off with the most jetty black,” Wilson’s tanager is a seducer or, perhaps, a loungor or dandy. The elevated and detached character of the traveler is as dangerous as his cultivation, and travel is desirable, finally, only so far as its fantastic height and breadth eventually take the traveler “home.”

This is precisely what the king bird stands for, in a long narrative poem written by Wilson and embedded in his prose essay on the species. In this poem, a (single male) bird escapes from a colorful but “suffocating” South to return to the North. On the way, he surveys a map-like outline of topography which is also a moral geography:

> Far in the south, where vast Maragnon flows,  
> And boundless forests unknown wilds enclose;  
> Vine-tangled shores, and suffocating woods,  
> Parched up with heat, or drowned with pouring floods;  
> Where each extreme alternately prevails,  
> And Nature sad their ravages bewails;  
> Lo! high in the air, above those trackless wastes,  
> With Spring’s return the king bird hither hastens;  
> Coasts the famed Gulf, and, from his height, explores  
> Its thousand streams, its long indented shores,  
> Its plains immense, wide opening on the day,  

32. “On this hand he beholds one species just returned from the orange groves of Guiana and Surinam... On that, a second, who has abandoned the shores of the Amazon or Orinoco, to trace his shallow streams and rivulets... while a brilliant and numerous family, in green, blue and glowing scarlet that but lately caught the eye of the sun-burnt savage of Brazil, amidst his native woods, now flutter through our orchards” (“Proposals,” *Letters*, 269).
Its lakes and isles, where feathered millions play:
All tempt not him; till gazing from on high,
Columbia's regions wide below him lie;
There end his wanderings and his wish to roam,
There lie his native woods, his fields, his home;
Down circling, he descends, from azure heights,
And on a full-blown sassafras alights.

(Ornithology, Jardine, 1:222)

Here “sassafras” iconically identifies (the northern) home, while the solitary king bird, foregrounded on his perch at the poem’s end, is framed as a picture suitable for any Victorian parlor. In American Ornithology, it is the ultimately domestic nature of the king bird’s homing impulse, bringing him north to his “nest,” that marks him as a representative national species. Even the king bird’s notorious aggression (which has earned him the name of “tyrant” flycatcher) is in the service of defending his family from plundering jays, thieving cuckoos, and even eagles. In aggressive self-defense, he becomes an ideal type of American Revolutionary virtue, fulfilling its principle of “common sense,” whereby domestic attachments translate naturally and rightfully into aggression and even war:

All danger over he hastens back elate,
To guard his post, and feed his faithful mate . . .
. . . Come now, ye cowards! . . .
When the hour of danger and dismay
Comes on your country, sneak in holes away,
Shrink from the perils ye were bound to face,
And leave those babes and country to disgrace;
Come here (if such we have), ye dastard herd!
And kneel in dust before this noble bird.

(Ornithology, Jardine, 1:222–23)

Again, the conclusion (“And kneel in dust before this noble bird”) is iconic. In Wilson’s bird collection, as in Peale’s museum, it is the ability to frame visually and thereby “see”—and even to worship—nature that denotes elevation. And it is here that Wilson’s Ornithology begins to fray at its Jeffersonian edges: as a purveyor of elevated views, Wilson puts himself sharply and repeatedly at odds with the American mechanic or agricultural producer whose labor grounds “Independence.”
In its “museumizing” practices of classification and visual display, *American Ornithology* is preservationist in two senses of the word. On the one hand, it is a repository of specimens, a book version of the stuffed birds in Peale’s museum. On the other hand, it is also, at many junctures, an environmentalist text arguing for the preservation and appreciation of birds, if not on the grounds of their entertaining characters and loving family life, then for their usefulness as killers of vermin.33 But both of these forms of bird preservation require the bird-watching, spectatorial subject of *American Ornithology* to sever himself from the mechanics of production—the mechanics that ground Union—and book production. The “bird’s-eye view” is thus diffused and established by Wilson’s text at the cost of undermining its own federalist representational practices in an impossible effort to disjoin representative characters from the principle of production that raises them into view.

The Antimechanical Turn

The argument of Wilson’s bird books turns again and again to a defense of nature’s varied and distinctive characters over and against the unenlightened slaughter of American birds by farmers and mechanics. At such moments Wilson, a former handloom weaver, not only adopts a sentimental pose, mourning the murder of nature’s creatures (because they live in “families”); he also assumes the point of view of a counterrevolutionary near-monarchist (or, given his Scottish background, a near-Jacobite):

See where [the farmer] skulks! and takes his gloomy stand,
The deep-charged musket hanging in his hand;
And, gaunt for blood, he leans it on a rest,
Prepared, and pointed at thy snow-white breast. . . .
If e’er a family’s griefs, a widow’s woe,
Have reached thy soul in mercy let him go!
Kill not thy friend, who thy whole harvest shields.
Some small return—some little right resign,
And spare his life whose services are thine!
—I plead in vain! Amid the bursting roar,
The poor lost king bird welters in his gore!

