

## ABSTRACT

### CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION: NATION, RACE, AND THE INVENTION OF THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE, 1830-1915

Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, Doctor of Philosophy, 2003

Dissertation Directed by Professor James B. Gilbert, Department of History

*Cultural Reconstruction* asks: How did the U.S. develop a national culture simultaneously unified and fractured by race? The little-examined history of American magazines offers a vital clue. The dissertation's first part demonstrates how post-Jacksonian American culturists, deeply disturbed by the divisive partisanship of "male" politics, turned to the "female" culture of sentimentality with the hope of creating a coherent and inclusive nation. These culturists believed a nationally circulating magazine would be the medium of that culture. This belief derived from the wide success of the penny press revolution of the 1830s. Cutting against the traditional reading of the penny press, *Cultural Reconstruction* claims that newspapers were a major proponent of sentimentality but were barred from creating a national audience by their intense local

appeal. Antebellum magazinists, from Edgar Allen Poe to James Russell Lowell, attempted to adapt the sentimental worldview of the penny press to a national audience, but were frustrated by a series of cultural rifts expressed chiefly in gendered terms. Part two of the dissertation examines how the post–Civil War magazine furthered the project of sentimentality and became the leading medium of national culture. Responding to the 1870s collapse of Political Reconstruction, editors such as Richard Watson Gilder at the *Century* employed a series of innovative aesthetic strategies—greater realism, local color, and regional dialect—believing they were creating a cultural panorama of American life. But this project of reconstruction was riven by two fundamentally conflicting visions of American identity: the regional versus the racial. The dissertation explores correspondence between Northern magazinists and white and black Southern authors (George Washington Cable, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Thomas Nelson Page) to reveal how race won out: Northern editors helped invent and popularize “Southern” memories of the Old South and the Civil War. In the process, the magazines nationalized white Southern conceptions of racial separation and prepared the way for the explosive nationwide reaction to the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. *Cultural Reconstruction* shows how twentieth-century American national unity was paradoxically bound up in racial division.

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THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE, 1830-1915

by

Reynolds J. Scott-Childress

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Advisory Committee:

Professor James B. Gilbert, Chair  
Professor Elsa Barkley Brown  
Professor Gary Gerstle  
Professor David Grimsted  
Professor Carla Peterson

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## Introduction

### **Forgetting the Magazine: The Birth of a National Culture**

*The Birth of a Nation* is the minotaur of race in the labyrinth of American popular culture. Hailed as the greatest movie ever made and as the founding moment of American cinema, D.W. Griffith's 1915 movie has also been reviled by multiple commentators, critics, and historians down to the present day as a vicious racist diatribe. So gnarled are these two elements of criticism that they frequently appear not only in a single critic's work, but sometimes within the space of a single paragraph and even within a single sentence. Commentators have grappled with the seemingly intractable problem of explaining why this technological and aesthetic marvel, this big bang of American popular culture, had to be polluted by the grisly fantasy of the founding of the Ku Klux Klan to avenge the suicide of a young white Southern girl escaping from a renegade black Union Army soldier. But in attempting to make sense of the movie, contemporary critics and latter-day historians, oddly, have severely limited their search for understanding to two individuals associated with the movie. They either blame director Griffith as a militant, unreconstructed Southerner, or they absolve him (and thereby secure his place as the founder of American cinema) by blaming the radical Southern racist Thomas Dixon, Jr., the author of the book and play on which Griffith based the second half of the movie.

Neither strategy has been very successful. Those who vindicate Griffith have had to perform a wide variety of rhetorical contortions. They have absolved Griffith by excusing his "unconscious racism." Or they have posited that he was not responsible for

the film's "pernicious... detachable content." Or they have claimed that Griffith at least modified "the exaggerations of a foolish and incompetent writer, Thomas Dixon, Jr." Or they have histrionically slammed Dixon: "*Birth of a Nation* is pure Dixon, all Dixon!"<sup>1</sup> Those critics and historians who excoriate Griffith have sought the origins of the story in his personal history. Claiming that great directors are the sole creators of their films, this latter school of criticism has dug into Griffith's Kentucky youth, mucked about in his relationship with his Confederate-veteran father, and scrounged around in his love life to divine the psycho-sexual complexes that impelled him to glorify the KKK's defense of white Southern womanhood. In other words, historians and critics have intensively focused on the minotaur of the movie and its creator without considering the cultural labyrinth which they inhabited.

To some extent this is due to the vast achievement of Griffith's virtual invention of the modern cinema. Consider the awe of James Agee, a usually circumspect critic: "To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art; and to realize that this is all the work of one man." But the minotaur did not build the labyrinth he inhabited.

The themes and figures that seem, due to the new technological medium of film, so fresh in *The Birth of a Nation* were in fact quite well-established long before 1915. Critics and historians have had a hard time seeing this because the medium that established these themes and figures in American culture has been largely invisible from historical sight. The seeds of *The Birth of a Nation* were actually planted seven decades earlier with the advent of the American magazine.

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<sup>1</sup>Everett Carter, "Cultural History Written with Lightning: The Significance of *The Birth of a Nation*," *American Quarterly* 12 (1960): 347-57, reprinted in Fred Silva, ed., *Focus on "The Birth of a Nation"* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971): 141; Fred Silva, "Introduction," in *Focus on "The Birth of a Nation,"* 7; John Hope Franklin, "'Birth of a Nation'—Propaganda as History," *Massachusetts Review* 20 (1979): 422.

In the 1840s, a growing coterie of American nationalists became exceedingly anxious over the fate of the country. Young America, Boston and Cambridge intellectuals, Southern Loco-foco Democrats, and literary Whigs argued whether the nation was on the verge of collapse because it had developed no culture of its own. Despondent over the state of American books and newspapers, they formulated grand plans to invent the magazine as a medium through which they could forge a unique national culture. The goal of this dissertation is to explain how their dreams became the nightmare of *The Birth of a Nation*.

### **Discovering the Magazine**

Long before *The Birth of a Nation*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had offered a completely different vision of the potential for race relations in the South. It pointed, albeit in a confused way, to the possibility of black and white cooperation in the formation of a post-emancipation culture. As significant as this possibility was for American literature and life, it was also an integral moment in the development of the magazine as the medium of national culture.

*Huck* began his literary life as a series of excerpts in a magazine. So too did such realist novels as Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and James's *The Bostonians*. Not only did all three of these works first appear as serials in a magazine, installments of each appeared in a single issue of one magazine, the *Century*. Bernard DeVoto called this issue of the *Century* the moment when "American journalism attained its highest reach."<sup>2</sup> Yet, while some critics have echoed that sentiment, none has dared consider the ramifications of the periodical production of American literature.

Literary scholars have long been prejudiced in favor of the novel form. Take the case of even so astute a critic as Amy Kaplan, in her *The Social Construction of American*

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<sup>2</sup>Cited in Kenneth H. Eble, *Old Clemens and W.D.H.: The Story of a Remarkable Friendship* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 157.



*Realism*. There she spends a chapter on Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, which revolves around the founding of a magazine, without considering the fact that the novel first appeared in serial form in a magazine. For Kaplan, the novel is about the city as a site of threatening social change. If, however, one reconceives the site of the novel's own production, recognizing how it was embedded in the magazine medium, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* takes on a different significance. Howells, a former magazine editor, was exploring the late nineteenth-century American magazine as the medium through which millions of Americans imagined their national community. The community at the heart of *Hazard* is the one that is founding the magazine, not the city at large. Howells's novel, then, is about modes of seeing society and the invention and production of those modes. *Hazard* drew back the curtain of representation to show how nineteenth-century American culture was created in magazines.

Cultural and journalism scholars have not been any more interested in the American magazine than literary scholars. They have lavished attention on the history of the book and the newspaper, but where is the history of the magazine? Nationally circulating magazines were the country's first medium of mass cultural communication but have rarely been examined as such. By 1880, American magazines were more popular than newspapers or books. Twice as many Americans bought monthly magazines as bought daily newspapers. Magazines also had a longer appeal than newspapers.<sup>3</sup> Where dailies became obsolete by the next morning's sunrise, Americans treated magazines more like books, keeping and reading them for longer periods and often binding them in book form. Few books sold more than 2,000 copies, while magazines such as *Harper's* and the *Century* each reached 200,000 homes *every month*. The social and cultural impact of this vast circulation has never been gauged. The history of the book, for all its

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<sup>3</sup>According to the 1880 census, monthly magazine circulation was 8,139,881 per issue, while daily newspaper circulation was 3,566,395 per issue (S.N.D. North, *History and Present Condition of the Newspaper and Periodical Press of the United States* [Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1883], 187, 191)

innovative attention to bound volumes, has been virtually silent on magazines. Similarly, in the last twenty-five years less than 1% of articles in *Journalism Quarterly* and *Communications Abstracts* have considered the history of American magazines.<sup>4</sup>

The vast numbers of magazine readers in the postbellum years would seem to be enough in themselves to merit detailed and sustained attention from cultural historians. Yet rarely has anyone stopped to examine how these great archives of culture were built, who built them, and what they might reveal—as a cultural form, not simply as a carpetbag for literary and historical texts—about the American nation after the Civil War. Theaters, parades, public monuments, fraternal organizations, museums, and world’s fairs—these and other cultural phenomena of the nineteenth century have received much attention from cultural historians. They have been periodized, contextualized, and explained in multiple fashions. The American general magazine—arguably the most important medium for bringing all of these phenomena into American’s homes—has received comparatively little examination as a site for the production and dissemination of American culture and the formation of national and personal identity.

To a great extent this historiographical desert is the product of one man: Frank Luther Mott. His magisterial, five-volume history of the American magazine, written in the 1930s under the Progressive aegis Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., has formed such a high wall of scholarship at the border of that desert that later historians have felt little need to scale it for a vision of what might lie beyond. Mott’s is an institutionally insular history. He discussed changes in magazine practices, circulation rates, the sorts of themes popular in magazine articles and fiction different eras, but did not place the magazine as a cultural institution in its social context. He did not examine magazines as a mode of

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<sup>4</sup>David Abrahamson, “Introduction,” in *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995), xviii. Abrahamson notes that, of the articles received by *Journalism Quarterly* in the twenty years between 1975 and 1995, only 6% were about the magazine, and half of these were content analyses of current magazines. Of the remaining 3%, he observes in a footnote, only 22% of these were historical in nature. That is, of the only 0.66% of the articles received by *JQ* concerned the history of the magazine.

communication, or as a social and cultural practice, linked up to the historical contingencies of the various periods of the American past. His work is a compendium, for the most part, of magazine facts and oddments, a sort of *Golden Bough* of periodical lore.

The greatest damage Mott inflicted on the postbellum magazines was to lightly label the best of them as “aristocratic.”<sup>5</sup> This label has been enough to scare off historians interested in the magazines of the later nineteenth century from treading into that territory. Those who have examined nineteenth century magazines have tended to start in 1890. These historians, interested in the origins of modern mass society, mass consumption, and commodity culture have not been concerned to modify Mott’s labeling. Mott’s work is highly descriptive, but it should not be accepted at face value. There are moments, to be sure, when *Harper’s* and the *Century* printed “aristocratic” themes and even portrayed themselves in a high culture light. But to characterize the magazines in their totality in these terms is to miss the fact that they were increasingly popular in their day. Moreover, it masks the rich, helter skelter, complex development of the American general magazine as a cultural form between 1830 and 1880. To ignore this development is akin to examining the history of American political institutions without reference to political parties simply because they are not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution.

There has been a trickle of magazine history over the last twenty-five years.<sup>6</sup> Several works on individual magazines have appeared. Arthur John’s 1981 history of the *Century* magazine was the first scholarly volume dedicated to a single periodical. Ellery Sedgwick’s 1994 examination of the *Atlantic Monthly* in light of the ideology of Yankee

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<sup>5</sup>Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 4: 1885-1905 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 2.

<sup>6</sup>John Tebbel has written two works on magazine history, *The American Magazine: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn, 1969) and (with Mary Ellen Waller-Zuckerman) *The Magazine in America, 1741–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). But both of these are Mott redux, employing the same point of view and many of the same anecdotes without attribution. Neither of Tebbel’s books provides citations of sources.

humanism was the first work to attempt to understand a magazine in cultural and ideological terms. Patricia Okker has ably explored the cultural project of an important periodical editor, Sarah Josepha Hale of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Isabelle Lehuu has written on popular periodicals of the antebellum era as an expression of Bakhtinian carnival. There is one journal devoted to the American magazine (*American Periodicals*), but it is an annual and tends to examine the literature in magazines rather than the medium itself. Belasco and Smith's 1995 collection of essays is the sole edited volume on American periodical literature. But it too focuses on literature that happens to have appeared in periodicals rather than books, and so pay scant attention to the historically contingent development of the magazine as a social institution or cultural practice. Some work on book publishers has incidentally provided magazine history, particularly Eugene Exman's two 1960s works on the Harper brothers' publishing house and Eugene Greenspan's biography of George Palmer Putnam. The British journal, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, has done excellent work in excavating the history of nineteenth-century British periodicals; but in over thirty volumes American magazines receive no more than a few scattered references—even though both the *Century* and *Harper's* were two of the major selling magazines *in Britain* in the 1880s and '90s.<sup>7</sup>

This same inattention has passed down to historians. Magazine histories, such as Mott's, recognize some of the ideological issues the post-Jacksonian magazinists argued over. They do not, however, examine the problem the magazine faced *as a genre*. Because they have already accepted that a periodical magazine medium existed, they do not attempt to examine either the magazine's historical genesis or the deep problem of definition that magazinists struggled with in this period. This inattention has led to two serious historiographical problems. First, magazine histories occur, for the most part, in a

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<sup>7</sup>There was one special issue on American periodicals, but the works discussed were obscure ones, with nothing on the most important magazines of the day. On the *Century's* sales in England, see Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner's Monthly and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 139.

vacuum. There is little or no reference to the development of other communications media. The generic definitions that early magazinists flailed over thus remain invisible because historians have simply assumed that something called the magazine existed since Benjamin Franklin's first plans for one. The history of magazines then becomes little more than a genealogy: This magazine published and died, then that magazine appeared and died. Yet, this genealogy has been an odd one that has shown little interest in genetic links.

This leads to the second problem: This historiography has prevented the close inspection of other influences on the American magazine, both of competing media and different sorts of magazine. Thus, the Civil War stands as a vast historical break: Somehow, within a few years after the war the American magazine became the most admired periodical in the world. Many recent histories that involve the magazine seem to have no conception that the American magazine even existed before the Civil War. The strategies adopted, generic boundaries defined, and topics covered are thus portrayed as effete buffers erected by frightened aristocrats against a seething mass of popular culture.

This dissertation approaches the development of the American magazine from a different vantage point. The vital strategies, boundaries, and topics that informed the postbellum magazine were the product of divisive culture wars fought in the post-Jacksonian era. "Culturists" battled over the form American nationalism should and could take.<sup>8</sup> They argued whether the nation could invent and produce a nurturing democratic culture to rival the bitter democratic politics of the day. And they struggled

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<sup>8</sup>I am adapting the term "culturist" from its biological roots to suggest all those who were engaged at a professional or even a concerted amateur level in the production of culture or the argumentation over its nature and mission. The term "intellectual" carries too much social baggage and seems to refer chiefly to an elite fraction that rigorously sets itself off from popular aspects of culture. In the antebellum period, figures like Elihu Burritt, the "learned blacksmith," and Orestes Brownson, the son of a poor New England farmer who yet became an essayist and political activist, were too numerous to suggest that the early magazinists were set off against popular culture. I will use "culturist" also to designate those who turned from politics as a means for influencing public debates over the best way to orient American life toward the future. Culturists were not averse to politics, although they often saw it as an embarrassing means for grappling with societal issues.

over the problem of delineating the cultural repertoire on which the American magazine would define itself.

This dissertation follows in the path blazed by Jane Tompkins in her seminal work, *Sensational Designs*.<sup>9</sup> Tompkins's goal was to reconceptualize the study of literary texts as "attempts to redefine the social order." Her work was crucial to the project of recovering the centrality of female literary work to the development of nineteenth-century American culture. It is important here to emphasize the gendered term "female" rather than the sexed term "woman." Running through much of Tompkins's book is the tantalizing suggestion that this female literary work was the product not only of women, but of men as well.<sup>10</sup> (Some critics of the day were completely at home with this idea. W.A. Jones, for instance, included both Hawthorne and Irving in a laudatory review of "Female Novelists." He approvingly listed them among the members of a "race of masculine writers, with feminine delicacy of mind," and likened them to the canonical sentimental writers, Richardson, Marivaux, Mackenzie, and Goldsmith.<sup>11</sup>) Where Tompkins collapsed the distinction of sentimental literature as exclusively female, *Cultural Reconstruction* is aimed at doing the same thing for the medium of the magazine.

Newspapers have traditionally been conceived of as the medium of American political expression. Books and novels have traditionally been considered the expression of American culture. But magazines have largely been written off as a form of "female" expression unworthy of study.<sup>12</sup> Magazines were the expression of female culture. But

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<sup>9</sup>Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g., her discussion of Hawthorne as a sentimental novel.

<sup>11</sup>W.A. Jones, "Female Novelists" [1844], in *Character and Criticisms* (New York: Westervelt, 1857), 198; see also Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 17.

<sup>12</sup>Throughout this dissertation I use the terms male and female following Joan Scott: "gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" ("Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 45). In the nineteenth-century debate over the nature of culture, "female" culture was often juxtaposed against "male" politics. Culture encompassed such purportedly female traits as the family, nurturing social relationships, emotionality, intuitive knowledge, and an appreciation for beauty. Male politics, by contrast,

the aim of the 1840s nationalists was to use that culture to reform “male” politics as well as sectarian religious movements and regional parochialism. America in the 1840s was convulsed by seemingly endless religious sectarianism, political partisanship, and cultural warfare between cities and regions. For the early magazinists, all these dilemmas resolved into a single, seemingly intractable problem: how to foster national cohesion in a country built on the socially fragmenting ideology of democratic individualism. Recoiling from the bitter public divisiveness and eventual Civil War wrought by male politics, these magazine editors turned to the female culture of sentimentality, administered through the magazine, as their means for creating national community—but not in its female guise. The culture of sentimentality could not take wide hold until it had run the gauntlet of an intense battle over the gendered nature of American culture. The site of this battle was the American magazine.

Just as the nineteenth-century magazine has long been invisible, so sentiment has been a term of opprobrium in American historiography and literary scholarship. Chiefly marginalized as the interminable women’s novel overflowing with gushes of tears, sentiment has also been ridiculed as little more than a moral pretense for devouring salacious material.<sup>13</sup> For numerous critics, the very popularity of the sentimental has served as a key proof for the hypocrisy of the rising middle class of the nineteenth century. It has also been the weapon with which male critics attacked female projects of reform and the novel as well.

A number of recent works, however, has begun to challenge this myopic conception of sentimentality. These works span a variety of fields, from Garry Wills’s excavation of sentimentality in Thomas Jefferson’s thought to Cathy Davidson’s

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was characterized by individualism, competition, reason, and an aversion to aesthetics. Throughout the dissertation, the terms male and female do not refer to sexed bodies. When this is necessary, the terms “man/men” and “woman/women” are used.

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 57.

unfolding of the social critique at the heart of sentimental fiction to a series of recent works that have demonstrated how men were intimately involved in the antebellum project of sentimentality.<sup>14</sup> Such works have begun to reveal that, far from a marginal aspect of American life, sentimentality deeply conditioned the nineteenth century American moral vision. Deriving from the Scottish common sense philosophy (which dominated American colleges in the antebellum era), as well as the early novel, sentimentality was at the heart of numerous social reform and cultural movements, from Abolitionism to Washingtonian temperance to the New England literary renaissance. Reveling in a faith in love, child nurture, and sympathy for people in need, sentimentality provided Americans with a communitarian ideal formulated around the legitimating trope of the family.

In spite of this communitarian ideal, sentimentality itself became the subject of a wide-ranging cultural battle. For men sentimentalists, the new culture offered a way to

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<sup>14</sup>The rediscovery of sentimentality and its vital place in nineteenth-century America has been Perhaps the beginning was historian Ann Douglass's diatribe against sentimentality, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977). Jane Tompkins countered by attempting to reclaim it as a literature worth studying (*Sensational Designs*). Since then, the exploration of sentimentality has largely been carried on by literary scholars. See Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Gregg Camfield, *Sentimental Twain: Samuel Clemens in the Maze of Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Mary Chapman & Glenn Hendler, eds., *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On European contexts for the culture of sentimentality, see John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); Terry Eagleton, "The Law of the Heart: Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke," in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990); David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Among the few historians who have delved into sentimentality are Lewis Perry (*Intellectual Life in America: A History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989]), Garry Wills (*Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* [New York: Vintage, 1979]), and John Corrigan (*Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002]). There is also Waldstreicher's odd, and seemingly unsupported claim that the high-water mark for sentimentality in America was the 1780s. All of his sources are about British subjects, and as far as I can tell, do not make any claims about the development of sentimentality in America (*In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997], 74).



counter the power of male politics to destroy the public sphere. But in a world strictly segregated by gender, men sentimentalists faced a daunting problem: How could they make sentimentality appeal to other men? Rejecting the public world of politics, they sought instead to fashion an alternative public. They attempted to create a national communications medium that could appeal to men as easily as women. This goal, however, met a practical barrier. In the 1830s, the magazine medium was dominated by magazines aimed almost exclusively at women readers, magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*. In the contest that ensued, between men sentimentalists and magazines aimed at women, the American magazine, as a medium of sentimental national culture was formed.

This dissertation examines the mutually influencing evolutions of the magazine as a national communications medium, its informing ideology of national culture based on sentiment, and its key content, the depiction of “real” American life. The underlying assumption is that content is not “detachable” from its medium, as D.W. Griffith’s critics have argued. The American magazine went through three distinct periods from its inception in the 1840s to its final form in the early twentieth century. A period of argument over the magazine’s mission in the 1840s gave way the standardization of the magazine’s form by the 1870s. From the 1870s through the 1890s, magazines such as *Scribner's Monthly* and *Harper's* established the basic content of the magazines. In the 1890s, a third generation of magazines, following the basic form and content already established, lowered the cost of magazines and radically extended their audiences.

The study of magazines is hampered by two central problems that flow into and out of each other. The problem of defining the American magazine makes it difficult to settle the problem of just who its audience is. I am using the term “American magazine” in a specific way to refer to a particular genre of magazine. Throughout this dissertation the focus is on those magazines that attempt to find and produce a national audience. The American magazine does not include such periodicals as professional or academic

journals, or quarterly reviews of literature and culture, or magazines aimed at specific occupational or cultural groups, such as farmers and children. But even this somewhat narrowed focus still leaves the daunting question of defining the American magazine. The definition will become clearer through the course of the dissertation. Here, however, some initial answers to the question of definition will set the stage.

The first answer (historically and interpretatively) is that it is not a newspaper. The American magazine came about as a response to the penny press revolution of the 1830s. It sought different audiences, a different cultural sensibility, a different rate of periodicity, and a different mission from the daily paper. A second answer is that the magazine made its function as a medium of social imagination more evident than the newspaper (which is equally a medium of social imagination, claims to objectivity notwithstanding). This aspect is suggested by the basic formula of the magazine's mission: "the Mind t'improve and yet amuse," as one early magazine put it. The third answer is suggested in the preceding formula by the word "amuse." The early magazines were a female medium of culture set in opposition to the male media of daily newspaper and book. The American magazine was, in great measure, an attempt to mesh together aspects of these two other periodical forms into a single work that balanced the best attributes of male and female media.

These answers, and the history of the magazine itself, suggest how important the concept of culture was in the development of the medium. The word culture presents numerous difficulties for a study such as the present one. By the beginning of the nineteenth, the word "culture" had taken on two connotations that historians often depict in oppositional terms.<sup>15</sup> First, culture came to mean the study of humans in all their practices and beliefs: thus the discipline of anthropology. Second, culture came to mean

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<sup>15</sup>Williams, *Keywords*(New York: Oxford, 1976), 76. Levine also attempts to define culture, but in a much less systematic way than Williams (*Highbrow/Lowbrow* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988], 224-25).

the conscious production of literary, artistic, political, historical, and intellectual works that signified cultural uniqueness, a people's cultural difference from other peoples: a nationalism.

These two threads of culture, anthropology and nationalism, are essential elements of the historical changes that took place between 1830 and 1915. In the past twenty years, historians such as Lawrence Levine and Alan Trachtenberg have conceived the conscious development of culture in the Gilded Age as the separating out of a high art from the popular art of the masses in the name of upper class cohesion and legitimation. Methodologically, they have tended to focus on the products of "highbrow" culture while paying less attention to the lives of the producers of that culture. They have also tended to examine a particular handful of literary authors as the key sources for explicating Gilded Age American culture, men such as Henry Adams, Henry James, W.D. Howells. In this frame of reference, elites have "unconscious" vested interests in fostering ever wider cultural gaps between themselves and those below them.<sup>16</sup> "Genteel" culture thus became "normative," in Trachtenberg's words, "setting special value on certain styles of art or patterns of behavior."<sup>17</sup> And this normative sense of culture then is set over against the conception of culture as "the 'way of life' of a society or group."<sup>18</sup> The dilemma for the cultural historian of the Gilded Age in particular, and popular culture in general, is how to conceptualize a culture that makes the invention of culture one of its key organizing principles. The resolution Levine and Trachtenberg reached, seems to have been to adopt a hegemonic model in which elites forge a normative culture and the masses live life the way it really is.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Levine, *Highbrow*, 227.

<sup>17</sup>Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of American: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 143.

<sup>18</sup>Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 143.

<sup>19</sup>In making this distinction, Levine and Trachtenberg join a long list of scholars who reenact the Romantic attack on civilization in the name of culture. As a result they tend to see working-class culture as "natural" and thereby true in some intrinsic sense and middle- and upper-class culture as "invented" and thereby false. To make this distinction a priori, however, is to downplay the fluidity of American society and to preclude examining the ways power runs through the entire society.

If we reframe the way we look at the interrelations between the two depictions of culture, however, a different picture emerges. Instead of setting these two approaches to culture, anthropology and nationalism, as separate opposing discourses, this dissertation will view them as informing and involving one another. To hold the two threads of culture artificially apart is to lose sight of the fluidity both of the definitions themselves but also of the lives of many of those men and women who, over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, had to negotiate a highly fluid social environment. Methodologically, this means that I will use the subjects of this dissertation as informants who can explain the fluid nature of nineteenth century class and national cohesion. That is, I do not assume that these men and women were always members of a particular class, committed without reservation to defending that class's interests. I do not disagree with Levine and Trachtenberg that Americans created sharply distinct cultural categories of artistic production by the turn into the twentieth century. But the reasons why this occurred cannot be adequately teased out by simply assuming the existence of class positions. Showing how these class positions developed reveals as much about American culture as comparing the cultural productions of highbrow and lowbrow.

The processes of class and national cohesion in the nineteenth century have remained something of a mystery. Raymond Williams's study of communications speaks directly to the problem of discovering just what it was that linked individuals to American society in late nineteenth century. Williams defined communications as "the institutions and forms in which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted and received," emphasizing that communication is always a "*process* of transmission and reception" whether at the individual or at the mass level.<sup>20</sup> His point in emphasizing process was to

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<sup>20</sup>Raymond Williams, *Communications*, rev. ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 17. Levine also claims to understand that culture is a process (*Highbrow*, 33); but he loses sight of what that process is for: it is precisely a process of making order out of the chaos of the world. This order is necessary to production of meaning out of which human action can take place. For Levine, the "urge" to order is a mutant gene driving cultural hegemony, rather than an essential aspect of human meaning making and social formation. Levine clearly recognizes that such order is fought over, but by laying too strong an emphasis on the divide

critique the mid-twentieth-century debate over mass culture. It was aimed as much at leftist concerns over the eradication of the one-dimensional man's potential for freedom and political contestation as at rightist fears that mass exposure to all the best that has been thought and said would diminish high culture while not benefiting the hoi polloi. The false opposition of mass versus high culture, which was the basis for most of this debate, Williams argued, was the product of old habits of seeing society as the product only of political and economic concerns. Without comprehending communications on its own terms or as a fundamental aspect of social formation and cultural practice, historians can see communications only as an extension of politics or economy (i.e., merely as a form of social control, as with Levine, or of commodity distribution as a means of political hegemony, as with Richard Ohmann).<sup>21</sup>

Communication is not a secondary effect of political or economic experience.<sup>22</sup> It is rather “the struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate, [and] is a central and necessary part of our humanity. This struggle is not begun, at second hand, *after* reality has occurred. It is, in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed. What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication.” “Society,” Williams succinctly put it, echoing John Dewey, “is a form of communication.” Once this notion of society as a form of communication is grasped, communication becomes a historical question of social power, subject to periodization in terms of rejected, developing, conflicting, and disappearing communication models, cultural practices, and social

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between highbrow and lowbrow, he undermines his ability to find adequate terms of cause for the development of these distinctions in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>21</sup>Williams, *Communications*, 19. “We degrade art and learning by supposing that they are always second-hand activities: that there is life, and then afterwards there are these accounts of it. Our commonest political error is the assumption that power—the capacity to govern other men—is the reality of the whole social process, and so the only context of politics. Our commonest economic error is the assumption that production and trade are our only practical activities, and that they require no other human justification or scrutiny” (19). The implications for political practice are clear: “The emphasis on communications asserts, as a matter of experience, that men and societies are not confined to relations of power, property, and prod. Their relations in describing, learning, persuading, and exchanging are seen as equally fundamental” (18).

<sup>22</sup>This paragraph is based on Williams, *Communications*, 18-20; emphasis added.

institutions related to the “struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate.”<sup>23</sup> In a society that was notoriously decentralized like the post-Civil War U.S., this struggle took place largely outside the sorts of social institutions that European scholars have emphasized as the terrain where contests over the formation of reality, of cultural taste, and social distinction took place.<sup>24</sup> The weak U.S. state confined itself to a narrow range of economic activities, and the American educational system, cobbled together by a patchwork of state administrations, was too disjointed to wield any widespread cultural power.<sup>25</sup> The cultural medium that tied the disparate sections of the U.S. together in the late nineteenth century was the American magazine.

This reorientation toward the idea of national culture and the magazine’s role in creating it makes it possible to address the question: What problem was the general magazine an answer to? The magazinists who first argued over the medium’s nature and those who guided it to increasing popularity in the postbellum years saw the magazine as a way of reconstructing American culture. Their two missions were related but took place in radically different historical contexts. For the antebellum magazinists, American culture was a tool for reconstructing the public sphere that had been fragmented by politics. That they were unable to formulate a widely popular magazine reveals their inability to locate the source and limits of American cultural sovereignty. The Civil War settled the issue of political sovereignty, and in a sense also settled the issue of cultural sovereignty since the South’s ability to produce its own culture (through magazines and

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<sup>23</sup>The echo is from Dewey’s dictum that “Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication” (*Democracy and Education* [1916], 5; emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup>The reference here is to Pierre Bourdieu’s work, which some American scholars have rather uncritically applied to the U.S. and, without taking into account the grave differences in federal centralization have subsequently misread the power of the federal state in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup>See Skowronek, Part 2: “State Building as Patchwork, 1877-1900,” in *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). He does not directly address the administration of education in the U.S., but focuses on the federal government’s failure to engage in substantive administrative reform of civil government, the army, and business.

books) was decimated. But the very victory of the North presented postbellum magazinists with a problem every bit as complex as that which faced their antebellum counterparts.

Although New York had arisen as the nation's cultural capital—both in terms of ideology and actual production—the divisiveness of Political Reconstruction left culturists deeply concerned that the nation was still in imminent danger of collapse. They responded with a paradoxical project for creating a unified national culture. Based on their understanding of European theorists of cultural nationalism, such as De Staël, Herder, and Taine, they encouraged the development of intensely *regional* literary cultures across the nation. There were other options. They could have inculcated a literature aimed at forging a stable class structure throughout the country. They could have kindled a historical literature that created national heroes from the colonial and Revolutionary eras, long before the nation had divided. They could have incited a xenophobic literature that brought Americans closer together by creating shared external enemies. But instead of these options, the postbellum magazinists set out to make the concept of regional difference the basis of a unified national culture.

This project of Cultural Reconstruction would have massive implications for the twentieth century. The magazines that popularized it unleashed new ways of looking at American society. To make literature resemble the nation, they fostered literary realism. To make realism sound like the nation, they created numerous regional dialects. The different regions, reading of themselves in mythological garb, responded. But the results of Cultural Reconstruction were far different for those the magazinists had hoped for in the beginning. By the end of the nineteenth century, the regionalist project had failed to create an all-inclusive, democratic culture. Rather, it contorted—because of the magazinists' inability to see the world beyond their own experience—into a congeries of class and racial divisions. The political divisiveness the antebellum magazinists sought to

quell, now suffused throughout the culture. Its harrowing expression was *The Birth of a Nation*.

### **Plan of the Dissertation**

*Cultural Reconstruction* examines the invention of the nineteenth-century American magazine as an expression of sentimental culture and the medium's key project: the invention of Southern literary culture. The chapters in Part I trace the ways sentimentality entered into the American periodical media and the ways magazinists attempted to use it to formulate a national culture. Chapter 1 lays out the general problem of national culture by examining the ways the invention of the telegraph revealed the country's severe lack of the defining attributes of nation. With no stable borders, no unique language, no mystical past, no organic tie to the land, no centralized state apparatus, no biological ethnicity, and no national cultural or social institutions to speak of, many Americans feared they lived in a country that was incapable of achieving the status of nation. The Civil War seemed to be a natural outcome of such a debilitated national condition.

The project for a national American magazine came about in response to the rise of the penny press in the 1830s. Chapter 2 examines the cultural sources for that rise and the increasing necessity urban Americans felt for imagining their society beyond the immediacy of face-to-face communications. Sentimentality was instrumental in shaping this urban social imagination. The penny press pioneers, in looking for types of stories to distinguish themselves from the religious, political, and mercantile press, adapted plot lines from sentimental novels and reform tracts. But ultimately, the penny papers proved to be poor vehicles for the sentimental imagination. Even as they arose in revolt against "politics as usual," their acutely commercial nature, their close identity with particular cities, and the traditional link between the newspaper press and politics left them incapable of transforming sentimentality into a unifying national culture.



In the 1840s, culturists believed sentimentality, disseminated through the magazine, could counterbalance the destructiveness of male politics. Chapter 3 first shows how they attempted to link sentimentality to the American nationalist project by laying the groundwork for a democratic literary criticism. It then documents how their dreams of creating a nationally circulating magazine foundered due to a confused commercial context, administrative and technological limitations, and the magazinists' own intense rivalries. These rivalries pitted city against city and male magazinists against the "ladies' magazines" (even as most of these male magazinists made their literary living by writing for the "ladies").

Part II examines the history of the American magazine from its first successful ventures in the 1850s to the early twentieth century. Chapter 4 describes the advent of the magazines that established the basic template of the American magazine, *Harper's* and *Scribner's* in particular. *Harper's*, although it introduced many of the features that would become essential to the American magazine, ironically seemed at first to spell the end of the nationalist dream. Founded chiefly as a means for advertising the books of its parent firm, the magazine eschewed American literature in favor of cheaper British works. *Scribner's* challenged the older magazine after the Civil War by discovering and promoting American authors. The ensuing competition between these two rivals established the American magazine as a popular medium.

To claim that these magazines were popular runs against a long tradition of historical criticism. Even before Mott inaccurately described the editors of the postwar American magazines as aristocrats, George Santayana had assigned them to a special circle of cultural hell he dubbed the "genteel tradition." The "genteel" editors, Santayana sneered in 1911, "floated gently in the back-water" of tradition. They were symbolized by the colonial mansion while the modern America was a sky-scraper. "The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper," he wrote, "the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion." Then, he made plain the gender implications of his analogy: "The one is the

sphere of the American man; the other... of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.”<sup>26</sup> These implications have informed historians’ distaste for late nineteenth century magazinists ever since. A legion of critics have condemned these men as “custodians” (the favorite image) of an outmoded, repressive, elite culture. Larzer Ziff derided them as “guardians” of the “sanctuaries of culture” where one breathed “an air of high-class mediocrity.” They published “sentimental banality” rather than “virile or obstreperous material.”<sup>27</sup> John Tomsich jeered that the genteel editors and their poet-colleagues “often verge[d] on the hysterical and paranoid.”<sup>28</sup> Thomas Bender castigated one editor, Richard Watson Gilder, for being a “prim and prissy... custodian of genteel culture.”<sup>29</sup> (There is something to these charges. It is at times difficult to take Gilder seriously when he requests his fellow Union soldiers, angry over a Rebel attack, to refrain from swearing, or when he responds to the charge of American prudery by saying “this is the price we pay for being, on the whole, the decentest nation on the face of the globe.”)

This body of criticism is misguided. It assumes, rather than proves, that there existed a bona fide middle class, that magazines were an unproblematic expression of that class, and that the editors of the major postbellum American magazines were products of that class. The relation of these magazines to class formation is far more complicated than such critics have understood. All too often the negative judgments levied against editors such as Gilder are based on the opinions of post-1900 contemporaries or the reading of their late-life memoirs. A strikingly different picture emerges when their lives are examined from the beginning on rather than from the end. These editors were not, for

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<sup>26</sup>Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 39-40.

<sup>27</sup>Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking, 1966), 120-28.

<sup>28</sup>John Tomsich, *A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1971), 141.

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 214. Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace go Bender one better and call Gilder “the prissiest... custodian of genteel culture” (*Gotham: A History of New York City* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 1166).

the most part, born and raised in comfortable socioeconomic circumstances. Their lives mirror the fundamental changes in American society that began to tease a middle-class consciousness out of earlier, more amorphous conceptions of group belonging. But historians cannot simply assume this middle-class consciousness; its existence and nature must be proved.

Robert Wiebe's classic *Search for Order*, for instance, describes a great movement from relatively isolated "island" communities scattered across the country to a fully integrated social network in the years between 1877 and 1920. In the extreme fluidity of this movement, Wiebe noted, "countless citizens in towns and cities across the land sensed that something fundamental was happening to their lives...."<sup>30</sup> Americans ached to "look beyond the day's work and try to locate themselves in a national system."<sup>31</sup> Members of a vaguely defined "class," were somehow drawn together by a "similar spirit, similar experiences and even similar aspirations... far more often than chance alone could have explained."<sup>32</sup> This last phrase leads one to expect an explanation of what brought these similarities about, but Wiebe is at a loss to provide it. At best, he hints at the existence of some vague force working through the new professional organizations and the railroads.<sup>33</sup> If, as Wiebe claims, the completion of the first four transcontinental railroads "gave the sudden impression of an integrated country,"<sup>34</sup> it was not because all, or even a very large percentage of Americans rode on them. It was because Americans *read* about them in their periodicals.

For Lawrence Levine, culture happens in the theater, the opera, concert halls, and museums. But in his history of the emergence of "cultural hierarchy" in late nineteenth century America, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, he largely ignores the medium through which the

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<sup>30</sup>Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), 44.

<sup>31</sup>Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 112.

<sup>32</sup>Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 113

<sup>33</sup>By the end of the period, Wiebe adds a third force ordering American society, "an emerging bureaucratic system" (*Search for Order*, 293).