(*Ornithology*, Jardine, 1:223)

The poor lost king bird is displayed here for the education of uncultivated cultivators—frontier squatters and farmers, among other comparatively characterless sorts who supposedly cannot see the birds before them, and whose possession of the frontier is merely mechanical and, therefore, a-federal. In response, Wilson’s “King Bird” essay sets forth a visual pedagogy that teaches the backcountry cultivator to elevate, see, and display—not only birds but also himself as a reader and viewer of nature.

Also at issue in Wilson’s attempt to preserve American nature is the long-standing Jeffersonian argument with the French naturalist Buffon over the supposedly weak and degenerate character of American species. For Buffon, American woodpeckers were yet another example of the derivative (that is, the mechanical, atrophied, and generally more bug-like) nature of American nature.34 Buffon compared American woodpeckers to “European peasants and mechanics,” who lead lives of endless labor. “Constrained to drag out an insipid existence in boring the bark and hard fibres of trees,” American woodpeckers in particular were, according to Buffon, mechanical producers of a low character, degraded by drudgery. But woodpeckers were not only maligned by Buffon; they were also regarded as “vermin” by American farmers, who shot them by the score: “This elegant bird is well known to our farmers and junior sportsmen who take every opportunity of destroying him for the supposed trespasses he commits on their Indian corn, or . . . for the trifle he will bring in market, . . . for the mere pleasure of destruction, and perhaps for the flavour of his flesh” (ORNITHOLOGY, Jardine, 1:43–44). Defending the “innocent amusements” of the gold-winged woodpecker against both Buffon and the American farmer, Wilson asks his reader to take a closer look at the gold-winged woodpecker—and his looks (fig. 26): “The abject and degraded character,” Wilson writes, “which the Count de Buffon . . . has drawn of the whole tribe of woodpeckers, belongs not to the elegant and sprightly bird now before us.”

_He_ cannot be said to “lead a mean and gloomy life, without an intermission of labour,” who usually feasts by the first peep of dawn, and spends the early and sweetest hours of morning on the highest peaks of the tallest trees . . . ”

Can it be said . . . that “the narrow circumference of a tree circumscribes his dull round of life,” who as seasons and inclination inspire, roams from the frigid to the torrid zone, feasting on the abundance of various regions? Or is it a proof that “his

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appetite is never softened by delicacy of taste,” because he so often varies his bill of fare, occasionally preferring to animal food the rich milkiness of young Indian corn. . . ? Let the reader turn to the faithful representation of him given in the plate, and say whether his looks be “sad and melancholy.” (Ornithology, Jardine, 1:50–51)

Wilson’s imperative to look at the woodpecker’s looks is performed by the plate to which the reader is directed (fig. 3): here, in a compositional arrangement common to European travel and magazine illustration, the position of the reader/viewer is represented within the plate by a smaller bird-spectator, who looks up admiringly at the large, handsome, and “happy” woodpecker above.35 Displayed in a handsome engraving and described in vivid prose, this specimen is no mere “mechanic” but, rather, a citizen of the world, “roam[ing] from the frigid to the torrid zone” and capable of enjoying the varied diversions of “taste”—diversions that correspond with the “sportive, elegant” and (above all) varied pleasures of American Ornithology itself.36 Inviting the reader/viewer to learn to see himself as a cultivated, and visually alert bird, Wilson’s gold-winged woodpecker balances industry with a variety of respectable, leisure-time amusements. Capable of diversion, he is the subject and the object of those visual techniques of appreciation that American Ornithology aimed to disseminate: all bird hunters must become cultivated; all Anglo-Americans, particularly recent European immigrants and western emigrants, must become more elevated and enlightened, more visually literate. Again, the imperative condemns producers who forget the real (that is, visual, textual, representational, exhibitionary) principles of production whenever they go out to shoot gold-winged woodpeckers or king birds mechanically and impersonally: “the farmer . . . steals among the rows with his gun, bent on vengeance, and forgetful of the benevolent sentiment of the poet, that ‘Just as wide of justice he must fall, / Who thinks all made for one, not one for all’” (Ornithology, Jardine, 1:46).