<sup>34</sup>Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 11.

changes he detects became part of American social practice by entering the homes of millions of Americans: the magazine. And there is a great cost: Levine is unable to offer any significant causes for the changes he describes. He can only suggest murky shifts in language, style, and taste, and some ineffable urge for order and social control as the forces responsible for creating cultural hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> Nor can he imagine how Americans beyond the narrow high-brow elite might have accepted, adopted, and even deeply appreciated some of the cultural works produced in the Gilded Age.<sup>36</sup> The division between high and low that informs Levine's book seems to demand it. As "society" for Wiebe is an inferred, lurking force dissolving the nation's island communities and casting a spell of middle-class unity, so "culture" is for Levine a disembodied force mystically altering the perceptions and interests of millions of Americans.<sup>37</sup> Where Wiebe ignores magazines altogether, Levine sees them as little more than agents of a new elite's desire for social control.<sup>38</sup>

To grasp the mutual development of culture and its most potent medium of expression, Chapter 5 sketches the lives of three of the most important editors of the period, all from *Scribner's*: Josiah Gilbert Holland, Richard Watson Gilder, and Robert Underwood Johnson. The goal here is two-fold. First, examining their lives demonstrates the gradual awareness of class that enfolded them completely only relatively

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<sup>35</sup>The phrase "changes in language, style, and taste" is at p. 49, "urge" is at 206. While offering teasers throughout the first chapter that he will demonstrate a cause for the changes in Shakespearian theatre in the U.S., Levine eventually admits he has not done so: "Whatever the causes..." (79).

<sup>36</sup>When museum director Luigi di Cesnola banishes a plumber from the Metropolitan Museum of Art because he has entered the museum in his soiled work clothes, Levine focuses on di Cesnola. Rather than following the working man down the Met's steps and into the society beyond in hopes of discovering what this laborer and others like him hoped to experience or how they heard about or read about the spectacle inside, Levine banishes the fellow from his text almost as brusquely as di Cesnola banished him from the galleries. This poor fellow has similarly been banished from books by Stephen Conn, Sven Beckert, and Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar.

<sup>37</sup>Levine's use of the passive voice at key moments in his argument underscores this impression.

<sup>38</sup>He argues, for example, that the "champions of culture in the late nineteenth century... were convinced that maintaining and disseminating pure art, literature, and drama would create *a force for moral order* and help to halt the chaos threatening to envelop the nation" (*Highbrow*, 200; emphasis added). Levine is aware that his argument strays in this direction and he explicitly attempts to downplay social control as the sole interest elites had in the imposition of high brow culture. But the thrust of the entire book is to show elites carving out and then protecting a social order conducive to their elite status.

late in life. Second, these three editors serve as cultural informants with special expertise in the meaning of culture for the millions of Americans who read their magazine and others like it. The stories of these three editors are strikingly similar to those of the other leading editors of the day (there are some significant differences, of course). Their lives, set in tandem with growing audience of their magazines, seem to bolster Stuart Blumin's contention that a national middle-class consciousness began to coalesce only at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

Chapter 6 examines the ways the *Scribner's* editors attempted to make the American magazine into a democratic medium. They sought to challenge the restrictive and conservative tastes of an earlier era that condemned literature and the novel in particular as vicious influences. To do this they adopted several strategies. They offered a wide variety of material in each issue, attempting to make their appeal "polysemic."<sup>40</sup> They divided novels into serial installments, made the short story into a preeminent American literary form, and wove fictional stories with nonfictional representations of the world. They advanced new modes of writing and representation. They championed realism and made it speak a panoply of regional dialects.

Dialect was vital to the project Cultural Reconstruction. Through dialect, editors such as Gilder and Johnson attempted to give the project the legitimacy of the human sciences. But it was a dangerous gamble. On the one hand, dialect seemed ideally suited to the project of Cultural Reconstruction. It was an immediate and visible sign of regional and cultural differences. It could suggest an author's inclusion in a subculture,

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<sup>39</sup>Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Paul Johnson, Mary Ryan, and others have argued that the middle class had achieved recognizable form in the antebellum era. But these claims seem to work only in terms of particular locales. The formation of a national middle class is harder to pinpoint. One of the reasons has been historians' inattention to the nationally circulating American magazine. See, e.g., Paul E. Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>40</sup>On the necessity of making a "mass" medium appeal to a wide variety of audiences, see John Fiske, "Television: Polysemy and Popularity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 3 (December 1986): 391-408.

or at least an intimate knowledge of it. Anxious to reflect the myriad regional and increasingly ethnic subcultures of the nation, magazine editors poured out dialect: Louisiana Creoles, New England Yankees, New York Jews, Irish and German immigrants, Georgia “crackers,” Midwest Hoosiers, California frontiersmen, white Southern planters, and plantation “darkeys.” On the other hand, dialect raised difficult questions of authenticity and cultural authority. Any use of dialect had to contend with its long history of abuse, particularly in the blackface minstrel theater. In the end, the racism of black dialect would win over the editors’ intentions.

The project of Cultural Reconstruction was fascinated by the “Negro” voice and sought to incorporate it into the great American chorus. The project’s editors avidly sought out authors who claimed to render black speech into written dialect. Chapter 7 examines case studies of two white Southern authors who achieved fame by writing dialect for the *Century* magazine. Their stories, however, are quite different and reveal the instabilities of regionalism as a means for achieving national culture. George Washington Cable became an ardent advocate for the civil rights of African Americans. Through the 1880s, the *Century* editors supported him and published two of the era’s most outspoken condemnations of the South’s emerging system of racial segregation. But controversy threatened the magazine’s regional appeal. Thus, mistakenly believing that Southern racial conservatism no longer presented a risk to national union, the *Century* editors published Thomas Nelson Page’s literary sketch, “Marse Chan.” The story, told almost completely in a purported “Negro” dialect, was an instant sensation, not only in the South but across the nation. Former abolitionists admired the pathos of the story which made an aging black freedman nostalgically describe the supposedly halcyon days of plantation slavery “befo’ de wah.” But the story proved to be a literary Trojan horse. While the editors thought they were publishing a piece of regional local color, the story contaminated the magazine with overt racism. The *Century* editors yielded to temptation, for the national, transregional popularity of “Marse Chan” led them to request

Page to write a North-South story about sectional reconciliation. “Meh Lady” was a love tale in which a Union officer, distraught over the devastation his army wreaked on Virginia, weds a nearly destitute Southern belle. This story, too, was told in Negro dialect. Soon, the *Century* editors made Negro dialect an integral voice in American literature, publishing Joel Chandler Harris, Harry Stillwell Edwards, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and numerous other white purveyors of the offensive speech. In the process, the *Century* and the magazines that emulated it, nationalized the white South’s supremacist ideology.

If white Southerners seemed foreign to Northern readers, black Southerners were even more so. For the editors who directed the project of Cultural Reconstruction, there was never any question of whether to include blacks in their project; their fealty to the memory of Abraham Lincoln demanded it. But the question of black inclusion crashed headlong into the culture of sentimentality in the 1890s. Historians have been at a loss to explain why Northern whites abandoned the freedmen in last decades of the nineteenth century. Even David Blight’s recent, magisterial chronicle of Civil War memory relies almost exclusively on the classic, yet empty explanation for that whites’ loss of interest in the plight of Southern blacks: They got tired. As Blight says of one correspondent who cut short a reminiscence of the war before discussing “the negro problem,” he had “simply run out of time for or interest in the place of race in Civil War remembrance.”<sup>41</sup> This dissertation offers a different interpretation.

Chapters 7 and 8 indicate the immense cultural dilemma that faced the freed people in the last decades of the nineteenth century by showing how the white culture of sentimentality turned against them. Sentimentality’s motive force is sympathy for those who have suffered. The Culture of Reconstruction, in popularizing Page’s South, transformed the locus of victimhood in Civil War memory from Southern blacks to

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<sup>41</sup>David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 193.

Southern whites. By 1890, Gilder could ignore the antebellum horror of black slavery and proclaim that in the Civil War the white South had lost everything Northerners held dear, family, property, livelihood. A new school of historians, led by William A. Dunning, re-enforced this belief by condemning military occupation during Reconstruction. Ironically, Northern whites no longer considered blacks to be victims, for as the recipients of freedom, their new status was the greatest victory of all. The white South won in the contest to receive Northern sympathy.

Chapter 8 examines the virtually impossible task black authors faced in combating this cultural onslaught and in reclaiming their voice from the white purveyors of dialect. Two case studies examine the literary negotiations between the *Century* editors and Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt over the range of black culture in the dominant monthlies. Dunbar's and Chesnutt's attempts at gaining a foothold in the *Century* were fraught with ambiguities and ambivalence precisely because they were dubious of the magazine's stereotypes.

The decades following the Civil War were highly unsettled for the freedmen. Issues of class formation, of relations to the democratic polity, and of the development of an American identity clashed and intermingled as the former slaves and blacks in general searched for a discourse in which to express a sense of national belonging. Negroes joined the throngs of Americans who were "becoming American" and wondered how best to anchor their Americanness: whether through regional, national, racial, or other figures. Even into the early years of Jim Crow segregation in the 1890s, Blacks and those Americans who considered the problem of the freedmen, could view inclusion in the American polity and perhaps even the culture as a real possibility. Building on Frederick Douglass's demand for blacks' "complete incorporation in the American body politic,"<sup>42</sup> African American authors in the two decades following Reconstruction stressed the

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<sup>42</sup>Cited in Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 94.



affinities of middle-class Negroes and whites. Howard University professor Andrew Hilyer, for instance, remarked in 1892 that Negro and white Americans “speak the same language, read and enjoy the same literature, venerate and supplicate the same Deity, have the same religion, the same ideals, the same standards of taste, the same manners and customs, love the same country and worship the same flag.”<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that Negroes did not increasingly see themselves in racial terms. But it is to see the logic of choosing that form of group classification and to show how a sense of “raceness” arose in response to white attacks. The resulting rhetoric of racial pride Negroes employed in the 1880s and ’90s was concerned far more with allegiance to the political *cause* of the eradication of color prejudice than with allegiance to a uniquely separate race *culture*.<sup>44</sup> And as John Patterson Sampson argued in an 1881 Hampton Institute pamphlet, “The colored people stand together on the subject of rights by a natural sympathy, *through the prejudice against them*.... When these rights are no longer an issue, they will disband and unite on subjects of similar tastes and interests, without regard to race identity.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, a work like the Mutual United Brotherhood of Liberty’s 1889 *Justice and Jurisprudence* demonstrated that even the militant Negro bourgeoisie was deeply committed to the ideals of American citizenship, and used those ideals to criticize the turn of courts and public opinion away from the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>46</sup>

Dunbar and Chesnutt dreamed of writing for magazines like the *Century* precisely because they wanted to claim a place in the middle class. But the dialectical voice that preceded them imposed a demeaning burden. They wrestled with ways of presenting a black subjectivity that did not dissolve in the medium of print into a story that could be

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<sup>43</sup>Cited in Dickson D. Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>44</sup>Bruce, *Black American Writing*, 38.

<sup>45</sup>Cited in Bruce, *Black American Writing*, 38-39.

<sup>46</sup>Jon-Christian Suggs, “Romanticism, Law, and the Suppression of African-American Citizenship,” in Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism* (New York: Garland, 1999), 67.

read as whiteface. Both attempted in different ways to speak through black dialect, to reclaim it, and to transform its references. But the attempt was ultimately fruitless. The advent of a cheaper form of the American magazine swept away such attempts, brought authors such as Page to a wider white audience and prepared the final, destructive way, as Chapter 9 discusses, for *The Birth of a Nation*.

In the end, this dissertation is an attempt to grapple with a conundrum of cultural production that *The Birth of a Nation* had already forgotten long ago: John Oakes, in his history of the antebellum South's master class, asserted without reservation that "The slaveholders did not leave the union in the name of southern nationalism."<sup>47</sup> And Robert Penn Warren claimed with equal assurance that "only at the moment when Lee handed Grant his sword was the Confederacy born."<sup>48</sup> How do we make sense of these contradictions, in which the Southerners did not set out to build a nation in 1861, yet Northerners worked so hard to produce a Southern regional culture after the Confederacy's defeat? What does it mean for American national culture that two of the dominant cultural figures with which Americans attempt to forge their national identity are the "South" and the "Negro"? The answer lies in the ways Americans of the late nineteenth century attempted to make sense of their culture by reading, in monthly magazines, the "South" and the "Negro" as figures through which they could imagine their American identity by thinking race.

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<sup>47</sup>James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveowners* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 241.

<sup>48</sup>Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 15.

PART I

The Invention of Sentimental

Public Culture

## Chapter 1

### **The Fall of the Millennial Nation: The Failure of the Atlantic Cable and the Coming of the Civil War**

The invention of the telegraph in 1844 created a cultural crisis of American community. On the one hand, it offered Americans new ways for thinking about national community. The telegraph seemed to do away with the problem of communication across the vast American landscape. It was the technological solution to the problem of democracy and geographical distance raised by Madison in Federalist 10. Telegraphic communication could both extend American dominion and bring the people of the nation together in one vast community. But, on the other hand, this very possibility of “annihilating time and space”—a favorite contemporary phrase—severely crippled the ideal of a specific, unique, and identifiable American nation.<sup>1</sup> For if the telegraph could span the continent, then why not the world? This question fed directly into cultural notions of the American nation’s millennial role in the world. From the surging ideology of Manifest Destiny to the brief success of the Cyrus Field’s Atlantic telegraph cable in 1858, the millennium seemed at hand. The apocalyptic imagery of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was swept away.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The source of the phrase is Alexander Pope’s “Martinus Scribberus On the Art of Sinking in Poetry,” ch. 11: “Ye Gods! annihilate but time and space/and make two lovers happy.” Caldwell quoted the passage in 1832 as “annihilate both time and space,/and make two lovers happy” (*New England Magazine* 2 [1832]: 294). Thereafter, it became a virtual mantra of telegraph commentary.

<sup>2</sup>On apocalyptic imagery in the antebellum era that focuses on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other anti-slavery works, see Terrie Dopp Aamodt, *Righteous Armies, Holy Cause: Apocalyptic Imagery and the Civil War*

The nation's cities in particular swelled with great hope in the summer of 1858 as citizens, tied into the American telegraphic network through their daily newspapers, intently followed Field's progress. In the midst of this excitement, a cresting religious revival broke on the nation's cities, particularly in the Northeast and West. Unlike any awakening the nation had known before, this one bypassed professional evangelists and ministers. Clerks, bookkeepers, and shopkeepers formed union prayer meetings and banished the sectarianism that had riven American religion for decades. In the midst of these two swelling events, the idea of nation seemed suddenly constricting. A universal community of all mankind seemed within reach.

This chapter has two goals. The first is to open up the problem of society and communications. The telegraph seemed, in its first years, to offer immense new possibilities for community. The fact that it employed electricity stimulated myriad metaphors of the apparatus as a potential nervous system for cities, nations, even all of humanity. The seemingly endless possibilities, however, suggested the difficulty Americans had in determining *practical* applications for the telegraph. The newspapers, virtually alone, seemed to have found a use for it. But with Field's bringing of the cable across the Atlantic in 1858, the metaphors took on the tenor of prophecy.

But the very success of the Atlantic cable in 1858 demonstrated the fragility of American nationalism in the era before the Civil War. The second goal of this chapter is to examine the dreams and ideals of community Americans attached to the telegraph to suggest the problems of antebellum nationalism that American magazinists attempted to solve in a different medium. Ideological issues of group boundaries clashed with problems of slow and

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(Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002). This is the flip side of optimistic millennialism, that is, an earthly cataclysm rather than heaven on earth. See also Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), and James Moorehead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978).

inconsistent communication. The very principle of communication became a point of sharp cultural focus.

Society, as Raymond Williams has suggested, is a form of communications. Before the invention of the telegraph, the terms “communication” and “transportation” were virtually synonymous. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, “communications” was the general term used to refer to the physical movement of goods and news via wagons, canal boats, and steam locomotives.<sup>3</sup> Communication traveled only as fast as the humans riding over the roads, waterways, or rails. Before the advent of the electronic telegraph, news had a viscerally human quality. It was literal communication: humans communing as they passed news from mouth to ear, from hand to hand. The telegraph severed the connection of humans from the dissemination of the news to the extent that messages sent over its wires traveled far faster than any human could.

A community formed by telegraphic communication would no longer rely on a chain of human interactions through space. As one contemporary put it, the electric telegraph involved not the “modification of matter but the transmission of thought.”<sup>4</sup> Some Americans hoped the telegraph would become the medium of the national mind, the nation’s electric destiny. These were the terms Samuel Morse used in his initial application to Congress to subsidize long-distance telegraph lines. Morse predicted that soon “the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those *nerves* which are to diffuse, with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land; making, in fact, one *neighborhood* of the whole country.”<sup>5</sup> The telegraph, Morse claimed, would stimulate national connectedness.

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<sup>3</sup>Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 62.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 17.

<sup>5</sup>This and the following quote are cited in Daniel Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 11.

The rhetoric of national connectedness was not new in 1844. Since the Nullification Crisis in the early 1830s, a number of American politicians and intellectuals had sought for a way to produce an organic sense of national connectedness.<sup>6</sup> The liberal immigrant professor of politics, Francis Lieber, argued in 1838 that organic nationalism was a bulwark against the disintegrative ideology of state rights. “Nationalization,” he proposed, “is the diffusion of the same life-blood through a system of arteries, throughout a body politic, indeed, it is the growing of the body politic as such, morally, and thoroughly cemented, out of a mass, otherwise uncemented.”<sup>7</sup> Such thinking meshed well with the Whig search for some basis for communitarian ideals that might effect a “natural” connection among Americans living at a distance from one another.<sup>8</sup> But organicists such as Lieber and the Whigs could do little more than theorize in the 1830s and early ’40s. They could provide no mechanism for this cultural “cementing.”

The railroad had seemed to some Americans of the mid 1840s to provide such a mechanism. The Whig Daniel Webster, for one, exclaimed that “in the history of human inventions there is hardly one so well calculated as that of the railroads to equalize the condition of men.” Speaking in August 1847 at the opening of a railroad line that ran through his native New Hampshire, Webster noted that because both rich and poor could easily travel the rails, “[m]en are thus brought together as neighbors and acquaintances....” Yet Webster was hardly thinking in national terms. The extended “neighborhood” Webster

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<sup>6</sup>Merle Curti long ago noted that Americans began to talk about their nation in organic metaphors in the years following the Civil War (Curti, *Roots of American Loyalty* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1946], 176). For the economist Robert Ellis Thompson writing in 1875, for instance, the American nation was literally “an organism, a political body animated by a life of its own.” This rhetoric, however, clearly antedates the Civil War. The postbellum organic rhetoric of American nationalism became more noticeable as American nationalism because the basic tenets of American national culture were not forged, for a variety of reasons that will become clear in this and the following chapters, until after the Civil War. On a different conception of “organic nationalism” that emphasizes nationalism’s relation to the market and the state, rather than to images of blood and spirit, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 314.

<sup>7</sup>Lieber, *Manual of Political Ethics*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1838-39), 497, cited in Curti, “Francis Lieber and Nationalism,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* (April 1941): 271.

<sup>8</sup>Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), 31.

imagined was little more than an enlarged village. These new neighbors and acquaintances lived only within two hundred miles of one another.<sup>9</sup> No matter the railroad's power as a symbol of American know-how, it could not do the work of national connection before the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> The railroad was too severely attenuated by technological limitations (no railroad line extended beyond a few hundred miles) and the hodge-podge system of track gauges was too irrational.

The telegraph, however, raised hopes that organic community might be possible.<sup>11</sup> In the first reactions to the new device, much of the rhetoric seemed to be taken straight from Lieber.<sup>12</sup> The Philadelphia *North American*, in 1847 (the same year Webster extolled the railroad), enthused: "This extraordinary discovery [of the telegraph] leaves, in our country, no elsewhere—it is all *here*: It makes the pulse at the extremity beat—throb for throb in the instant—with that at the heart.... In short, it will make the whole land one being—a touch

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<sup>9</sup>Webster, "Opening of the Northern Railroad to Grafton, N. H. [28 August 1847]," in *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols., vol. 4: *Speeches on Various Occasions* (Boston: Little Brown, 1903), 109. Leo Marx inaccurately paraphrases Webster in his attempt to make Webster's vision seem more national than it in fact was. Leo Marx's paraphrase has Webster saying that the "railroad breaks down regional barriers" and holds out "the promise of national unity" (Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1964], 210).

<sup>10</sup>The term "know-how" was coined in 1838. The telegraph would later, beginning in the 1850s, play an integral role in extending railroad lines. Only after the Civil War, did railroad companies agree on a standard track gauge. These two developments produced the massive and technologically efficient railroad system of the Gilded Age. (Business efficiency was of course a different matter.)

<sup>11</sup>The rhetoric of the telegraph about to be quoted sounds similar to that associated with the train in mid nineteenth-century American literature that Leo Marx termed the "technological sublime." It has the same "overblown, exclamatory tone" that Marx attributed to the "intoxicated feeling of unlimited possibility" that Americans increasingly felt in the decades between 1830 and 1860 (Marx, *Machine*, 195, 198). And indeed the language stems from many of the same sources. But Marx's term elides the difference between the machines of transportation and the media of communication mentioned above. Marx's emphasis on the railroad as the central, even the sole, agent of the technological sublime neglects to consider how it was the telegraph that made the railroad possible. Much historiography similarly pays little attention to the telegraph. In part, this is because the telegraph is far more difficult to romanticize than the railroad. The railroad is powerful, mechanical, hard-charging. It gives riders the experience of speed. It is the site of human activity. But the telegraph is a relatively simple device and is visible only as a set of wires, humming perhaps, but otherwise immanently nonstimulative to the adventurous imagination.

<sup>12</sup>Czitrom (*Media and the American Mind*, 11) claims that in the wake of the discovery of telegraph's effects one finds for the first time "the repeated use of organic metaphor and symbol to describe how modern communications would change American life." His emphasis here on the technology leading to the symbol is not quite accurate. By the 1830s there was clearly in process a search for an organic connection, beyond the contract model of the founders, for imagining and positing the social connection among Americans. Indeed, it is this earlier rhetoric of union in search of a mechanism that demonstrates the cultural basis for conceptualizing the new technology.



upon any part will—like wires—vibrate over all.” Five years later, William F. Channing, a civil engineer, drew out the organic implications of wires vibrating throughout a body: “the Electric Telegraph is to constitute the nervous system of organized societies... its functions are analogous to the sensitive nerves of the animal system.”<sup>13</sup> Edward Everett Hale called the telegraph “a sensitive nerve,... the brain-like organism, as it were, wherewith the mind and heart of the [human] race shall have instant and universal expression.”<sup>14</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, in September 1861, observed that “the whole nation is now penetrated by the ramifications of a network of iron nerves which flash sensation and volition backward and forward to and from towns and provinces as if they were organs and limbs of a single living body.” Holmes sensed that this “perpetual intercommunication, joined to the power of instantaneous action, keeps us always alive with excitement.”<sup>15</sup>

Americans conjured a torrent of dreams of community stimulated by this excitement. In 1852, Donald Mann, writing in his new magazine, *American Telegraph*, made the political implications of the telegraph for Americans even more succinct. He was astonished at how “nearly all our vast and wide-spread populations are bound together, not merely by political institutions but by a Telegraph and Lightning-like affinity of intelligence and sympathy, that renders us emphatically ‘ONE PEOPLE’ everywhere.” An early chronicler of the telegraph, Laurence Turnbull, wrote glowingly of how the telegraph would someday span the continent to re-render the faint citizens of far-off California as immediate and vivid Americans: “Although separated from us by thousands of miles of distance, they will be again restored to us in feeling, and still present to our affections, through the help of the noiseless tenant of the wilderness.”

These ecstatic evocations of the nation as a single people were less nationalistic bombast than desperate sociopolitical prayers. Submerged in these references to “the whole

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<sup>13</sup>This and the following quotes are cited in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 11.

<sup>14</sup>Hale, “The Union of the Hemispheres,” *Christian Examiner* 65 (September 1858): 276.

<sup>15</sup>Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Bread and the Newspaper,” *Atlantic* 8 (September 1861): 348.

nation” and “one people” were severe religious, political, and social dislocations that threatened to sunder whatever unity the country’s political institutions had once offered.<sup>16</sup> The three antebellum decades were a period of intense economic, religious, political, and social fragmentation. Bitter sectarianism in religion, irresolvable sectional tensions over slavery, the collapse of traditional workplace regimens in the feverish transition to industrialization, as well as proliferating and crashing political parties left many Americans fearing for the future of the union. Old notions of republican virtue seemed no longer to provide a basis for understanding a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing world. Conflict abounded: Lieber wrote in the shadow of the South Carolina nullification crisis. The infusion of Irish immigrants reinforced Americans’ knowledge that they lacked a common blood. A fanatical band of Southern intellectuals, in the 1850s, fabricated a separate race of Americans, “Anglo-Normans,” to distinguish themselves from other Americans.<sup>17</sup> They sought to create a separate nation for themselves, free of Holmes and his Yankee brethren. The nineteenth century revivification of cotton production in the South had created there a distinctly different labor system from that of the North. All those American emigrants in California represented a conundrum of national territory. Industrialization, urbanization, the market “revolution,” workers’ increasingly radical democratic ideology, and the incessant westering of European Americans continually destabilized the possibility of establishing a “whole nation” of “one people.”

Any talk of the U.S. being a single people or becoming a unified nation flew in the face of a vertiginous cultural dilemma. The U.S. lacked virtually all of the key components that mark a nation: a mythic past, a “natural” and bounded territory, a biological ethnicity, a strong federal state, a language of its own, or the social and cultural institutions that can

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<sup>16</sup>On these social dislocations see, Sellers, *Market Revolution*; and Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup>Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 164. The term had existed as early as the 1820s, but it was only in the 1850s, as with so many other markers of a separate Southernness, that the term became common.

create a sense of organic unity. American nationalism had always been stunted by the republic's coming into being virtually *ex nihilo*. This had made the divination of the nation's future extremely difficult to gauge. The sudden appearance of America, the historical fact of its being discovered and settled by foreigners, also meant that the country could not, literally, ground itself. It was a transplanted culture—more political ideal than natural growth of the soil. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the western and much of the northern and southeastern boundaries of the U.S., as the zone of contact between the modern nation-state and the vestiges of pre-statist and colonial societies, were still exceedingly fluid. The border between Canada and Maine was not settled until the 1840s. New states were added at the rate of three per decade between 1830 and 1860. Many Americans began to despair that the U.S. had a single, discernible character.

When the telegraph allowed Americans to envision a new form of community, through the late 1840s and '50s, it provided the basis for a new optimism. The telegraph served as the organizing metaphor through which religious and political Americans alike could make manifest their communitarian sentiments. Those Americans who grasped the communitarian implications of electronic communication believed it would be a panacea that would mend the social fractures. But this panacea had a hidden cost: It carried no "natural" connotation of a specifically *American* community. Electricity was something utterly alien to political institutions, it was mysterious and frightening and awesome, beyond the powers of man to adequately comprehend.

Mystery, fear, and awe connoted a set of beliefs with which Americans were quite familiar. Such connotations quickly stuck to the telegraph after its successful implementation. They suggested an explanatory framework through which Americans could divine the worldly meaning of the telegraph: America's supposed millennial role in history.

The telegraph quickly became the proof of America's millennial role in world history. It appeared to be the fulfillment of solemn promises made ages before: It was the harbinger of Christ's immanent victory. The telegraph was often referred to as a miracle that wove

together the spiritual and the material.<sup>18</sup> The itinerant nature of the Protestant faiths in America had long served to link the idea of movement in space with the act of redemption. Traveling along roads, canals, and railroads, carrying God's word, was a key means of communicating the faith and spreading the Lord's dominion.<sup>19</sup> Each of these modes of travel, however, required great amounts of time and emphasized human action and communication through space.

The telegraph represented an entirely new form of spiritual communication. The railroad was, for all its power and speed, bound to the earth. Where the train was visible, graspable, materially driven by wood and steam, the electricity that coursed through the telegraph was invisible, unknowable, and yet immensely, divinely powerful.<sup>20</sup> "The wonderful mystery of the lightning lines," one minister testified, would soon make manifest "the grand moral effects of instantaneous communication."<sup>21</sup> Reverend Ezra Gannett of Boston likened electricity to God's awful power to give and to take away, characterizing electricity as both "the swift winged messenger of destruction" and "the vital energy of material creation."<sup>22</sup> Preacher Gardner Spring exulted that America, through God's new medium, was on the verge of a spiritual bounty because "thought now travels by steam and electric wires."<sup>23</sup> The instantaneity of electrical communication, for these Americans, made the telegraph the very voice of God, the medium through which He would speak soothing words of universal union. Unlike the proselytizing disciples, the telegraphic message traveled at the speed of revelation.

Ostensibly secular writers could hardly write about the telegraph without sounding spiritual. A commentator in the New York *Times* marveled at the increasing powers of the

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<sup>18</sup>Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 10.

<sup>19</sup>Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 16.

<sup>20</sup>As Ambrose Bierce later sarcastically phrased it, electricity was "the power that causes all natural phenomena not known to be caused by something else." Bierce, *Devil's Dictionary*, cited in David Nye, *Electrifying America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 156.

<sup>21</sup>Cited in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 10.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 9.

<sup>23</sup>Cited in Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 207; and Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1965), 48.

telegraph: “Piercing so the secret of nature, man makes himself symmetrical with nature. Penetrating to the working of creative energies, he becomes himself a creator.”<sup>24</sup> Dangerous talk—for this was a shy step away from making man *the* creator. The Cincinnati *Daily Chronicle* piously reported that the telegraph would “facilitat[e] Human Intercourse and produc[e] Harmony among Men and Nations... [I]t may be regarded as an important element in Moral Progress.”<sup>25</sup> The miracle of telegraphic communication could also make the spiritual writer sound oddly secular. Minister Gannett seemed to forget his piety, wondering aloud to his congregation, “Who shall describe the circle with which human ability must confine itself?” The telegraph had inaugurated a new era, he preached, in which “mind asserts its superiority over matter, not in a spirit of self-admiration, but for the sake of enriching life.” The moment was portentous, as historian Perry Miller once noted: “Neither Gannett nor his congregation realized that if he were correct, then by the same token they had come to the close of an epoch in religious thought as well as in metaphysics.”<sup>26</sup>

The invention of the telegraph altered American political ideas of the role of the nation-state. The notion that America was to lead the world into an earthly heaven in the end of time had long been a part of American rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> But the divorce of church and state and the fundamentally a-religious nature of American political institutions had prevented this millennialism from entering fully into American political discourse. A rapprochement of sorts between the political and religious occurred through the early nineteenth century as these millennial beliefs sloughed off much of their theological and supernatural trappings.<sup>28</sup> In the process, a tepid millennialism sometimes mingled with the ideology of democracy. But this mixture was inert. It lacked a motive force, something that could reveal its presence and power in this world, something that could operationalize the idea in matter—until 1845.

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<sup>24</sup>Cited in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 10.

<sup>25</sup>Richard B. Du Boff, “The Telegraph in Nineteenth-Century America: Technology and Monopoly,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 571.

<sup>26</sup>Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 308.

<sup>27</sup>Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, ch. 3; Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, ch.1.

<sup>28</sup>Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 58-79.

“What happened,” wrote historian Ernest Tuveson, “was that the possibilities for territorial expansion in the years just after the Texan revolt came into a kind of chemical combination with the general Protestant theology of the millennium, and with the already old idea of the destined greatness and messianic mission of ‘Columbia.’”<sup>29</sup> The electrical spark that galvanized this chemical combination was the telegraph. The reaction produced was the doctrine of manifest destiny.

The telegraph could spur panegyrics to manifest destiny among Whigs and Democrats alike. Three months after Webster had celebrated the new New Hampshire railroad, he offered another homily in honor of the new railroad. But now the telegraph quickly overshadowed the meek power of the railroad to make neighbors. It led Webster to consider a far vaster neighborhood. Providence, it seemed, was working through man to stitch humanity together with telegraph wire: “Shakespeare’s fairy said he would ‘Put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes.’ Professor Morse has done more than that; his girdle requires far less time for its traverse.”<sup>30</sup> The new means of communication sent Webster into a religious reverie: “We see the ocean navigated and the solid land traversed by steam power, and intelligence communicated by electricity. Truly this is almost a miraculous era. What is before us no one can say, what is upon us no one can hardly realize. The progress of the age has almost outstripped human belief; the future is known only to Omniscience.”<sup>31</sup> Webster’s swerve toward the role of Providence is all the more remarkable considering that one of the arch opponents of his Whig party, the ardent Loco Foco Democrat John O’Sullivan, had coined the phrase “manifest destiny” to refer to just such a divine plan two years earlier.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 125.

<sup>30</sup>Webster, “Opening of Railroad to Lebanon, N.H.,” in *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols., vol. 4: *Speeches on Various Occasions* (Boston: Little Brown, 1903), 117. Something of the dislocation that the telegraph introduced is evident in Webster’s next sentences: “In fact, if one were to send a despatch from Boston by the telegraph at twelve o’clock, it would reach St. Louis at a quarter before twelve. This is what may be called doing a thing in less than no time.”

<sup>31</sup>Marx (*Machine*, 214) quotes much of this same passage, but excised the section on the telegraph.

<sup>32</sup>Marx sees something similar, although he does not make an explicit link to O’Sullivan: “Everything, [Webster] says, is working out according to a divine plan” (*Machine*, 214).

Manifest destiny attempted to make a virtue of America's lack of the basic criteria for nationhood. It was in part the invention for America of that primal basis requisite for nationhood: the misty origins of a people in a mythic past. To locate such origins, O'Sullivan and other destinarians shifted the basis of corporate national identity from biology to politics. America was the embodiment of an idea: democracy. This idea, according to the advocates of manifest destiny, had been born eons before in the far Teutonic regions of the Caucasus (and in some variations even in the earliest civilizations of Asia).<sup>33</sup> The embrace of democracy as the organizing principle of American unity, however, undermined as much as it ever underscored an American nationalism. The very idea of a past that stretched back through other nation-states forced believers in manifest destiny to jettison any coherent argument for the biological unity of the American people.<sup>34</sup> The stretch back to Teutonic origins made America's mythic past, from the outset, transnational.<sup>35</sup> As the bearers of the Teutonic heritage of democracy, neither Americans nor Europeans could rest in place. The search for a mythic past made it imperative to envision America as but one moment in the realization of the evolving democratic ideal. Democracy was a westering organism of uncertain shape, but definite history, a shark requiring constant motion to sustain itself. Yet this westering was not "American" expansionism per se (as many historians have depicted it). For neither O'Sullivan nor that seminal proponent of manifest destiny Thomas Hart Benton conceived that the new settlements of the west would inevitably become part of the American state. In fact, they had great doubts. The very rhetoric of democracy precluded U.S.

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<sup>33</sup>Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 90-91, 287.

<sup>34</sup>The shrill claims to Anglo-Saxonism reveal that the biological element of manifest destiny was always incoherent. No theorist stepped forward to even make a serious effort at making the case.

<sup>35</sup>Stephanson is essentially correct when he notes that the American nationalism of the 1840s pushed "the notion that the United States was a sacred-secular *project*, a mission of world historical significance in a designated continental setting of no determinate limits" (28). He is, further, correct in observing that this nationalism clearly "differed markedly from the European model which emerged simultaneously." But for the wrong reasons. Stephanson claims that, where the European model emphasized a glorious and homogeneous ancestry and ancient traditions tied to ancestral lands, the American nationalism of manifest destiny eschewed thought of the past. But the whole sense of American westering as a "project" was based in its continuity with historical forces that originated in the most ancient traditions of mankind, traditions that were continually working themselves toward the creation of the democratic individual.

imperialism over any far western settlements. Both O’Sullivan and Benton held that they could easily become independent republics. The right of these new settlements “to independence,” declared O’Sullivan, “will be the natural right of self-government, belonging to any community strong enough to maintain it—distinct in position, origin and character, and free from any mutual obligations of membership of a common political body.... [T]here can be no doubt that the population now fast streaming down upon California will both assert and maintain that independence. *Whether they will then attach themselves to our Union or not, is not to be predicted with any certainty.*”<sup>36</sup> Benton, equally, conceived of the new settlements’ destiny to be the creation of “a new republic,” separate though allied with the U.S.<sup>37</sup>

Some demagogues, to be sure, tried to force the ideology of manifest destiny into a racial mold by touting the nation’s democratic institutions and economy as the special product of Anglo-Saxon genius. But this very gesture only served to underscore the transnationality of manifest destiny. The reference to an Anglo-Saxon past, whatever else it did, placed the U.S. in a great stream of democratic history that spanned its national borders. Manifest destiny could never become exclusively an ideology of a single people; virtually by definition it called for porous boundaries to the nation, if not an open society. O’Sullivan saw westward movement as a force pulling not only Northeastern Americans but also European immigrants into the westward flow of history. And O’Sullivan should know: He himself was not Anglo-Saxon. He was, rather, an Irishman who had emigrated westward from the Celtic fringe.<sup>38</sup> This Irishman, even though he might label the westward movement an “Anglo-Saxon emigration,” conceived it as a multiracial force.<sup>39</sup> In O’Sullivan’s pre-Mexican War thought, the emigration could incorporate Mexicans as “an integral portion of

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<sup>36</sup>O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *U.S Magazine and Democratic Review* (July/August 1845): 9; emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup>Benton cited in Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 91.

<sup>38</sup>Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, xi.

<sup>39</sup>O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” 9.



these United States at some future period.”<sup>40</sup> It could also undermine slavery and provide the place for and the means to “elevate the Negro race out of a virtually servile degradation...”<sup>41</sup> The justification of manifest destiny rested, ultimately, in its being a universally encompassing project. As a democratic ideology it had to provide opportunity to all.

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<sup>40</sup>Cited in Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 45.

<sup>41</sup>The complexities, or perhaps we should say confusions, of O’Sullivan’s conception of race and nation cannot be discussed in full here. He did want to separate blacks out from America. The annexation of Texas, and the resulting demise of slavery, he thought, would “furnish much probability of the ultimate disappearance of the negro race from our borders. The Spanish-Indian-American populations of Mexico, Central America and South America, afford the only receptacle capable of absorbing that race whenever we shall be prepared to slough it off-- to emancipate it from slavery, and (simultaneously necessary) to remove it from the midst of our own.” Interestingly, O’Sullivan lay the necessity for this separation, not directly on any innate Negro inferiority, but suggested that it was the fault of Americans for having cast Africans into slavery: “Themselves [i.e., the Spanish-Indian-Americans] already of mixed and confused blood, and free from the ‘prejudices’ which among us so insuperably forbid the social amalgamation which can alone elevate the Negro race out of a virtually servile degradation even though legally free [after emancipation]...” (“Annexation,” 7).

Manifest destiny was not ipso facto racially exclusionary. John L. O’Sullivan, for one, avoided the concept of racial exclusion, noting two other ways (besides emancipation) in which democracy demanded an open society. First, democracy was the ideology of freedom expressed through the development of independent republics in the lands west of the Mississippi. Yet, these republics were not mere outposts of American expansionism. For O’Sullivan, “Their right to independence will be the natural right of self-government belonging to any community strong enough to maintain it—distinct in position, origin and character, and free from any mutual obligations of membership of a common political body.... Whether they will then attach themselves to our Union or not, is not to be predicted with any certainty” (9). Second, the people who would populate the west were not Americans alone, but also “the emigration fast flowing... from Europe...” (7). O’Sullivan’s conceptualization of manifest destiny did not completely accept the racial justification of manifest destiny that later ideologues attempted. Even Horsman had to admit that (*Race and Manifest Destiny*, 219).