With this quotation, the poet suggests for a moment that the land is originally common, or “made for all.” But this allusion to a propertyless economy is in the end just a sentimental memento. Wilson sympathizes finally with the economic values that justify shooting birds: “but most farmers,” he concludes, “are, understandably, not much versed in poetry, and pretty well acquainted with value of corn, from the hard labour requisite in raising it” (Ornithology, Jardine, 1:46). Zigzagging, Wilson now allies himself with the Jeffersonian

35. McKinsey, Niagara Falls; see chaps. 1 and 2 for plates and a discussion of viewers within views.

Figure 26. Gold-winged woodpecker (no. 1), from Wilson, *American Ornithology*, volume 1 (1808). Huntington Library.
husbandman and speaks understandably of “the hard labour” requisite to “raising” corn, wheat—and the state. In the end, even though it repeatedly, and often agonizingly, tries to sever itself from its own ground in labor—as a work painstakingly, laboriously assembled—American Ornithology also ultimately reproduces, or raises again, a collective union via federal mechanics, (re)making itself and the world around it upon the same representational grounds it attacks. Finally, instead of a roof raised above a federal edifice or “mansion-house” (the central trope of Philadelphia’s Grand Federal Procession of 1787), Wilson’s Ornithology presents us with a less neatly centered and stable structure. As a federal and Jeffersonian collection, American Ornithology more closely resembles a huge tent covering acres of grass, a tent that is beginning to collapse here and there but that rises, baggily and doggedly, to any number of widely dispersed and fluttering—but pyramidal—points.

Elevation is figured, among other things, by the “big birds” in the collection—that is, those birds whose native characters were, in Wilson’s view, the most representative. Each of the nine volumes contains between thirty and fifty species; but the essays written for each species vary radically in length, according to the representational significance, the peculiarities, or the familiarity of the species under description. Small birds, such as the Maryland yellow-throat, the small blue-gray flycatcher, and warblers generally, are given very cursory empirical descriptions, while others—such as the king bird, the gold-winged woodpecker, the mockingbird, the parrot, and the ivory-billed woodpecker—are occasions for extended socio-biological meditation upon that species’ collective “character” and its implications for the character of American nature generally.

At the same time, American Ornithology is organized as a mere list of species, arranged in no special order, as they came into the “possession” of the ornithologist. Wilson stated explicitly that his Ornithology would not be organized according to the categories of systematic classification, which would have required him to open with “Acciperes” (“rapacious” birds) and, then “proceed regularly through the orders and genera” (that is, from Picae, “Pies,” to Passerines, Columbe, etc.). Jefferson-like, the collector refuses to impose taxonomic order from above because, he says, “it is highly probable that numerous species at present unknown would come into our possession, . . . interrupting the regularity of the above arrangement.”37 Accordingly, it is the person and wanderings of the collector himself that are the ultimate point of

37. There is, however, an overall division into land birds (vols. 1–6) versus water birds (vols. 7–9), a division that deserves attention, but seems secondary; see Introduction, Ornithology, 1:vii.
reference—and Wilson appears repeatedly, therefore, in the text of *American Ornithology* as its productive author and traveler, a stand-in for the Maker or founder of all the species, who alone sustains, unifies, and justifies the whole sprawling assemblage.

**“SHOOTING DUCKS AND PAROQUETS”**

Wilson describes at length an episode in which he gratuitously shoots “paroquets,” by which he meant Carolina parrots—the only species of parrot native to North America (fig. 27). Carolina parrots are now extinct, but when Wilson traveled through Louisiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee in 1810, he observed them as far north as Marietta, Ohio, even “in the month of February, along the banks of the Ohio, in a snow storm, flying about like pigeons, and in full cry” (*Ornithology*, Jardine, 1:378). Wilson adopted one of these parrots as a pet, named her Poll, and kept her in a cage although, upon being “remitted to ‘durance vile’ . . . it paid me in kind for the wound I had inflicted and for depriving it of liberty, by cutting and almost disabling several of my fingers with its sharp and powerful bill” (1:384). Poll served as a source of amusement and a traveling companion until the end of Wilson’s journey. With Poll’s cage in hand, Wilson attracted many curious viewers as he traveled through Louisiana. The bird proved especially useful when Wilson passed through Chickasaw and Choctaw country: “the Indians wherever I stopped to feed, collected around me, men, women, and children, laughing, and seemingly wonderfully amused with the novelty of my companion. Wherever I chanced to stop among these people, we soon became familiar with each other through the medium of Poll.” Curious crowds of parrots likewise flocked “sympathetically” around Poll: “Numerous parties frequently alighted on the trees immediately above, keeping up a constant conversation with the prisoner” (1:385).

Despite Wilson’s reiterated belief that the possession and exhibition of birds in cages would (like *American Ornithology* itself) have a softening and civilizing effect on their viewers, Wilson himself is a solitary shooter and gratuitous hunter of birds. In the midst of his anecdote about Poll, Wilson describes a sudden and unmotivated episode of slaughter. A flock of parrots had “come screaming through the woods in the morning, about an hour after sunrise, to drink the salt water. . . . When they alighted on the ground, it appeared . . . as if covered with a carpet of the richest green, orange, and yellow; they afterwards settled, in one body, on a neighboring tree, . . . covering
Figure 27. Carolina parrot (no. 1), from Wilson, *American Ornithology*, volume 3 (1811). Huntington Library.
almost every twig of it, and the sun, shining strongly on their gay and glossy plumage produced a very beautiful and splendid appearance.” Then, without transition, Wilson begins to shoot:

Having shot down a number, some of which were only wounded, the whole flock swept repeatedly around their prostrate companions, and again settled on a low tree, within twenty yards of the spot where I stood. At each successive discharge, though showers of them fell, yet the affection of the survivors seemed rather to increase; for after a few circuits around the place, they again alighted near me, looking down on their slaughtered companions with such manifest symptoms of sympathy and concern, as entirely disarmed me. *(Ornithology, Jardine, 1:380)*

*American Ornithology* presents such disjunctive moments of violence without commentary, in ways that seem split-off, half-conscious, and dissociated. Here, bird-killing is clearly not assimilable to the overriding ethic of the nest or of home production—where home production means the expansion of a United States domestic economy into brand-new interiors. But neither do such episodes of bird-killing stand in clear opposition to the expanding domestic scenery of the national nest. The often random shooting of “ducks and paroquets” (as well as blue jays, robins, rice birds, passenger pigeons, and others) in Wilson’s *Ornithology* voices contradiction in a way that merely marks—without meaning much of anything by it—the sheer difference made by things that are not “things” (or commodities) and that cannot, therefore, be gathered to the national nest. The dissociation so evident here, between the act of slaughter and the moment of humanitarian disarmament, marks a place of breakdown in *American Ornithology*. It is precisely at this point—where Wilson can shoot down showers of birds and then be brought to heel by their “looks”—that the ornithological project of preservation, education, and cultivation is unable to assimilate, or absorb, the everyday violence of territorial appropriation, coerced work, and continual displacement to its own adoption of a cultivated tone.

Wilson continually instructs his audience in a laissez-faire ethic of benevolence: look, but don’t touch; buy, read, or be visually absorbed, but don’t shoot. At the same time, feathered death abounds. Wilson’s pet Poll herself dies during the journey home to Philadelphia. Strangely gratuitous, this story also evades, without legitimating, *American Ornithology*. Upon reaching New Orleans, Wilson observed that Poll had become “restless and inconsolable”
after the death of a companion parrot that had been caged with her. In response, Wilson performs an experiment:

I placed a looking glass beside the place where she usually sat, and the instant she perceived her image, all her former fondness seemed to return, so that she could scarcely absent herself from it for a moment. . . . It was evident that she was completely deceived. Always when evening drew on . . . she laid her head close to that of the image in the glass, and began to doze with great composure and satisfaction. (Ornithology, Jardine, 1:386)

Immediately after Wilson's experiment with the mirror, however—in which Poll contentedly parroted the parrot—she plunges to her death: taking Poll with him on the ocean journey back to Philadelphia, Wilson was sleeping when “she wrought her way through the cage . . . flew overboard and perished in the Gulf of Mexico” (1:386). The experiment with the mirror can be chalked up to science; but Poll's death cannot, in fact, be absorbed by the ornithological project of cultivation—except where it foregrounds a representational framework that aims to let nothing escape its view. After playing her part as a representative and picturesque character, Wilson's parrot figures the particular losses (of particularity) constituted by American Ornithology—or what is left over, without significance, or without the federal state and its mirror of production.38

Throughout American Ornithology, cultivation implies a visual pedagogy according to which the ethic of elevation and the framework of visual display constitute a kind of cage. The parrot in her cage also allegorizes the emergence of authorship itself within a slowly bureaucratizing commercial culture where the objectification and isolation of its authors is masked by and as a structurally constitutive deception. Albeit in his silent, oblique, and split-off way—gratuitous and without irony—it is against this mirror, which frames him as the author and the subject of American Ornithology, that Wilson sometimes turned his gun (or his representational devices).
Paisley in the 1790s: The Worker Against Work