Horsman attempted to read manifest destiny as an expression of white racism. His argument is based on a false identity between Anglo-Saxonism and whiteness, that is what we would now call an ethnic category and a racial one. Horsman admitted that “for the most part, before 1815, the term Anglo-Saxon was not used to characterize the American population in any racial sense” (94; see 93 also). But this is only after he has depicted westward movement as a project of cultural regeneration “reserved for ... a homogeneous American people” (92). Horsman ends with a complete identity between the Anglo-Saxon and the white, which he would not be able to sustain if he had gone beyond the Civil War in his book. Charles Sellers follows Horsman closely in this identity of Anglo-Saxon and white (*Market Revolution*, 422-23). Matthew Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) forces a reexamination of such an identity for the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Until the turn into the twentieth century, Americans considered races to be akin to what we would now call ethnicities. This meant that race was synonymous with nation and implied a biological as well as cultural different between groups much smaller than the white, black, brown, yellow, and red races we have delineated in the twentieth century. If these champions of the “Anglo-Saxon” sometimes referred to themselves as “whites,” it was less because they considered themselves to be deeply unified with all other European groups. Consider, for instance, antipathy toward the Irish through the 1800s. See also, Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, “Introduction” and “Race, Nation, and the Rhetoric of Color: Locating Japan and China, 1870-1907,” in idem, ed., *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism* (New York: Garland, 1999).

O’Sullivan’s concept of manifest destiny was only loosely worked out. His first mention of the term is on page 5 of the “Annexation” article. But note that he offers at least four other formulations of the idea: “manifest design” (7); an “inevitable [and] most natural...” process (7-8); “fulfil[ling] the purposes of its creation” (9); and “the natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles...” (9).

Manifest destiny, as a universal project, necessitated the conquering of both time and space.<sup>42</sup> It was only a destiny if it completed the circle of historical westward movement of civilization by reaching across the Pacific to China, and only in completing that circle would it bring about the end of time. It could only come about with the advent of new forms of transportation and communication that could tie people together across great distances. The railroad was one new form. But it was the telegraph that annihilated space and time. It is thus no accident that O'Sullivan's universal vision of manifest destiny appeared less than a year after the first successful long-distance telegraph transmission. The telegraph was both the proof and the stuff of manifest destiny. O'Sullivan exclaimed that "the magnetic telegraph will enable the editors of the 'San Francisco Union,' the 'Astoria Evening Post,' or the 'Nootka Morning News' to set up in type the first half of the President's Inaugural, before the echoes of the latter half shall have died away beneath the lofty porch of the Capitol, as spoken from his lips."<sup>43</sup> The new apparatus made it possible for Americans to grasp the continent, to think in continental terms, in world terms, in millennial terms. These terms were in turn conditioned by their material link, via the telegraph, to the historically unfolding idea of democracy. (O'Sullivan's connection of the device and political discourse in his example of transmitting presidential speech was also no coincidence.)

Manifest destiny, shorn of its mid '40s political implications in regard to Texas and Mexico, passed into common belief in the 1850s.<sup>44</sup> Not that there had ever been much opposition to the basic premise.<sup>45</sup> The Sage of Concord was on record as saying that America, as it extended "to the waves of the Pacific sea," was the "last effort of the Divine

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<sup>42</sup>Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 50-51. Outside of Merk's paragraph on the railroad and the telegraph, no historian seems to have picked up on the necessity of manifest destiny's requiring new forms of communications technology to bring about the millennium.

<sup>43</sup>O'Sullivan, "Annexation," 9. And as Webster pointed out, since a transmission from the East arrived before it was sent out, the West Coast papers could, presumably, set the president's inaugural in type *before* he uttered the first word.

<sup>44</sup>Stephanson notes that even those who opposed the specifically Democratic and jingoistic formulations of manifest destiny nonetheless did so in destinarian terms (*Manifest Destiny*, 48-63).

<sup>45</sup>Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 32.

Providence in behalf of the human race.”<sup>46</sup> Even those who had specifically opposed the annexation of Mexican territory did so in destinarian terms: Their chief opposition had been to the use of arms. But then O’Sullivan himself had asserted that “Democracies must make their conquests by moral agencies [i.e., by persuasion and attraction by example]. If these are not sufficient, the conquest is robbery.”<sup>47</sup> His magazine’s support for the war with Mexico was thus as tepid as that of the rival *American Whig Review*.<sup>48</sup> The Whigs had been concerned, to be sure, that the increasing augmentation of national territory would undermine the possibility of either political control or organic ties. But their equally intense interest in economic growth led them to see that some version of manifest destiny would make possible a “deterritorialized commerce.”<sup>49</sup> Horace Greeley’s advice of 1837, urging urban workers and the poor to “Go West, young man, go forth into the country,” became increasingly enticing to his fellow Whigs. The telegraph made both organic union across vast distances and an internationally open commerce seem immanent, even desirable.

As the bitter political conflict over the war with Mexico waned, the telegraph increasingly allowed writers of various political and theological stripes to tie America’s democratic institutions to the workings of Providence to give Americans a sense of national purpose. By the mid 1850s, the telegraph was among those material innovations that had made it easy even for Americans who disagreed with the jingoistic formulations of manifest destiny to share the optimism of America’s millennial role in the world. “Frontiers and boundaries,” wrote the former Democrat Walt Whitman in 1856, “are less and less able to divide men. The modern inventions, the wholesale engines of war, the world-spreading instruments of peace, the steamship, the locomotive, the electric telegraph, the common newspaper, the cheap book, the ocean mail, are interlinking the inhabitants of the earth together as groups of one family—America standing, and for ages to stand, as the host and

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<sup>46</sup>Cited in Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 53.

<sup>47</sup>Cited in Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 45.

<sup>48</sup>Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 42, 56.

<sup>49</sup>Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 56.

champion of the same, the most welcome spectacle ever presented among nations. Everything indicates unparalleled reforms.”<sup>50</sup> Whitman believed that these American advances in transportation and communication were paving the way for a “Redeemer President of These States” who would purge the nation of the sins of political hackery and social caste. But unlike previous presidents, this president was to lead the entire world: America, for Whitman, had become the metaphorical, even literal, home of the entire world: “In both physical and political America there is *plenty of room for the whole human race; if not, more room can be provided.*”<sup>51</sup> More room can be provided—the size of the American continent pulled the world into the historical rush of democracy and simultaneously created a need for long distance communication.

Such notions were not limited to Whitman’s populism. The staid *North American Review* agreed with Whitman’s basic point: “the extent of our country and the imperative need of easy transit from the vast interior to the long range of sea-coast, have rendered this modern principle of civilization [i.e., as built on steam engines and the electric telegraph] infinitely more available here than elsewhere.”<sup>52</sup> The London *Times* said as much in 1850. Claiming that Englishmen had invented the telegraph, the *Times* was mystified that England, with its “greater wealth and equal intelligence and energy,” had not made any significant use of the telegraph as the U.S. had. The only explanation was “the enormous distances at which people live from each other in the United States” which had made a great “difficulty of traveling and of personal communication.”<sup>53</sup>

American exceptionalism was now read in geographical terms. These “enormous distances” pulled the bearers of democratic culture westward and forced Americans to create

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<sup>50</sup>Walt Whitman, “The Eighteenth Presidency,” in Clifton Joseph Furness, ed., *Walt Whitman’s Workshop* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), 112-13. This pamphlet, contrary to Whitman’s ardent hopes, seems never to have been issued.

<sup>51</sup>Walt Whitman, “The Eighteenth Presidency,” 109; emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup>“American Society,” *North American Review* 81 (July 1855): 36.

<sup>53</sup>“The Electric Telegraph in England and in America,” reprinted in *Littell’s Living Age* 27 (November 1850): 334.

the means for each to communicate with the far away all. American nationalism, even of the Whitmanesque variety, had become lost in its millennial role. American exceptionalism had become American universalism.

Through the 1850s as George Fredrickson once pointed out, the “cosmic optimism” that “the millennium... was fast approaching” gained force in American life.<sup>54</sup> Then, for a brief period in the summer of 1858, those who read the signs believed that the universal American millennium was at hand. Two gradually unfolding events seemed to be working toward one another, and their confluence caused an immense stir throughout the country. A great and unprecedented revival spread from city to city while two small ships laying the Atlantic Cable churned toward the coasts of Great Britain and North America. The material and the spiritual, the individual and the universal, all seemed about to converge.

The Great Awakening of 1857-58, one of the most important and distinct revivals in the nation’s history, was borne on the electric wires of the telegraph.<sup>55</sup> Revivals had periodically wracked the countryside for decades. These rural prayer meetings were led by evangelists usually bent on collecting souls for a particular sect or denomination. The 1857-58 revival was utterly different. It was nonsectarian, led by lay men, and concentrated in the cities, from Portland, Maine, to Omaha, Nebraska, from Detroit to Charleston, South Carolina, in small cities like Lynchburg, Virginia, and big cities like Chicago.<sup>56</sup> Drove of Americans were undergoing a conversion to unity.<sup>57</sup> Even those established churches and churchmen who were perennially suspicious of revivals, joined in this one.<sup>58</sup> Responding to

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<sup>54</sup>George Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 7; see also Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 187; Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

<sup>55</sup>Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 88. See, also, John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>56</sup>William C. Conant, *Narratives of Remarkable Conversions and Revival Incidents*, introduction by Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 367-80, 440.

<sup>57</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 227. The revival was not universally inclusive, particularly in Boston where the Irish and blacks were not made to feel welcome. It is perhaps significant that of these two groups in the Civil War, one would often fight *against* joining the Union army while the other had to fight *to join* it. Abolitionists were a third group the revivalists tended to hold suspect. See Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, ch. 10.

<sup>58</sup>Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 92.

ever widening beliefs in the perfectibility of man and in the possibility of universal reform, and goaded in part by the recent severe economic downturn of the country's economy, clerks, businessmen, porters, mechanics, artisans, school boys, and messenger boys held daily prayer at lunch time in cities across the country.<sup>59</sup> They transcended the debilitating fragmentation of American religion by forbidding all speakers from stating membership in any particular denomination.<sup>60</sup> Their prayer meetings became known as "union meetings" for their interdenominational emphasis on Christian ethics rather than sectarian metaphysical dogma. Emotion, an ideology of sentiment, replaced the hard, rational disputation of metaphysics. Tears became a public badge of manliness.<sup>61</sup> The urban tents of the union meetings replaced the rural camp meetings, opening the way to the urban revivalists of later decades.<sup>62</sup> These revivals spread from the cities outward to smaller towns, Utica, Peekskill, Rochester in New York; 88 towns in Maine, 39 in Vermont, 147 in Massachusetts.<sup>63</sup> In what had appeared impossible to most churchmen only a few years previous, the "FINGER OF GOD" was directing the lion of business to lie down with the lamb of piety. This eruption of urban and commercial piety was a source, rejoiced J.W. Alexander of Princeton, "from which we are to expect the sublime unity of a coming day." This revival, agreed Nathan Bangs, "tears down their [the revivalists'] sectarian prejudices, and makes them all feel as one."<sup>64</sup> Reaching from Maine to the deep South, the Great Awakening of 1857-58 fostered a cohesion among urban Americans that they had rarely felt.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Perry Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 88; Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, ch. 8.

<sup>60</sup>Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 91.

<sup>61</sup>Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, ch. 6.

<sup>62</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 72; Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 92.

<sup>63</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 67.

<sup>64</sup>Both cited in Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 91.

<sup>65</sup>"The Great Religious Awakening," *Southern Literary Messenger* 24 (August 1858): 146-49. For the millions of Americans under the power of the revival, "there was one controlling sentiment common to all, viz. *the necessity of a direct Divine Power to effect a radical change in the natural state of the soul*" (146; emphasis in original). Perry Miller derisively notes that such cohesion could not be produced "through *Leaves of Grass*" (94).

The sense of unanimity, whose cause many attributed to a supernatural source, was the product of the telegraph and the press.<sup>66</sup> Both media of communication, one contemporary rejoiced, had been “taken possession of by the Spirit, willing or unwilling, to proclaim His wonders.”<sup>67</sup> Bennett’s *New York Herald* and Greeley’s *Tribune* exploited the revival to increase their circulations.<sup>68</sup> News via telegraph spread the word to city after city, New York, Boston, Buffalo, Rochester, Pittsburgh, Hartford, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit. Religious and secular papers covered the revival throughout the country.<sup>69</sup> In a process that had been underway since 1844, those forms of communication that could reach great distances, the telegraph, the railroad, and the press, “received a religious sanction as bonds of solidarity.”<sup>70</sup> The electricity coursing through the telegraph wires was most often cited as the force of that solidarity, for as a writer in the *Evangelist* remarked, “A thrill of emotion sometimes darts through society like electricity, so that for a time thousands are swayed by a single feeling. No matter what the cause.”<sup>71</sup>

The telegraph was the miracle of the day. It linked man and God, spirit and matter as never before. The telegraph, intoned Unitarian clergyman Edward Everett Hale, was to be a “link along which no *thing* passes, not [even] the most subtile fluid. Will passes,—power passes,—love passes,—life passes,—but no *thing*.” For Hale, the telegraph was to be God’s “perfect symbol of heart-to-heart communion.”<sup>72</sup> The Reverend Dr. Thomas DeWitt of New York testified to the widespread association of Christian faith and electricity. “[T]he simile has often been employed,” he observed, “that prayer is like the electric telegraph—in a

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<sup>66</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 64; Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 91.

<sup>67</sup>Cited in Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 64-65.

<sup>68</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 63.

<sup>69</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 63.

<sup>70</sup>Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 91, 94. Miller would disagree that this process had been underway for some time, for he claims that the “steaming cities felt [these forms of communication] were destroying their identities.” I have found little evidence, however, that this was the case.

<sup>71</sup>Cited in Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 227.

<sup>72</sup>Hale, “The Union of the Hemispheres,” *Christian Examiner* 65 (September 1858): 276.

moment reaching upward from earth to heaven, and bringing down again in return heaven to earth....”<sup>73</sup>

Secular writers were swept up in the religious fervor. They wrote of the telegraph in the holy tones of Christian redemption. No American observers were more optimistic about the telegraph’s communitarian potential than Charles Briggs and Augustus Maverick. In their 1858 history of the telegraph, they conceived of this new American technology as the material savior of mankind. “It has been the result of the great discoveries of the past century, to effect a revolution in political and social life, by establishing a more intimate connexion between nations, with race and race. It has been found that the old system of exclusion and insulation are stagnation and death. National health can only be maintained by the free and unobstructed interchange of each with all. How potent a power, then, is the telegraph destined to become in the civilization of the world! This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth.”<sup>74</sup> In an era before Americans had devised an identity based in science and technology, in American “know-how,” an identity which could explain why the telegraph happened here and not elsewhere, the ramifications of the iron nervous system were not American but universal. “Nothing is impossible,” exulted Briggs and Maverick, not to Americans or because of American character, “Nothing is impossible to man.”<sup>75</sup> Utopia seemed somehow to be at the end of the telegraph line.

The telegraph not only carried the news of the revival, it became the sign of the millennium. In the midst of the revival, on 17 August 1858, the largest crowd in the history

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<sup>73</sup>“How the News Was Received in the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting,” *New York Herald*, 18 August 1858, 1:5. This idea was the subject of an extended exegesis in “Prayer a Telegraph,” a chapter in Augustus Thompson’s highly popular 1863 book on prayer, *The Mercy-Seat; or, Thoughts on Prayer* (Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1864). See also Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 58, 228-29.

<sup>74</sup>Charles F. Briggs & Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1858), 21-22.

<sup>75</sup>Cited in Miller, *Life of the Mind*, 308.



of New York City, as many as 250,000 inhabitants, poured into the streets to celebrate what the New York *Herald* billed as the “UNION OF THE WHOLE WORLD.”<sup>76</sup> The *Herald* turned the national slogan, “E PLURIBUS UNUM,” to refer to the entire planet. At 293 Bowery, a lighted transparency outside a saloon bore the slogan:

**Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité**  
**UNIVERSAL REPUBLIC**

An image below these words depicted the figure of Justice looking down on a white man embracing an Indian and a black man.<sup>77</sup> For weeks, the newspapers had been covering the progress of Cyrus Field’s attempt to lay a telegraph cable under the Atlantic Ocean to link North America and Europe in instantaneous communication. News of the connection of the two continents on 5 August raced through the country’s telegraph wires and newspapers, but the tension remained extreme for some time as Americans waited for the first message to make its way through the wires. They could not be sure that Fields’s claims to be thoroughly testing the cable were anything more than bluster. Several attempts to lay such a cable had already failed, and the delays became anguishing. Days passed and the mood tightened until, finally, on 16 August, the *Herald* reported the transmission of the first official message: “BUT THE TELEGRAPH A SURE THING: All Doubt with the Croakers Dissipated: EVERYBODY CRAZY WITH JOY.”<sup>78</sup> The telegraph carried the news across the country, spontaneous celebrations erupted everywhere. Bells tolled from Maine to Mississippi. Militia fired off volley after volley of salutes. At the Fulton Street prayer meeting, reported a *Herald* correspondent, “an erratic genius... made a highfalutin speech: ‘The booming of the cannon and the peeling of the bells,’ proclaimed the clearly crazed New Yorker, ‘tell us that

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<sup>76</sup>Czitrom (*Media and the American Mind*, 13) makes the claim that this was the largest crowd ever, but the figure he gives is far below that which was reported in the New York *Herald*, 18 August 1858, 1:1.

<sup>77</sup>New York *Herald*, 18 August 1858, 2:3.

<sup>78</sup>New York *Herald*, 17 August 1858, 1:1.

space is annihilated, that sectional privileges now are too small and too insignificant to find a place, that all are one, and that the billows may roll and mountain ramparts rise in vain to separate the nations.”” From Concord, New Hampshire, to St. Louis, Missouri, from Calais, Maine, to New Orleans, Louisiana, bonfires, rifle volleys, illuminations, and fireworks, seared the event into popular memory.<sup>79</sup> The telegraph carried the news and the telegraph *was* the news.

From office clerks to the president, Americans proclaimed world peace. Manifest destiny appeared to be at hand. A member of the Fulton Street prayer meeting offered the hope that “this wonderful accomplishment and extraordinary invention [would] be instrumental in uniting the hearts of Christians throughout the world for the conversion of men and for the introduction of the glorious millennial day.”<sup>80</sup> The first message sent from the U.S. was by President Buchanan to Queen Victoria: “It is a triumph more glorious, because far more useful to mankind, than was ever won by conqueror on the field of battle. May the Atlantic Telegraph, under the blessing of Heaven, prove to be a bond of perpetual peace and friendship between the kindred nations, and an instrument destined by the Divine Providence, to diffuse religion, civilization, liberty and law throughout the world.” The telegraph was no longer the means solely of the westward march of democratic culture, it now could send back to the Old World the glad tidings of peace of the new manifest electrical destiny. As if to rub it in a bit, Buchanan closed his message to the Queen of the world’s leading imperial power by suggesting, “will not all nations of Christendom spontaneously unite in the declaration that it [the telegraph] shall be forever neutral, and that its communications shall be held sacred in passing to their places of destination, even in the midst of hostilities?” Few commentators picked up on this hint that the telegraph in itself was not the millennium.

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<sup>79</sup>See New York *Herald*, 18 August 1858, esp., 1:1, 1:6, as well as the days before and after for page after page about the event and its celebrations.

<sup>80</sup>New York *Herald*, 18 August 1858, 1:1.

One of the few was George William Curtis, writing in his *Harper's Monthly* column, "Editor's Easy Chair." Usually a dispassionate stylist, Curtis was carried by the national mood to effusive praise. The success of the cable led Curtis to exult (echoing Lewis's ideology of sentiment) "in all great triumphs of mind over matter there is something so inspiring that the best sentiments of the heart seem for a little while to be common-sense. So let the peals ring out; let the music of eloquent lips and kindling hearts flow free; let the mountain tops glitter with the fires that shall flash far down the valleys humming with life, the glad tidings, that Time and Space, the old foes of man, are made at last his slaves, and that as Solomon of old bound the genii in a box, and threw them into the bottom of the sea, so science has seized Space and Time, and made them run the messages of the world along the floor of the ocean." If there was a strong tone of irony in Curtis's bombastic peroration, it was because he was all too aware of the hostilities at which Buchanan had hinted. He fully concurred that the ocean telegraph had revealed science to be "the handmaid of Morality." (Significantly, Curtis dropped "religion" from Buchanan's quadrumvirate.) Curtis felt sure that science would hasten the work of the heart that pursued peace and good will. But he also recalled to his readers another side of the heart. The telegraph "in the hands of bad men," he warned, "will be an electric match lighting the fires and blowing off the batteries of discord."<sup>81</sup>

In a great historical irony, the Atlantic cable had failed by the time Curtis's warning appeared in homes and libraries across the country that October of 1858. After only two weeks of operation, as the celebration of the feat peaked higher, the undersea cable sputtered and expired. No one could figure out why. The mystery gave way to depression, then anger. The massive celebrations seemed all for naught. Henry Field remembered the dominant mood: "Alas for all human glory! Its paths lead to the grave. Death is the end of human ambition.... Vain is all human toil and endeavor."<sup>82</sup> Accusations flew at Cyrus Field: Hoax!

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<sup>81</sup>George William Curtis, "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly* 17 (October 1858): 700.

<sup>82</sup>Henry M. Field, *The Story of the Atlantic Telegraph* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 212-13.

Humbug! Swindler! Critics charged that the cable was only a story got up to raise the price of the cable company's stocks.<sup>83</sup> What now of the millennium?

The cosmic optimism contorted into fatalism. Lincoln won the presidential election in 1860, South Carolina seceded, and the nation careened into Civil War. Virtually unnoticed in those dark days, the telegraph first spanned the American continent. On 24 October 1861, a full eight years before the railroad, the telegraph linked the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. There were no great celebrations, no hoopla, no millenarian cant. The creed of Union had now withered from a universal imperative to a strategic political ideology. The national hubris that once wondered at the American invention of a new haying machine ("Are not our inventors absolutely ushering in the very dawn of the millennium?"<sup>84</sup>) evaporated in the face of armageddon. The Northern states were in horror at the losses suffered at the hands of the Confederates at Bull Run, Wilson's Creek, and Ball's Bluff.

These same rebels were encamped within sight of the nation's capital on that October day in 1861 when a telegrapher in San Francisco sent the first transcontinental message to the new president. The message did not address all of mankind. Rather, the chief justice of the California Supreme Court wrote to Lincoln assuring him that the telegraph "will be the means of strengthening the attachment which binds both the East and West to the Union." The telegraph was the medium through which the people of California expressed "their loyalty to the Union and their determination to stand by its Government on this its day of trial."<sup>85</sup> The telegraph was now the harbinger of hostility.

The lesson of the telegraph seemed clear until the summer of 1858: Large groups of humans could organize themselves to be members of a single imagined community.<sup>86</sup> This

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<sup>83</sup>Bern Dibner, *The Atlantic Cable* (Norwalk, Conn.: Burndy Library, 1959), 43, from Bright *The Story of the Atlantic Cable* (New York: Appleton, 1903), 43.

<sup>84</sup>Cited in Marx, *Machine*, 198.

<sup>85</sup>Robert Luther Thompson, *Wiring a Continent: The History of the Telegraphy Industry in the United States, 1832-1866* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 367-68.

<sup>86</sup>Benedict Anderson coined the term, "imagined community" (*Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. [New York: Verso, 1991]). For him, however, the imagined community is the product of a print culture limited to books and newspapers.

rhetoric of community, until the failure of the Atlantic cable, was capable of embracing the entire world. But the failure of the cable after only two weeks of operation left Americans with an empty sense of union. The millennial unionism of the Great Awakening of 1858 turned its sights on issues closer to the American heart and “pave[d] the way,” one historian has noted, “to the election of Lincoln and the coming of the war.”<sup>87</sup> The war forced Americans to shelve their millennial mission, and prepare instead for a fight over the meaning of the nation. By 1865, the “universal” had shriveled to “the Union.”

In the aftermath of war, not even “the Union” could be taken for granted. It had to be forged anew in a different medium. This was precisely the task a coterie of magazine editors and publishers had set themselves since the 1830s. With a different set of cultural tools, they had been struggling to make the American magazine the medium of nationalist imagining.

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<sup>87</sup>Smith, *Revival and Social Reform*, 223. Smith is seconded in this by Miller (*Life of the Mind*, 94). McPherson mentions Smith’s work, but does not specifically endorse his argument of causation (*Battle Cry of Freedom* [New York: Ballantine, 1988], 191).

## Chapter 2

### **Printing Urban Society: The Social Imagination and the Rise of the Daily Newspaper**

The 1830s were years of frenzied change for the American newspaper, but this frenzy barely touched the American magazine. Magazines scratched out a meagre existence. While there were some periodicals that could be classed as magazines, they hardly resembled either the form or content of later magazines. A handful of journals appeared monthly or quarterly and published literature and literary and political essays. But these tended to be tendentious, verbose, ponderous. The quarterly *North American Review* was perhaps the best known of this type of periodical. It was not intended for a popular audience, and protected its intellectual aerie with high battlements built of words. Such periodicals constructed a reading community based on older conceptions of society: Society for them meant a close group of acquaintances and suggested a small network of like minded readers. “Society” was rapidly taking on a far different meaning, however, in the new sorts of periodicals aborning in the penny press newspaper revolution.

Newspapers underwent a series of transformations that altered their audiences, their forms, and their role in social communications. They invented the very notion of the news.<sup>1</sup> They shifted the conception of society from the frame of a relatively small cadre of elites to a

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic, 1978), ch. 1.

panoply of urban characters. They made social imagination into a commercial commodity to be bought and sold on city streets.

The penny papers that began appearing in the mid 1830s offered urban Americans a new sort of cultural vision. They greatly expanded the readership of periodicals downward into new audiences of middling and lower sorts. They paid increasing attention to daily life and urged readers to imagine themselves enmeshed in urban social networks beyond their personal experience. The conductors of the penny press refashioned key elements of the newspaper. They infused the newspaper with the ideology of sentimental culture, refashioned the literary style of writing, and helped popularize new literary genres such as the literary sketch.

Sentimentality was crucial to the development of the American magazine. The magazine came about as the preeminent means for expressing sentimental culture. But the question of how sentimentality could mold a social imaginary, was first worked out in the penny press. These papers rebelled against older conceptions of politics. The rise of sentimentality throughout the early 1800s represents the evolution of a virtually autonomous realm of culture organized largely in opposition to politics. It offered all manner of Americans—from evangelists to temperance organizations to moral reformers to women in general—a different way of conceptualizing and ordering public life. Sentimentality was the expression of a popular moral culture. This culture is essential to comprehend because a key aspect of its mission was the creation of affective bonds of community that increasingly stretched beyond the local to encompass ever larger orders of society, including the entire nation and even all of human kind. The agents of sentimentality are central to the story of the newspaper and the magazine because they sought both a psychology of mass cultural connection across the great distances of the U.S. and technical apparatus that could serve, in effect, as the nervous system of a vast body cultural.

The penny paper's early success was closely linked to the culture of sentimentality. Magazine editors would learn much from the newspaper experiments of the 1830s. But the

newspaper, as a means of imagining and communicating American social relations, was severely attenuated. The penny press revolution, while it introduced literary and stylistic elements that would later be vital to the American magazine, remained chiefly a local medium. It remained for magazinists, inventing the American monthly periodical in the 1840s, to forge a medium for imagining an integrated national culture.

The history of the national American magazine cannot be told without understanding the penny press revolution's role in that history. The penny press popularized a variety of literary genres by turning their modes of story telling to the description of purportedly real life urban citizens. The popularity of this "realism" was essential in magazinists' attempts at defining their medium. It was only through distinguishing themselves from newspapers, while adapting the basic newspaper mode of story-telling, that magazines gained their initial generic configuration. The history presented here is by no means a complete retelling of the penny press revolution from a cultural standpoint. The focus is on those aspects of the revolution that would break ground for the invention of the American magazine in the 1840s and '50s.

The history of the penny press has been told often. But the history as presented here comes at the newspaper from a different angle. Journalism scholars have rarely looked outside the newspaper medium itself, either in terms of literary influences or effects on other media. Because the role of sentimentality in the penny press revolution has not been adequately assessed, it is important to present a brief history of its origins and its influence in Early Republic America.

## **The Newspaper and the Commercial City**



The newspaper was the literary representation of the commercial American city of the Jacksonian era, New York in particular.<sup>2</sup> Although New York's neighborhoods were becoming differentiated by class by the 1820s, the city still retained something of the intimate scale of the "walking city." Peter Buckley has noted that "all groups in the city claimed a role in public life.... [I]nter-class contact was extensive, and the political, charitable, and social obligations developed among knickerbocker merchants overflowed into the street. The wealthy continued to shop at the public markets... until the late 1830s." The different orders of the city intermingled in theaters, parks, volunteer fire companies, and public parades and festivities.<sup>3</sup> This social intermingling and intimate city scale underwent significant changes in the 1830s. The wealthy began to separate themselves out by moving north of Bleecker street. A variety of neighborhoods took on identifiable characters, from the Fifteenth Ward's fashionable "inner republic" to the Bowery's rowdy and radical commercialized entertainment to the Five Points' crushing poverty and licentious criminality.<sup>4</sup> Immigrants poured into the city as it established its commercial dominance over the middle states and reached into the western interior via the Erie Canal. New York City experienced phenomenal population growth from 1820 until the Civil War, virtually doubling the national rate every decade. In the 1840s and '50s, New York accounted for one fifth of country's entire urban

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<sup>2</sup>Henkin has gone so far as to claim that the changes in the layout of the penny press newspaper mirrored concurrent changes in New York City's urban grid of new streets, commercial districts, and residential real estate (*City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 102). Barnhurst and Nerone also characterize layout in Victorian newspapers as "a revisualization of the newspaper as territory" (*The Form of the News: A History* [New York: Guilford, 2001], 75). While the relation between newspaper layout and urban geography may be tenuous, there is no question that the newspaper reflected new social relations. As historian C.D. Clark observed, the very concept of the news "was a phenomenon brought about by the new and peculiar social situation created by the modern city. The character of news... and the evolution of the concept of news have been closely tied up with the development of urban modes of existence, for it is the city which has forced the substitution of secondary for primary forms of association" (C.D. Clark, cited in Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* [New York: Macmillan, 1937], 626).

<sup>3</sup>Buckley, "Culture, Class, and Place in Antebellum New York," in John Hull Mollenkopf, ed., *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City* (New York: Russell Sage, 1988), 32.

<sup>4</sup>Buckley, "Culture, Class"; Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

population growth. By 1860, the city had almost 1.8 million inhabitants, and was twice the size of the next largest American city, Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup>

Such expansive growth surrounded the citizens of New York with multitudes of strangers. Poe's narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) was mesmerized by these multitudes, looking from face to face to try and "read... the history of long years."<sup>6</sup> But there were too many faces—swarming in masses, numbers, societies, tribes, fellows, races, companies, battalions, classes—Poe's narrator could not penetrate the secret of the crowd. Poe's urban contemporaries, faced a similar struggle. Reading unfamiliar persons was essential to differentiating confidence men or painted ladies from reputable citizens.<sup>7</sup> The commercial culture of large cities like New York required the men and women who traversed its streets, as a matter of urban survival, to be able to decipher the city. They had to learn to interpret the clothes and actions of strangers, to imagine the social origins and connections of people they met, as well as the people they never met who lived and worked in the millions of offices and homes of the city they passed by. The necessity to read and interpret urban life was especially keen among the droves of country immigrants, who needed some sort of authoritative guide to city ways, amenities, services, and entertainments.

Earlier forms of the newspaper were unable to describe this new world. At the beginning of the 1830s there were three basic types of American newspaper: political papers, mercantile journals, and the religious trumpets of various denominations and visionaries. These papers did not resemble the modern newspaper in mission, appearance, content, or

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<sup>5</sup>Diane Lindstrom, "Economic Structure in Antebellum New York," in Mollenkopf, *Power, Culture, and Place*, 4, and Table 1.1. New York City, of course, was not alone in this urban growth. The country's urban population grew at a faster rate than that of the country as a whole for the first time in the 1820s. The urban population, between 1820 and 1840 quadrupled, from 443,000 to 1,844,000 (from 4.6% of the country's total population to 10.8%). All of this growth required new means of communication to enable denizens of the city to conceptualize the world they lived and worked in.

<sup>6</sup>Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" (*The Complete Edgar Allen Poe Tales* [New York: Avenel, 1981], 244.) Henkin employed this trope in the title of his book, *City Reading*. Kasson also used this trope in the title of chapter 3 of *Rudeness and Civility* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990): "Reading the City." See also Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), although she does not use the trope explicitly she is getting at the same problem of interpreting material cues of social status, such as equipage, dress, and manner.

<sup>7</sup>Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Ladies*.

audience. They had radically different page layouts and sizes (some measured as much as three feet by five feet when unfolded) and an aversion to illustration.<sup>8</sup> Most papers were weeklies. The few daily papers cost around \$10 (\$190) per week, or twice the average urban laborer's weekly wages.<sup>9</sup> Daily and weekly papers were rarely sold individually.<sup>10</sup> Instead, they were available almost solely through expensive annual subscription.<sup>11</sup> Circulations were quite limited, with average numbers reaching only about 1000 in 1830.<sup>12</sup> Debt, low circulation, and a narrow readership forced paper printers to obtain financial support from

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<sup>8</sup>Ironically, illustrations became increasingly rare in the penny press papers (Barnhurst & Nerone, *The Form of the News*, 62-63).

<sup>9</sup> This was also roughly equal to one week of a journeyman printer's salary. See Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 95. Lee (*Daily Newspaper*, 136) points out that the range of journeymen printers' wages was from \$10 to \$12 per week, depending on the sort of paper one worked for, with the *Journal of Commerce* paying the lower figure and the penny papers claiming to pay the higher. Using McCusker's price index, this rate equals about \$190 to \$230 in 2001 dollars (John J. McCusker, *How Much Is That in Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States*, 2d ed. [Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 2001], Table A-2).

<sup>10</sup>Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 203; Henkin, *City Reading*, 105. When available, single copies of these dailies and weeklies cost from 6 to 12 1/2 cents, although most publishers simply refused to sell single copies at all.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 37-52; William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), 39.

<sup>12</sup>Mott, *American Journalism*, 202-203; Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 256. Much of Pred's data obscures this point of relatively small newspaper circulations. The unit he used to display the dissemination of information was not the number of subscriptions, but the total number of copies issued. Thus in his discussion of the amount of information issuing from Richmond, Virginia, in one three month period of the 1820s, he observes that 150,624 papers were shipped out of the city (59). This number appears immense. But when it is recalculated to show the total number of subscribers this represents, the number shrinks to only 1141. Further, this number is distributed among six different papers (one daily and five weeklies), for an average circulation of each of these journals of only 190 each.

It is well to reconsider what Pred (and others who follow him, especially Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], and Richard Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989]) means by "information." Pred takes the term to be facts, to be value free data. The newspaper is the vehicle for the dissemination of objective reports of data. But objectivity, while it first appeared with the penny papers, did not take on its modern sense until quite late in the nineteenth century. Pred's discussion, as so many others built on this anachronistic sense of information as solely a product of the newspaper, thus ignore magazines altogether as a media for the dissemination of information (Pred, 20, e.g., leaves out magazines altogether from his analysis). Such discussions need to be augmented to consider the flow of culture, of cultural practices and figures, with an equal weight to "information" in order to garner any meaningful sense of the spread of knowledge in the nineteenth century.

other sources. These were most often a political party, a cadre of elite merchant subscribers, or a dedicated band of proselytes.

The social world of these papers was quite limited. Religious papers offered little “news,” no matter how loosely the term might be understood.<sup>13</sup> Political papers were filled chiefly with party propaganda. These papers were mostly given over to long, verbatim quotations of political speeches. The reporting of local events, even political ones, was rare.<sup>14</sup> Partisan papers were formed with the express purpose of intraparty communication.<sup>15</sup> They were thus heavily subsidized by the parties themselves and by government spoils.<sup>16</sup> Mercantile papers became prominent in the 1820s in the wake of the transportation revolution’s ability to tie together increasing numbers of markets.<sup>17</sup> They mainly ran print ads, business items, and shipping news, but added newspaper elements in the 1820s as they transformed from weeklies to dailies. There was no pretension to anything like objective reporting of events in any of these papers.

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<sup>13</sup>Religious papers could sometimes reach wide audiences both within and beyond particular cities. The total number of such publications grew exponentially between 1800 (when they first appeared) and 1830. But religious papers offered a different sort of social vision, one immersed in holy waters. As such, they played at best a small role in the development of the newspaper. Their most notable affect was probably the vast numbers their printers produced. Such circulation may have inspired the innovators of the penny press to seek out new audiences. On the rise and influence of the religious press, see David Paul Nord, *The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835*, Journalism Monographs no. 88 (1984): 1-30; John C. Nerone, *The Culture of the Press in the Early Republic: Cincinnati, 1793-1848* (New York: Garland, 1989), ch. 5; and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 126, 144.

<sup>14</sup>Mott, *American Journalism*, 51-52, 136, 197-98; David J. Russo, *The Origins of Local News in the U.S. Country Press, 1840s-1870s*, Journalism Monographs no. 65 (1980), 2: “[B]efore the 1860s, there was very little sustained effort on the part of most American editors, at least, to report the news of their own villages or of the surrounding countryside.” When local events gained attention, it was often more in the form of announcements of upcoming political rallies. A paragraph in an 1829 edition of the weekly Hagerstown [Maryland] *Mail* (31 July 1829, 2:4), for example, urged local Democratic partisans to attend an upcoming “Jackson Barbecue” to celebrate the “old Chief’s” election to the presidency.

<sup>15</sup>The loss of a local party paper was often a calamity to a party for it was the only means of communication between a party and its particular public. To prevent renegade editors from turning against a party, stalwards often barred outside ownership, forming instead their own joint-stock companies to control a paper. Gerald Baldasty, *The Press and Politics in the Age of Jackson*, Journalism Monographs, no. 89 (August 1984), 16.

<sup>16</sup>The federal government paid out as much as \$2.5 million between 1819 and 1846, in the form of contracts to print government documents, to newspapers favored by the party in power. Baldasty, *Press and Politics*, 14.

<sup>17</sup>Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1977), 40.