Between 1790 and 1795, Wilson had participated in and struggled directly against British industrial expansion in Scotland, and it was under the threat of imprisonment for sedition that Wilson emigrated to Philadelphia in 1794. His youthful crime was the writing and circulating of a dialect poem which had incited his fellow weavers to revolt. Like manufactory-era workers in nearby Glasgow, the weavers of Paisley had felt the brunt of social and economic changes introduced by foreign investment and the gradual mechanization of textile manufacturing at the end of the eighteenth century. In the midst of the growing British reaction to the revolution in France and to growing anti-British sentiment in Scotland, Wilson had combined chronic poverty with weaving, book and cloth peddling, the writing of dialect poetry, and radical politics—specifically involvement in a Paineite Jacobin organization called “The Friends of Liberty and Reform.” Jacobin organizations in industrial west Scotland were able to connect the ideals and events of the French Revolution with Scots artisan/worker resistance to British industrial development, combining an artisan-based Scots nationalism with hostility to Britain’s commercial and manufacturing expansion. It was not in the crafts and guilds of Edinburgh, but in the mills and manufactories of Glasgow and Paisley, that Wolfe Tone’s “Society of United Irishmen” found counterpart Societies of United Scotsmen—united against a double “tyranny” of industry and empire.

It was in this context that Wilson wrote the poem that occasioned his flight to Philadelphia. Titled “The Shark, or Lang Mills Detected,” the offending poem described the fantasy beating of a Paisley mill owner, “Lang Willy Shark.” Wilson had first been imprisoned in 1791 for another poem about a Paisley mill owner titled “The Hollander or Light-Weight,” which had accused a Dutch silk manufacturer in Paisley of cheating his weavers, scrutinizing their work for holes, and weighing it for stolen thread. (The black market in goods stolen was a traditional source of additional income for weavers in western Scotland.) The dialect poem for which Wilson was arrested in 1793, however, was even more egregious, as a seemingly direct incitement to violence:

While, in my sleep, methinks I see
Thee marching through the city,
And Hangman Jock, wi’ ginnan glee,
Proceeding to his duty.
I see thy dismal phiz and back,
While Jock, his stroke to strengthen,
Brings down his brows at every swack,
“I’ll learn your frien’ to lengthen,
Your mills the day.”

Poor wretch! in sic a dreadfu’ hour
O’ blude and dirt and hurry,
What wad thy safest luke or sour
Avail to stap their fury?
Lang Mills, was rise around thy lugs
In mony a horrid volley;
And thou be kicket to the dugs,
To think upo’ thy folly
Ilk after day.42

It is poetry such as this, with its direct attack on the expansion of manufacturing that is excluded from American Ornithology. After emigrating to Philadelphia, Wilson quickly came to regard his earlier participation in radical politics as a temporary aberration, a fumbling in the darkness. Apart from delivering a speech or two on behalf of candidate Jefferson, Wilson returned energetically and single-mindedly to his struggle to emerge from obscurity into the light of literary celebrity. In 1811, when Wilson’s half-brother David arrived in Philadelphia from Scotland with copies of Wilson’s early dialect poems, Wilson reportedly “threw them in the fire, unread, saying that if he had followed his worthy father’s counsels they never should have seen the light.”43 He was then finishing the third volume of American Ornithology and had finally begun to find a name for himself as the first American ornithologist—and as the friend of Bartram and Peale. Like Peale, Wilson repeatedly claimed at this time to have “long quitted the turbulent field of politics” for “the arts of peace” and the “peaceful, unassuming pages of AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY”:
“Books on natural history, calculated to improve the taste, to enlarge the

understanding and better the heart, as they are friends to the whole human race, are generally welcomed by people of all parties.”

In spite of Wilson’s wish to separate his sometimes violent, sometimes “licentious”—and supposedly failed—dialect poems of the early 1790s from his Jeffersonian Ornithology, the juxtaposition helps to illuminate the contradictions and disintegrations—the ragged edges or “holes” in—his “great work” of natural history. It seems safe to say, considering the episodes of bird-killing in Wilson’s collection, that the rage and aggression provoked by the manufactory-era production and display of persons as things, and of authors as exemplary workers, found their own oblique articulation in American Ornithology. More obviously, however, if we rejoin the artisan-poet of the 1790s with the American ornithologist of 1807–14, a disjunction emerges between the federal collection and all that it failed to incorporate. By 1810, the cost of federal expansion included, among other things, a repression and forgetting (on the part of federalist art and technology) of the worker-governed wing of revolutionary social struggle as it had emerged in both Europe and the United States during the early years of the French Revolution. Among other things, what Wilson’s great labor of American authorship explicitly refused to remember was the formation of increasingly class-conscious urban artisan organizations—the struggle and insight of manufactory-era artists and workers in both Europe and America.

**Feathered Federalism**

... the sportsman need only take his stand near it, load, take aim, and fire; one flock succeeding another, with little interruption, almost the whole day: by this method, prodigious slaughter has been made among them with little fatigue. ...  
In January, 1807, two young men, in one excursion after them, shot thirty dozen. *(Ornithology*, Jardine, 1:31–32)

Wilson’s *Ornithology* does not only focus on individual specimens, however; it is also full of descriptions of huge flocks of birds: red-winged blackbirds, rice birds, grackles, passenger pigeons, robins, Carolina parrots, and others. In their overwhelming numbers—in flocks that sometimes take days to pass—birds in huge groups represent a kind of living surplus, a surplus that seems to escape, or fly free of, the relations of production. On the one

44. Wilson to [a Paisley friend] 3 November 1811 (*Letters*, 393); preface, *Ornithology*, vol. 3 (1811), v.
hand, then, the birds of America can be shot or harvested as food or as food for sale. But, on the other hand, insofar as birds, bird skins, or bird feathers are not of enormous market value, they also figure another, noneconomic kind of surplus, an elevated, aesthetic kind of surplus that seems, at first glance, to escape the mechanics of exchange: like the distinction between flowers grown for pleasure and crops grown for market, birds would seem to offer a form of enjoyment that could ratify national growth as something other than merely productive, commercial, or mechanical. It is precisely as a living surplus, however, that American birds represented the possibility of other kinds of investment. Wilson repeatedly deploys the language and visual practices of "enjoyment" and "appreciation" as a way of recouping this second kind of surplus. In his discussion of the black-throated blue warbler, Wilson explicitly distinguished the ornithological "taste" for birds from the European taste for quadrupeds—and the virtues of the United States domestic economy from the British fur trade. Little is known of this warbler in Canada, Wilson writes, because "the feathered race is little known or attended to . . . on that part of the continent. . . . The habits of the bear, the deer, and beaver are much more interesting to those people",

and for a good substantial reason too, because more lucrative; and unless there should arrive an order from England for a cargo of skins of warblers and flycatchers, sufficient to make them an object worth speculation, we are likely to know as little of them hereafter. (Ornithology, Jardine, 1:261)

Unlike fur-bearing quadrupeds, but like the independent Jeffersonian republic, both the American "nest" and American Ornithology would seem to be aloof from the corruption of international markets. ("I candidly declare," Wilson writes, "that lucrative views have nothing to do in the business. . . . [A] wish to draw the attention of my fellow-citizens from the jarrings of politics, to the contemplation of the grandeur, harmony, and wonderful variety of nature . . . are my principle . . . motives" [Introduction, Ornithology, vol. 1]). In American Ornithology, bird-watching is primarily a "rural sport," a leisure-time pursuit that cultivates surplus as visual enjoyment or aesthetic appreciation. At the same time, however, the visual framework of American Ornithology articulates a landscape of violence, contradiction, and rupture, particularly at those moments when it represents Wilson slaughtering birds gratuitously, or unable to contain the diversity he

pursues. At such sites of rupture, *American Ornithology* simply fails to ratify the representational mechanics of federalism and one finds that birds do, in fact, escape the net of use-and-enjoyment. At the violent edges of *American Ornithology*, the visual and verbal mechanics of federalism cannot seamlessly contain the mammoth state they project.

Some of the most graphic episodes of breakdown in Wilson’s *Ornithology* correspond with entries that describe birds inhabiting the Southeast and Southwest, the land of the Cherokee, Muskogee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. In the “Ivory-Billed Woodpecker” (fig. 28), for example, the entry that opens volume 4, Wilson compares his specimen to both a baby and an “Indian.”
Adorned in miniature with ivory (the commodity that helped open Africa and India to European capital), the ivory-billed woodpecker is pronounced doomed to “extinction,” and Wilson analogizes the species to Native Americans who reject adoption, assimilation, and the plough. A “royal hunter...the king or chief of his tribe,...ornamented with carmine crest and polished ivory,” the bird is ornamented like “the southern tribes” (that is, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw) who, Wilson reports, ornament themselves, in turn, with the head and bill, skin or feathers of birds: “Thus I have seen a coat made of the skins, heads and claws of the raven, and caps stuck round with heads of butcher birds, hawks and eagles.” In the swamps of North Carolina, Wilson captures a member of this species, and decides to keep it alive to use as a model for his drawing. The bird is inconsolable, however, and its screams in captivity “exactly resemble the violent crying of a young child.” Carrying his miniature captive “under cover,” Wilson soon arrives at Wilmington, North Carolina. As he enters town, the bird’s “affecting cries surprised everyone within hearing, particularly the females, who hurried to the doors and windows with looks of alarm and anxiety” (Ornithology, Jardine, 2:13). When Wilson arrives at his “hotel,” the landlord, “alarmed at what he heard, asked whether he could furnish me with accommodations for myself and my baby.” The American ornithologist quickly relieves everyone’s anxiety: he produces his “baby,” withdrawing the bird “from under the cover,” while “a general laugh [takes] place.” But the ivory-billed woodpecker himself comes to a less-than-humorous end. Left in Wilson’s hotel room, the woodpecker wreaks havoc, breaking a fifteen-inch hole through the wall, covering the bed with plaster and nearly escaping. Wilson tries tying the bird to a mahogany table—upon which it likewise “wreaked his whole vengeance,” nearly destroying it. While he was taking drawings of the woodpecker, Wilson reports, the bird “cut me severely in several places” and “displayed such a noble and unconquerable spirit that I was frequently tempted to restore him to his native woods....He lived with me nearly three days, but refused all sustenance, and I witnessed his death with regret” (Ornithology, Jardine, 2:14). The head and body of Wilson’s woodpecker remain, however, captured by Wilson’s drawing; but, more centrally, as both feathered hunter and adopted infant, the ivory-billed woodpecker lives on as an artifact of the national family in its memories, jokes, and stories.