Pre-penny press newspapers employed no reporters.<sup>18</sup> Most papers were operated by a single individual. These editors collected “news” passively, slowly. Most items they printed came to them through the “exchange system.” Editors “exchanged” a free subscription to their own newspaper with dozens, even hundreds, of other papers. The editors then copied items at will from these other papers. This primitive system was extremely haphazard, for it was utterly dependent on the quixotically irregular delivery of the mail and the highly idiosyncratic editorial decisions of local printers. No mail meant no news, and sometimes there was no mail for weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Equally quixotic were the printers of papers. Local printers had little conception of the news as objective fact or impartial coverage of widely important events. Rural papers often reflected a personal, obscurantist view of the world. William C. Howells (father to novelist William Dean Howells), for example, learned of the ideas of Robert Dale Owen while setting type for Alexander Campbell’s paper, the *Christian Baptist*. He quit the *Baptist* in 1828 to found a paper reflecting Owen’s ideas. The paper folded within a year due to Howells’s lack of capital and editorial experience. Another ill-fated attempt to found an Owensite paper in the early ’30s collapsed in less than six months. In the 1840s and ’50s, Howells jerrybuilt and lost three more papers, each reflecting a passing personal mania. The *Retina* was a Swedenborgian vehicle in a town bereft of

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<sup>18</sup>A few papers engaged “correspondents.” Most correspondents were located in Washington, D.C., and were responsible chiefly for sending transcriptions of Congressional speeches to distant papers.

<sup>19</sup>The 17 April 1833 issue of the *Mobile Advertiser*, for instance, sheepishly informed its readers: “The failure of all the mails must plead our excuse for the barrenness of our columns today. We have no news from New York later than the 28th ultimo, being 19 days” (cited in Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information*, 58). One exasperated paper editor complained, “No mail yesterday—we hardly know what we shall fill our paper with that will have the appearance of news. If we can get no mail—nor any papers by sea—we shall either have to print without [news], or get it manufactured at home.” He facetiously proposed “petitioning [the local government] leave to have established in some eligible part of this city a *manufactory of news*, on such principles as will always afford a sufficiency for current use.” (New Orleans *Orleans Gazette*, 28 May 1805; cited in Mott, *American Journalism*, 197). See Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information*, 57-61 for detailed numbers on the system and amount of newspaper exchanges.

Swedenborgian followers. His next venture was a free-soil paper in a heavily Democratic town. The last was a Whig paper formed during the demise of the Whig party.<sup>20</sup>

The exchange system had none of the ability to create instantaneous excitement among the people as later daily newspapers, linked by the telegraph could do. The system tended to blunt the immediate impact of articles or literary works it distributed. Some items made an itinerant journey through American print culture, wandering from paper to paper as long as five years and even longer.<sup>21</sup> When the exchange papers did not provide enough “news” to fill a weekly paper, a printer would run sections of the Bible, George Washington’s obituary (even decades after the old general had died), and similar odds and ends.<sup>22</sup> As a result, as with the papers of William C. Howells, newspapers too often represented the obscurantist view of their printers. Because these papers were so personal, readers rejected them more often than not. Newspapers in the first third of the nineteenth century rarely survived for more than a few years.

In this regime of communications, culture was a local affair that followed from quotidian rhythms and personal relations. Outside of moments of intense crisis such as 1812, Americans felt little need to observe their national society through the medium of print. Relations to central figures of American history, such as George Washington, were understood in personal terms. Washington was a role model of public probity to be emulated more for his republican piety than as a representative of abstract social and historical relations in a complex national culture.

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<sup>20</sup>Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), 21-40.

<sup>21</sup>David Waldstreicher traced a “fragment” of a rumination, on the news considered as a conversation with the world, that first appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* in 1790 and turned up five years later in the *Otsego [N.Y.] Herald (In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997], 115).

<sup>22</sup>Menahem Blondheim *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12. Certain filler items could obtain a certain cache throughout the country, as when the *New-England Magazine* (2 [May 1832]: 366) commented that “Six years ago Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* was the comforter of distressed editors, but,” complained the author implying that the *Anatomy* was still in common filluer-use, “but it is now too hackneyed to venture upon.”

## The Penny Press Revolution

In the mid 1830s, a new group of newspaper editors transformed the press. They slashed the cost of papers, churned them out daily, and sold them hand over fist in the streets. The founders of the “first wave” of penny dailies (those launched between 1833 and the 1837 depression) came mostly from the ranks of wage earners and artisans.<sup>23</sup> All were recent immigrants from the hinterlands to New York City, the center of the Jacksonian era’s embroiling market revolution.<sup>24</sup> All began as staunch Democrats, and several had been deeply involved in the Workingmen’s brief agitation for labor rights in 1829 and ’30.<sup>25</sup> All had little intention of remaining members of the lower orders.<sup>26</sup> These printers were entrepreneurs bent on raising their social and economic standing through commerce in the news.

Penny papers made these workingmen rich. They began with minimal amounts of start-up capital. Benjamin Day could hardly afford the \$400 price of his old hand-

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<sup>23</sup>The descriptors “first wave” and “second wave” are from Saxton, *Rise and Fall*, ch. 4. Among the key founders were Benjamin Day, William Stanley, Arunah Shepherdson Abell, Azariah Simmons, William Swain, Moses Beach, and James Gordon Bennett. The one definite non-artisan was Bennett (there is some question about Stanley). He had worked as a correspondent and editor of several American papers in Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York. He had even attempted to launch a paper of his own, a partisan paper in the Jackson camp. But it failed quickly, leaving Bennett virtually destitute (Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, 19-20). In New York, Bennett founded the New York *Herald* in 1836. Abell, Simmons, and Swain apprenticed with Day and went on to found the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* in 1836 and the Baltimore *Sun* in 1837 (Mott, *American Journalism*, 239-41; Saxton, *Rise and Fall*, 96-99; and Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, ch. 1).

<sup>24</sup>Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 40-43.

<sup>25</sup>Saxton, *Rise and Fall*, 95-105; David T.Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>26</sup>Saxton (*Rise and Fall*) and Dan Schiller (*Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994]) would likely disagree with this point, for they characterize the first wave of penny press printers as artisans and wage earners. Schudson (*Discovering the News*), likewise, has a somewhat static class conception in seeing the penny press (and by extension its founders) as an expression of the middle class. Mindich (*Just the Facts*) offers the most fluid sense of class dynamics in his examination of the relationship between Bennett and his former boss at the six-penny *Courier and Enquirer* (24-30). But he goes too far in simply writing off the influences of Jacksonian democracy on the early penny press and claiming that “mobility” was the true cause of the penny press’s rise. The general democratic ideology was certainly inextricably bound up with the changing class dynamics at the heart of the market revolution. All of the penny press printers, of both the first and second waves, experienced intense class dynamics: They quickly rose to greater levels of wealth but tried, in various ways, to retain the political vision of their youths. Greeley’s turn to socialism after founding his *Tribune* represents perhaps the most cogent attempt to transform earlier poverty into socio-political theory.

cranked flat-bed press, which printed no more than 200 copies of the *Sun* per hour.<sup>27</sup> William Swain was working for wages of \$12 per week when he co-founded the *Public Ledger*.<sup>28</sup> James Gordon Bennett was forty-four years old and out of work when he founded the New York *Herald*, scraping together a mere \$500 to print his first issue.<sup>29</sup> But lack of capital was hardly a hindrance to success. The circulation of the new penny press quickly outstripped that of the older papers. To appeal to new reading audiences, the conductors of the penny press sold their papers at street prices: one penny per paper. They introduced a new sales method, hiring boys to sell the papers individually as street wares.<sup>30</sup> Their commercial success was swift. Within months of launching their papers in the middle 1830s, the penny papers achieved circulations that dwarfed those of the mercantile and political papers. In late 1833, on the eve of the penny press revolution, the total circulation of papers in New York City had been 26,500. Eighteen months later the combined circulation of just three of the new penny papers was 44,000.<sup>31</sup> The daily penny paper swiftly became the news source of choice of urban readers.

The rapid rise in the circulation of this new genre was highly dependent on the transformation of the “news.” In Schudson’s formulation, the penny press printers “discovered” the news. There was a new quality to the social world depicted in the penny papers. Day, Bennett, and the other progenitors of the penny press sought out corners of society the political, mercantile, and religious papers disdained to inspect. Instead of passively waiting for information through personal contacts or the exchange of newspapers, the new press entrepreneurs developed independent means to ferret out news. They searched streets, back alleys, churches, courts, and meeting halls for stories.

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<sup>27</sup>Saxton, *Rise and Fall*, 98.

<sup>28</sup>Mott, *American Journalism*, 240.

<sup>29</sup>Mott, *American Journalism*, 230; Saxton, *Rise and Fall*, 99.

<sup>30</sup>They also sold papers by subscription to those who requested it.

<sup>31</sup>Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 18. The seven key founders of the penny press in New York City all became quite wealthy from the profits of their papers. Day sold the *Sun* in 1838 for \$40,000 (Frank M. O’Brien, *The Story of the Sun, New York: 1833-1928* [New York: Appleton, 1928], 127; Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, 12). William Swain, retired in 1864 with a personal worth of \$3 million.



They described events rarely covered in older forms of the press: crimes, fires, parties, trials, violent or mysterious deaths, and scandals. And they described these events in titillating detail. In the process, they seemingly invented two modes crucial to the definition of the modern newspaper: sensationalism and objectivity.

Journalism historians have attributed this transformation to a variety of causes: developments in printing and transportation technology, changing rates of literacy, the onslaught of Jacksonian democracy.<sup>32</sup> Each of these factors certainly contributed to the quick commercial success of the penny paper. But these explanations have been limited by journalism historians' focus on the newspaper medium itself.<sup>33</sup> That is, because the newspaper in our day is such a powerfully coherent medium, they have tended to see the newspaper of the early 1800s as a clearly defined medium or literary genre. They have rarely grappled with the problems of defining the newspaper in terms of either institutional medium or literary genre (literary here understood in its widest sense). The history of the newspaper has thus been largely limited to the newspaper itself with little attention paid to other possible sources. But if the field of possible sources for the new content is widened to include other literary genres, a different picture of the

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<sup>32</sup>Schudson (*Discovering the News*, ch. 1) examines the relative merits of each of these explanations. Schudson demolished the first two explanations (technology and literacy) and attempted to bolster the political argument. The penny press, for Schudson, was the social expression of the middle class's growing interest in democratic politics. Schiller (*Objectivity*) also emphasized the importance of Jacksonian democracy on the success of the penny press. But, where Schudson saw the penny press's audience as middle class, Schiller argued it was a laboring class of artisans and mechanics. (Saxton attempted to shore up Schiller's argument by detailing the workingclass origins of several of the key penny press innovators.) Since these two influential books appeared, the earlier technological and literacy explanations have not been significantly advanced, nor have they really been mentioned. See eg Barnhurst and Nerone who, in a work that covers the entire sweep of American newspaper history, do not mention either argument until bringing up technology's effects in the later twentieth century (they also demolish the technological argument, see 20-21, 193). Any cogent synthesis of journalism historiography, would of course have to take both technological innovation and changing rate of literacy into account. But no adequate synthesis has been attempted since the pioneering arguments of Schudson and Schiller appeared twenty years ago.

<sup>33</sup>Schudson and Schiller both began to search outside newspaper history itself to discern something of the audience for the penny press. Schiller in particular criticized journalism historians for not examining objectivity as a "cultural form with its own set of conventions" (*Objectivity*, 5). But he limited his examination of the penny press's "cultural form" to an examination of it as the workingman's expression of American democracy. Although he placed the penny paper within a cultural context, he limited that context to the traditional justification of the newspaper as nation's trumpet of democracy.

transformation of the newspaper comes into focus. The invention of the modern newspaper in the 1830s can be seen as the product of other cultural forces that help to explain its almost instantaneous popular appeal. Seen this way, the aspect of the “new” news that caught the eye of new readers was its foundation in the literary modes and narratives of the emerging culture of sentimentality.

Urban life required city dwellers to develop new ways of seeing the life around them, or to adapt old ways to new conditions. Seeing beyond their daily experiences required a medium that stimulated the imagination and that seemed to impart to imagined objects a solid reality. The forms through which urbanites came to imagine urban life would greatly determine their cultural self-understanding. The cultural forms the penny press adapted to the urban social imagination derived chiefly from the emerging culture of sentimentality.

### **Sentimental Culture: Sources for Transforming the News**

Transforming newspaper content was vital to the penny paper’s success for three main reasons. First, its printer/editors were mostly workingmen from the hinterlands with no family or social connections in the city. They were locked out of the traditional sources of information: personal, professional, and family relationships with politicians and merchants.<sup>34</sup> Nor, as their early affiliations with the Workingmen’s party make clear, did they particularly *want* to rub shoulders with political and commercial elites. Thus, even as they rose into higher class statuses, they chafed at the idea of reproducing older forms of the “news.” They remained true, for the most part, to their roots in labor and Jacksonian democracy and proclaimed themselves spirited opponents of the political and mercantile papers, as well as the classes these papers catered to.

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<sup>34</sup>Daniel Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 14-15.

Second, the penny press had to appeal to audiences in ways quite at odds with the political and mercantile press. The old mercantile and political papers' emphasis on sales by subscription had ensured that their audience would also be their subject.<sup>35</sup> The new papers broke this closed circle of influence. The penny press had to be "socially prismatic," to use William R. Taylor's important phrase.<sup>36</sup> They had to have different sorts of features that matched the city's "culture of pastiche." Rather than trumpet the platform of one particular political party, the data of business, or the dogma of a single religious sect, New York newspapers had to reflect the "seemingly random, potpourri organization" of their city, they had "to dramatize the discontinuity, the kaleidoscopic variety, and the quick tempo of city life...."<sup>37</sup> James Gordon Bennett had described in 1835 just such a kaleidoscopic audience when he catalogued the readers to whom his paper would appeal: "the great masses of the community—the merchant, mechanic, working people—the private family as well as the public hotel—the journeyman and his employer—the clerk and his principle.... There is not a person in the city, male or female, that may not be able to say, 'Well I have got a paper of my own which will tell me all about what's doing in the world.'"<sup>38</sup> Walt Whitman, that self-proclaimed poet of the people, closely echoed Bennett when he took over the editorship of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* in 1846: "We really feel a desire to talk on many subjects to *all* the people of Brooklyn."<sup>39</sup> Penny press newspapers were social maps of this new urban society. They promised to guide urbanites through what Daniel Rodgers has called "a web of mutual dependency that was at once extraordinarily powerful and barely visible."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Buckley, "Culture, Class," 37.

<sup>36</sup>William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 83.

<sup>37</sup>Taylor, *Gotham*, 70. Taylor notes that several other cultural forms also arose later to fulfill similar ends of reflecting street culture, including guides to the city, youth-oriented books along the lines of Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, and the song production of Tin Pan Alley.

<sup>38</sup>*Herald's* Prospectus, 6 May 1835, cited in Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts: Proprietors of the New York Herald* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), 40.

<sup>39</sup>Cited in Leonard, *News for All*, 150.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel R. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Professive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 114. Rodgers is talking of the Progressive era, but this seems fitting as a description of the burgeoning Jacksonian city as well.

Third, to reach new audiences, penny press printers had to fold already popular literary genres from other media into their papers to create an instant appeal.<sup>41</sup> Their “discovery” of the news was as much a repackaging of a variety of established and emerging narrative forms as it was the invention of original modes of news out of whole cloth. As the penny press printers cast about for new subjects to cover in their papers, they looked to established literary genres such as the gory crime pamphlet, the novel of seduction, and reform periodicals for narrative models and sources of content. Each of these genres grew out of the cultural concerns that have come to be known as sentimentality.

Sentimentality in the antebellum era referred to a far greater set of cultural practices and attitudes than than tradition historians and literary scholars have recognized. Its effects were evident in a wide variety of emotional public scenes, such as Washingtonian temperance meetings, revivals, and all manner of projects aimed at social reform. It was also crucial to the development of the nation’s public cultural sphere, not just the novels commonly referred to as “sentimental,” when that term has the force of derisive epithet. To get at sentimentality’s cultural centrality in Jacksonian world in which the penny press burst forth, it is necessary examine its genesis. Each of the scenes of sentimentality mentioned above (temperance, revivalism, social reform, and literature) was the product of a long battle in British thought between the empiricism of John Locke and the moral counterattack by the Scottish common sense philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Locke’s empiricism was dedicated to discovering the “thingness” of objects out in the world through the experience of the senses. Reacting against both Christian metaphysics and the Enlightenment’s excessive faith in reason, Locke developed a psychology of sensation to support his key philosophical belief: All knowledge begins with experience of the world

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<sup>41</sup>One interesting example of this was the ad genre. In the earliest issues of his New York *Sun*, Day often did not have enough ads to suggest that his paper was supported by the business community. He thus copied ads from the commercial papers to give the impression of a wide commercial support for his publishing venture.

outside the self. The individual human mind, Locke argued, begins life empty (his famous *tabula rasa*). Through experience, the mind collects sensory data. Thought is the mind's reflection on these data and the consequent elaboration of increasingly complex ideas. Experience for Locke was the means of learning about the world.

The Scottish common sense philosophers dominated the American intellect between the Revolution and the Civil War.<sup>42</sup> They strongly criticized the lack of morality in the empiricist psychology of John Locke and his followers. The problem with Locke's psychology, they argued, was that thought came only *after* the collection of data and resulted in an anarchic structure of conscience. They deplored David Hume's radical pagan skepticism as the inevitable outcome of Locke's *tabula rasa*.<sup>43</sup> To combat the mire of skepticism, common sense philosophers revised Lockian psychology to include an innate moral framework. They agreed with Locke that knowledge was the product of experience. But they insisted that the mind had an inborn ability to organize data received through the senses. This inborn ability, for them, was the meaning of common sense. And this common sense, they claimed, was inherently moral.<sup>44</sup> Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1758), pinpointed this moral common sense in the human instinct for sympathizing with the thoughts and feelings of other humans. "How selfish soever man may be supposed," Smith wrote, "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except

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<sup>42</sup>Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper, 1943), 236; D.H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972); Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 24-28; Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America, 200-202*. Cremin notes that the common sense philosophy had a pervasive influence in American colleges in the first half of the nineteenth century. He argues that American educators melded the common sense intuitive epistemology with a Lockian emphasis on observation and induction. Perry adopts the dialectical view of the common sense philosophy and set it at odds with the rise of science. It would seem that, with its emphasis on Baconian and Lockian calls for empirical observation, common sense deserves a more subtle investigation than Perry gives it. See, for a step in that direction, Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 175-180, 184-85, in particular, and chapters 11 and 12, in general. The more important champions of "common sense" were Henry Kames, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart. Their school is also sometimes referred to as "moral philosophy."

<sup>43</sup>S.A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (1960, reprint: Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973), 4.

<sup>44</sup>Meyer, *Instructed Conscience*, 89-90.

the pleasure of seeing it.”<sup>45</sup> The individual, according to common sense, experienced sympathy, not through any Enlightened rationality, but through an intensity of feelings. Sympathy was an intuitive knowledge that sprang from the human’s innate morality.

This moral common sense philosophy was deeply influential on the American reform movements of the antebellum era, from capital punishment to prisons, asylums, schools, anti-vivisection, antislavery, women’s rights, temperance, Christian nurture, and evangelical revivalism. Each of these involved an imaginative identification and physically felt emotional sympathy with others. Revivalists invoked the moral common sense as direct proof of God’s influence on the individual. They also emphasized the power of intuitive emotional connections in formulating new communities of the faithful.

Non-religious reformers used a similar model to legitimate their social projects. The philosophers of the Enlightenment had already begun to popularize the concept of a universal society. Their anthropology treated man as an object and the systems of society as concrete. For Enlightenment thinkers, society was a set of objective relations that had a “thingness” that could be discovered and labeled as social laws. In the hands of American sentimental reformers, the vital quality of this anthropology was American society’s moral nature. Deliverance increasingly came to mean, not the redemption of the single, individual soul, but the perfection of universal society.<sup>46</sup> Millennialism, for non-religious reformers, often meant the grand union of their splintered, fractious, sectarian, partisan, economically fragmenting, and regional cultures. To accomplish unity among such division, reformers had to devise connections, or social bands, that could tie disparate groups together.

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<sup>45</sup>Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; 6th ed. 1790; reprint. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 73.