The principle of assimilation is familiar to historians of Jefferson and his administration: many scholars have noted Jefferson’s rejection of military force

46. The “southern Indians” are said to believe that feathered ornaments, used as “amulets or charms, ...confer on the wearer all the virtues or excellences of those birds” (Ornithology, Jardine, 2:14).
in favor of a policy that aimed to convert North American Indians to commercial farming via education, example, and rituals of adoption.47 Jefferson himself advocated the peaceable assimilation (through cultivation) not only of Native American people but also of all "unproductive" tribes, including recent European immigrants and Anglo-American "squatters."48 In attempts to convert a-federal people to federal land-use policy, Jefferson and his agents theoretically preferred a politics of example and performance to the overt violence of forced removal.49 In both the "Ivory-Billed Woodpecker" and the "Carolina Parrot," the affecting spectacle of a captive bird is made to serve as a mediator of contact, a softening agent of Union.

In 1799, Peale had summarized the affective philosophy of his museum in a series of lectures delivered at the University of Pennsylvania. The 1790s had been a period of counterrevolution and reaction in Philadelphia (as well as Paris). Peale is concerned, therefore, to argue that his museum is a deeply moral rather than libertine institution, a virtuous rather than prurient display of mother nature's "parts." From birds to bears, Peale declares, social harmony characterizes nature's nations. Contrasting the American cuckoo to the European cuckoo—a notorious libertine and the "prototype of cuckoldry"—he argues that the secrets of American nature support a peace-loving domestic order:

Here I feel gratification, nay, pleasure, that I am able to show this nest and Eggs belonging to these American Cuckoos. They build their own nest; they foster their young; they chant their soft notes to sweeten the care of Incubation—and I am proud to believe that they are faithful and constant to each other.50

Although this example was presented tongue-in-cheek, Peale was completely serious about the social virtues that he saw displayed by nature—in miniature.

47. See Joel W. Martin, Sacred Revolt: The Muskogee Struggle for a New World (Boston, 1991), 114–86; and Bernard Sheehan, Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973). The U.S. Creek Treaty of 1790, signed in New York, is a useful example of the failure of models of national representativeness when applied to an Amerindian alliance groups; see John Walton Caughhey, McGlivaney of the Creeks (Norman, Okla., 1938; 1959). For a wider discussion, which considers the possibility that native American "examples of representative democratic social organization and leadership were formatively influential" and productive of (rather than merely appropriated or erased by) federalizing models of democratic-republicanism, confederation, and statesmanship see Donald A. Grinde Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, Exemplar of Liberty, Native America and the Evolution of Democracy (Los Angeles, 1991), 1–59.

48. See Martin, Sacred Revolt, 87–116.

49. See, for example, the policies and rituals that shaped the encounters of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery with the Oto and Yankton Sioux as summarized by Stephen E. Ambrose, Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West (New York, 1996), 155–64.

In another such lecture, delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, Peale imagines a world of animal nature penetrated at every level by "constancy and parental care":

—Our traders to the Falkland and other Isles... tell us that Sea-Lyons, Sea-Wolves, and other such animals, are often found so numerous, as to cover the shores; so thickly are they inhabited, that man with a short bludgeon, may kill hundreds of them before breakfast!—yet among this immense number of creatures a perfect harmony prevails!

—Suppose we descend, and view the smaller animals,—here, myriads of insects present themselves to our view... behold among them also, a perfect harmony...

And if we study the manners of such animals in general, we shall find amongst them, most excellent models of friendship, constancy, parental care and other social virtues.\(^51\)

In this passage, Peale juxtaposes a violent foreground—the "man with a short bludgeon"—with the miniature world of birds and other animals. While it was his lifework to depict the lives of animals as "models" of human happiness, Peale himself killed most of the birds on display in his museum. His letters and diaries document countless shooting expeditions to obtain bird specimens, both for his museum and for exchange with institutions in Europe.\(^52\) The museum mythology of Jeffersonian political economy attempted to fuse a domestic ideology with territorial appropriation and the violence of republican representation (as in the harvesting of animals for skins, feathers, or specimens for museum display). By virtue of the seamlessness with which it fused what Peale called "Art and Nature,"—or, one might say, interior and exterior habitats—the microcosm of the family and, more specifically, the family farm itself provided both Jefferson and Peale with a national icon that could seemingly regenerate itself no matter how often it was attacked and destroyed. As an American Noah's Ark, a self-sufficient domestic sphere was survivable, and would always come out on top, or so it seemed. As the locus of natural reproduction, the "nest" was an endlessly regenerative icon: "hundreds" of little worlds might be demolished "before

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breakfast" and still stand—as they did in the bird cases of Peale's Museum—as household shrines to national peace and harmony.

In the introduction to his *Ornithology*, Wilson compares himself to a schoolboy, home for the holidays, and his *Ornithology* to a "bouquet" of wild-flowers, which he brings home to his mother: "Look my dear 'ma, what beautiful flowers I have found growing on our place. Why all the woods are full of them! red, orange, blue and 'most every color. O I can gather you a whole parcel . . . of them, much handsomer than these, all growing in our own woods!" He goes running out, "on the wings of ecstasy," to gather more. Wilson writes:

> Should my country receive with the same gracious indulgence the specimens which I here humbly present her, should she express a desire for me to go and bring her more, the highest wishes of my ambition will be gratified; for, in the language of my little friend, our whole woods are full of them! and I can collect hundreds more, much handsomer than these. —A. W. (Preface, *Ornithology*, 1:i–ii)

Here, where the labor of production is both "natural and spontaneous," rooted in the child's "love" for his mother, it ends in possession. Where the little boy's world of nature is "our place" and "our very own woods," ownership is presumed as a kind of natural title to animals and flowers. In the figure of the American mother, both Home and Nation are, in other words, everywhere—wherever specimens of natural history are to be gathered. And it is here that *American Ornithology* maps and records, projects and produces, a national "interior" that is, simultaneously, a continental and an emotional or feeling state. In *American Ornithology*, "the nest" went west Jeffersonian style: the nation is the continent—its incomprehensibly diverse "interior" is "our place"—while the imperial expansion, the sprawling migrations, and the extensions of American manufacturing are all marked as ultimately "domestic," homebound, or made in America.

The failures of *American Ornithology* to "fly"—the unwieldiness of the sprawling collection and its inability, in the end, to "raise" its maker into the light (of fame) he craved—are summarized by an anecdote from one of Wilson's travel letters from Kentucky. In 1810 Wilson went bird hunting at the Big Bone Lick, where an "enormous congregation" of mammoth skeletons were known to be sunk or buried beneath the mud. Having propelled his batteau into the Big-Bone Creek, Wilson "amuses" himself for a time "shooting ducks and parquets" at "that great antediluvian rendezvous of the American elephants." While pursuing a bird across the Lick, Wilson feels himself beginning to sink:
In pursuing a wounded duck across this quagmire, I had nearly deposited my carcass among the grand congregation of mammoths below, having sunk up to the middle, and had a hard struggling to get out.\(^5^3\)

This description aptly represents the kind of hybrid, border-life Wilson led as an immigrant poet in pursuit of literary independence. It also encodes the ambivalent, ultimately tenuous position Wilson sustained on the expanding ground of the federal state he served. Caught curiously between union and specificity, between resistance to and deployment of the representational practices that produced him together with his collection, Wilson is caught, so to speak, between the mammoth and the bird. Contrary to the situation of Peale, who was similarly positioned between mammoth and birds (the one and the many) in *The Artist and His Museum* (see fig. 1 in David Brigham’s essay in this volume), Wilson finds the ground (of self-assembly) giving way beneath his feet. As an objectified and buoyant “work,” manufactured by a market that assembled, displayed, and sent him forth as an exemplary producer, this particular American manufacturer feels himself drawn into a swamp of “grand” (republican and federalist) carcasses—the remains of the great works and workers that have gone before him.

*University of Iowa*