<sup>46</sup>“Universal,” here, should not necessarily be construed as denoting all of mankind. It refers rather to the idea of an organic society rather than a congeries of different orders of people who, though in personal contact with one another, essentially functioned in different social realms. Much of the debate through the nineteenth century was precisely over the limits of universal society. As Americans came increasingly to see society as an organic whole, they shed the millennial aspects of conceptualizing society and began to place national limits on a single, unified American society. (Unified, here, does not mean that all Americans agreed on cultural and political ideology, but that they understood their secondary social relations as being natural, real, and objective.) Only when these limits came into at least hazy view could Americans begin to formulate a national culture.

Sentimentality provided these bands through the democratization of virtue. It posited a universal human nature: Neither virtue nor evil was the exclusive domain of any social group. Both were equally distributed up and down the social order, from the polite to the impoverished. Sentimental critics redefined criminal acts as fits of passion rather than the result of either man's innate depravity or a particular class's shortcomings. Correspondingly, virtue was no longer the sole province of paternalistic elites. Sentimentality transformed the political sense of virtue into the social quality of benevolence. Where Jefferson's late eighteenth-century Declaration of Independence, building firmly on common sense ideas, suggested that benevolence was the preeminent organizing principle of political association, early nineteenth-century sentimentalists sought to extend the reach of benevolence to encompass all of society.<sup>47</sup> In a world of increasingly broad, class-based divisions and urban secondary-relations, sympathetic feeling became the vital force that held different orders of society together within the democratic republic. Sentimentality worked as an ideology of community because it posited a morality (read: culture) common to all urbanites, save those who were corrupted by their own passions. In such moral formulations, the common sense philosophers lay the groundwork for conceptualizing universal society and the relations of all the people living within society.

To make disparate social groups cohere, sentimentality required that moral issues be broadcast. The innate morality of all individuals in society had to be stimulated through a confrontation with crime and brutality. This confrontation would, supposedly, trigger the natural sentimental identification with the victims, and even with the criminals. The process would foster greater benevolence in individuals and thereby produce a moral culture and more closely knit society.

But here the ideology of sentiment confronted a grave problem: The display of benevolent action simultaneously required the display of the evil that benevolence was aimed

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<sup>47</sup>On the influence of the common-sense idea of benevolence as the essential band tying political society together, see Wills, *Inventing America*, 284-92.

at quelling. Moreover, to achieve the physical correspondence of sympathetic feeling for victims and thus to induce a benevolent sensibility, the display of crime and brutality had to be sensational. It had to be strong enough to create physical sensations (i.e., experience) in readers who were far distant from actual events. How, then, could one present enough evil to demonstrate a considerable threat to social order without corrupting readers? How could sentimental social reformers properly gauge the experience of evil and the response to it?<sup>48</sup>

This problem was seen most acutely in the debates over how to publicize sympathy with victims of physical abuse as a corrective to violent behavior. The requirement that crime and brutality be sensational made it necessary for sentimental reformers to publish, that is, to make public, tales and pictures of suffering in order to call attention to the problems they sought to redress. Assuming the moral framework of the human mind, the sensationalizing reformers argued that the proper experience of images of suffering would produce in observers, in those experiencing the event, a sympathetic response to the sufferer, and hence a reaction of conscience to act against brutality. Sympathy, for the philosophers of sentimentality, was activated chiefly through sight.<sup>49</sup> But reformers feared that the actual, first-hand experience of witnessing violence, whether a criminal act or even corporal punishment, could lead to an insensitivity to brutality. Too much experience of violence or vice, that is, might cause the mind to learn the wrong lesson, to sympathize not with the victim but the victimizer, not with virtue but with vice.<sup>50</sup> This was especially true for those members of society most susceptible to sensation and emotional sympathy, women, the young, and religiously inclined men. It was thus essential to separate event and experience, and to mediate the link. The link was kept vital by the absent observer's ability to read about and imagine suffering, to experience the sufferer's plight—at a distance. Experience was fundamentally, for the ideology of sentimentality, an *imaginative* act that required reports

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<sup>48</sup>Halttunen makes this point about the contradiction of humanitarian reform in "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100 (April 1995): 330.

<sup>49</sup>Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 305.

<sup>50</sup>Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 324, 330.



from a world beyond one's actual experience. Sight, then, was often best taken at a remove, that is, through *reading* about morally problematic situations and events.<sup>51</sup> In some ways, especially as the ideology of sentimentality gained wider acceptance in American culture, first-hand observation could actually be a detrimental means of seeing and experiencing the world.

Reading theoretically allowed reformers to control the distant witness's experience of dangerous though morally instructive events. Reformers had developed ways in their own literature for setting cultural limits on how much of a scene of cruelty was acceptable for viewing by a reading public. They sometimes warned a reader that odious material was immediately to follow (thus giving the reader the choice of reading it or not), or they set the potentially offensive material in an appendix, or suppressed violent material altogether leaving only the suggestion of it.<sup>52</sup> No matter the approach they took, reformers were consistently troubled by the problems of properly influencing the imagination of the distant readers of their materials.

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<sup>51</sup>Halttunen follows Barker-Benfield in explaining the spread of "spectatorial sympathy" in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as due to, in her paraphrase, "a growing distance from suffering in the experience of many English people" (309). Barker-Benfield suggests that this distance was the product of a confluence of factors, including slowing population growth, greater food production, price stability, rising real wages, the cessation of the plague and the civil wars, as well as greater wealth and access to consumer luxuries. None of these reasons, however, is explicitly tied to the means of communicating suffering. Missing from this list is the greater connection made possible among people by the increasing capacities of transportation and communication. Thus, while there may have been a "growing distance" from actual physical suffering, this does not mean that a cultural reorientation away from scenes of suffering would necessarily take place. It could even imply the opposite: In the early nineteenth-century U.S., at least, the proliferation of print and the greater involvement of Americans in reading it meant that suffering became a greater *presence* in the lives of Americans. A murder no longer affected solely those people who were physically connected to the crime and its aftermath, or the relatively closed community in which it happened. Now, with penny papers publishing for tens of thousands of readers, the murder was a societal event experienced, albeit at a distance, by all who read the papers or had the papers read to them—and all in gory detail.

<sup>52</sup>Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 328-30. Halttunen can see such acts only as a means of *highlighting* prurient material, rather than suppressing it, and, following Sabor, as a means of sending the reader off on "greater flights of sexual fantasy" to fill in the deleted material (329, 329n69). Halttunen seems oddly critical of the sentimentalists' interest in offering their readers a protection from scenes they might want to avoid. Her reasoning suggests that readers were already deeply involved in the literature of the pathological and only interested in stretching, in their imaginations, the pathology even further. She seems to believe, ultimately, that the sentimentalists were little more than hypocrites whose real intent was to capitalize on what she terms "the pornography of pain." It seems more likely that the sentimentalists were only following their own dictates and trying to set limits on what sorts of physical abuse were acceptable either to commit or to witness.

One of the most effective strategies sentimental reformers devised was moral exposure. Moral exposure concerned putatively private behavior and events. It was directed at individual acts. It was social in its assumption that the exposure of vice would alter great aggregates of individual behavior thereby forging social reform. As such, moral reform had quite different ends from political exposure. The papers of the Revolutionary War era (which numbered fewer than forty weeklies) pioneered the use of the exposé to dramatically reveal attacks by corrupting royal forces on native republican virtues and thus forge and mobilize patriot forces.<sup>53</sup> The dangers thus exposed, however, were inevitably of a political nature.<sup>54</sup> They comprised a battle royal of republican virtue among men fighting in a “strictly male arena.”<sup>55</sup> These political issues were as narrowly conceived as the polity and only tangentially concerned with the private behaviors of private people, or with the totality of social relations. Moral issues in the partisan press took the form of political invective. When Federalist papers accused Jefferson of having an affair with one of his slaves, their goal was to gain political advantage over a politician and not to raise up the morals of the people at large.

Political exposure rarely concerned itself with truth. Moral exposure concerned little else. As such it was thoroughly bound up with the development of the ideal of objectivity in

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<sup>53</sup>Leonard, *Power of the Press*, 33, and ch. 2 passim; “forty weeklies,” Mott, *American Journalism*, 95. See also Stephen Botein, “Printers and the American Revolution,” in Bernard Bailyn & John B. Hench, eds., *The Press and the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981). Botein shows the economic origins of the concept of the “freedom of the press,” how the concept originally meant something like the free play of information, and how printers were at first reluctant to take sides in the revolutionary conflict.

<sup>54</sup>Leonard, *Power of the Press*, 40.

<sup>55</sup>Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986), 7. Zboray and Zboray have shown how a handful of women in the Boston area were deeply involved in reading about politics in the newspapers. As the Zboray’s provide no clear rationale for delimiting their time period, nor any definition of when the antebellum era began, it is thus unclear whether these women’s involvement in political reading was significantly linked to the rise of the penny press or to other sources, such as the rise in women’s education. All of their evidence shows women reading the papers only after the onset of the penny press revolution. “Political News and Female Readership in Antebellum Boston and Its Region,” *Journalism History* 22 (Spring 1996): 2-14.

the press.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, objectivity was an outgrowth of the concept of sensationalism, which has often been seen in the historiography as standing in complete opposition to it.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Two works that closely examine objectivity in the press, Schiller (*Objectivity and the News*) and Mindich (*Just the Facts*), do not examine the role of sentimental reformism in the evolution of the concept.

The terms “sensationalism” and “objectivity,” in their modern senses, appeared in the English language about the same time, around 1800. Sensationalism is the more difficult term for us because it is buried under layers of historical usage that obscure the meanings it had for Americans in the 1830s during the penny press revolution. Something of the problem can be illustrated by the mass marketing phrase, “an overnight sensation.” Here, the word implies a media phenomenon, the wild proliferation of the image or representation of a celebrity figure. The phrase implies a vast number of people who have no actual experience of the celebrity, much less the hope of meeting the person beneath the celebrity. These diverse people are suddenly made to feel the presence of the figure as if it were a real person. Thousands and even millions of people then enter into an imaginary social relationship with the celebrity (John Caughey, *Imaginary Social Worlds: A Cultural Approach* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984], ch. 2). While sensationalism in the early nineteenth century had some connotations of both popular diversion and class difference, the word “sensation” still retained much of its earlier meaning of something bodily felt, something requiring the interaction of two physical bodies.

A Note on Usage: Although the use of the “ism” form here is, strictly speaking, anachronistic, I am using it to mitigate confusion with the many other senses of “sensational.” “Sensationalism” was coined around the 1860s. But its root meaning had appeared at the same time as “objectivity.” See the OED entry for sensation, 2a-d for the root. At 3a-c the association between sensation and the spread of both print and visual culture is made clear. The “ism” first appeared, according to the OED, in 1846, and then in a philosophical work. Only in 1865 did it appear in the context of communications media, in a decidedly negative connotation. Halttunen (“Humanitarianism,” 312, citing the OED) points out that the 1865 usage of sensationalism as its first application to the concept of addiction, but she does not link this addiction to the spread of print media. On objectivity in its modern sense, see the OED entry, definition 3b, and also Williams, *Key Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), entry for subjectivity.

Sensationalism has long been associated with a reprehensible approach to journalism that uses violence and sex to thrill an audience for mere commercial gain. Sensationalism is morally bankrupt, the argument goes, because it has no care as to its effect on the behavior of the audiences it stimulates. Historians have tended to treat sensationalism as either a means to divert popular attention away from political and social issues or as an expression of a new popular, working-class sensibility that threatened middle class decorum (as diversion and commercial exploitation, see Mott [*American Journalism*, 225-26]; Ray Harvey Pearce, “The Significance of the Captivity Narrative,” *American Literature* 19 [March 1947]: 1-20; and Richard Slotkin, “Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800,” *American Quarterly* 25 [March 1973]: 3-31. As working-class expression, see Saxton (*Rise and Fall*) and Schiller (*Objectivity and the News*). In either case, sensationalism is set off against objectivity. Objectivity is the claim that a writer can present a story of events without polluting it with any of his or her own political values.

Schiller rightly attacks this notion of objectivity. He asserts that objectivity, rather than being a pure form of truth, should be considered as “a cultural form with its own set of conventions” (*Objectivity*, 5). For Schiller, the problem of objectivity is to find the “bias” always at work in newspaper writing. Sensationalism became the bias of the penny press because it allowed these new papers to adopt the workingmen’s radically democratic rhetoric. In this model, “sensationalism” is merely the epithet that the established orders hurled at this democratic rhetoric. The problem for Schiller’s thesis is that he attempts to equate objectivity with facticity and thus to explain away sensationalism. While noting that Baconian precepts of observation and experience were “universally acknowledged” in the 1830s U.S., spread here through the work of the Scottish common sense philosophers, Schiller equates these precepts with Comtian positivism, calling them “the American variant of positivism” (83). In doing this, he cuts against his own admonition to search for the cultural conventions undergirding objectivity, for he does not adequately consider how these very same Scottish philosophers were busy re-introducing a moral framework to the experience of the senses that would blossom in the U.S. as the ideology of sentiment. In the end, he produces a declension model of newspaper change in which the 1830s were a golden age when papers told the working-class facts, followed by the increasing corporatization of

To be sensational, to be sensorially present, reported or exposed events had to be made vibrantly objective through a narrative of explicit details. To the extent that experience and moral sense derived from things outside of individual consciousness, representations of them, if they were to produce sympathetic feelings, had to provide as much of their “thingness” as possible. And because sentimentalists claimed to deal in truth, they were morally obliged to strip their narratives of personal judgment, that is, of subjectivity. In this, they were aided by the emerging distinction between the subjective and the objective. After 1820, the English romanticists, Coleridge in particular, first began elaborating what is for us the common distinction between the subjective and the objective, between the thinking subject and the independent object.<sup>58</sup> Increasingly, this division associated the objective with the factual, neutral, unbiased, and rational.<sup>59</sup> The subjective was associated with the impressionable, partisan, biased, and emotional, not to mention the scientifically unreliable. The ideology of sentiment relied heavily on this distinction between the subjective and objective, not by maintaining it rigorously but by first delineating the two poles and then

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newspapers and “formalization of the news” (182). As Schiller puts it, “formal equality of access to news reports came increasingly to mask substantive inequality in public access to information” (182). In other words, he claims that editors became the agents of the ballooning corporate bureaucracy who controlled the sorts of information newspaper readers had access to. But even in the days before the specialization of various newspaper functions, penny press conductors like Bennett served this same gate-keeping function. Throughout, Schiller naively takes Bennett at his word, that the *Herald* was dedicated only to the facts. And this is in spite of Schiller’s own admission that the penny press conductors were “fundamentally self-interested” (179).

Our cultural preference for objectivity over sensationalism is denoted by their respective suffixes. The “-ism” refers to ideology and implies a covert project, a web of lies constructed to mask political or commercial exploitation. The “-ity” suggests a high degree of some inherent quality. Thus, objectivity implies a high degree of *object* in a story, or, in other words, a high degree of truth. The direct opposition of these two terms, however, is a product of the late nineteenth century, well after the rise of the penny press. This opposition has obscured, for twentieth century historians, the fact that these two terms, sensationalism and objectivity, did not develop in opposition to one another. Rather, *both* were involved in the problem of communicating the truth (or, more specifically, a culturally conditioned ideal of truth) to large numbers of people across great distances. To understand how they developed in tandem and mutually informed one another, these terms must be placed in a context that historians have ignored vis-à-vis the newspaper. Both were integral aspects in the antebellum era of the developing cultural and political ideology of sentiment.

<sup>58</sup>Williams, *Key Words*, 262-63. See also the *Oxford English Dictionary*, entry for “objective,” sense 3b, “Opposed to *subjective* in the modern sense: That is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the perceiving or thinking subject; hence, that is, or has the character of being, a ‘thing’ external to the mind; real.”

<sup>59</sup>This definition of the objective was, to a great degree, the culmination of the Lockian and Baconian emphasis on observation and empiricism, and was closely associated with the nineteenth century development of positivistic science.

collapsing them. Sentimentality held that the objective experience of the world was not rational but emotional; for emotions sprang directly from human kind's innate moral sensibility. Reason was, in sentimentality, the right, intuitive action of the moral sense. Truth was the identity of one's own feelings with what ought to be.

This emphasis on feelings led critics of sentimentality to code it as "female." The social reform movements and literary genres associated with it, likewise, were often labeled as female culture. Its productions thus had a complicated relationship with the penny press. The news was considered to be a "male" arena due to the press's longstanding relationship to politics. The penny press originally took up elements of sentimental culture as a way to fill pages with matter distinct from that in the established political and mercantile papers. This need for "filler" gradually diminished as the penny papers metamorphosed into established institutions by the 1840s. The appearance of a second wave of penny papers, such as the New York *Tribune* and the *Times*, actively sought to engage politics more directly than had the first wave.<sup>60</sup> But the objective and sensational modes of sentimental storytelling remained crucial to the penny press's literary form. To understand the impact of these modes on the penny press, it is necessary to examine briefly four of the most important.

#### *Emerging Sentimental Modes: Objectivity and Sensationalism*

Sentimentality, especially when engaging in moral exposé, always rode a thin line between righteousness and titillation. Through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sentimental authors experimented with where the line between the two ought best to lie. In the process, they developed a variety of literary genres that encompassed the two intimately related modes of sensational and objective writing that would become vital to the penny press revolution, and later to the development of the magazine.

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<sup>60</sup>This is not to say that these papers became partisan journals. Indeed, Greeley's *Tribune* is remarkable for the way it fused a Whig-leaning ideology with the culture of sentimental reform.

The literary “sketch” was a new genre that rapidly gained popularity in the U.S. beginning in the 1810s.<sup>61</sup> It was preeminently a periodical genre. It was quick to read and easy to digest. Sketches were short and concise. They largely eschewed plot and character development. They had to be vivid and unadulterated by artistic process. Written mostly in the first person, sketches were supposed to give readers the impression of an actual person discovering some unique or poignant scene of daily life. These scenes were not random, but derived their interest precisely from their ability to objectively express sentimental morality.<sup>62</sup> These conceits of the literary sketch—its brevity, its objectivity, its lack of artistry—made it a popular form both in terms of production and reception. Writers from a Boston Brahmin to the women mill-worker contributors of the *Lowell Offering* to miners in the rough Nevada mining camps could use the form to construct or criticize the cultural repertoire of American life.

Formal elements of the sketch, particularly its brevity, “spontaneity,” personal voice, and visual nature, led antebellum critics and readers to characterize it as female.<sup>63</sup> Often written by “bachelors” (i.e., nonsexual, or feminized, men) and women, the sketch was a static image of relations rather than a dynamic narrative of actions.<sup>64</sup> Through the sketch,

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<sup>61</sup>For the sketch and its general attributes, see Kristie Hamilton, *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), ch. 1.

<sup>62</sup>Hamilton (*America’s Sketchbook*, 4) aptly points out that Hawthorne, in the following passage about the difference between the pictorial sketch and the finished picture from *The Marble Faun*, was simultaneously evaluating the value of the literary sketch (a genre Hawthorne often worked in): “There is an effluence of divinity in the first sketch; and there, if anywhere, you find the pure light of inspiration, which the subsequent toil of the artist serves to bring out in stronger lustre, indeed, but likewise adulterates it with what belongs to an inferior mood. the aroma and fragrance of new thought were perceptible in these [sketched] designs, after three centuries of wear and tear. The charm lay partly in their very imperfection; for this is suggestive, and sets the imagination to work; whereas, the finished picture, if a good one, leaves the spectator nothing to do, and if bad, confuses, stupefies, disenchant, and disheartens him.”

Hawthorne’s last sentence is a succinct definition of the picturesque. The picturesque aesthetic would increasingly become important to the literary sketch as magazine editors took over the sketch genre later in the century.

<sup>63</sup>While Hamilton lays out the elements of the form and its gender orientation, she does not link the sketch to the cultural frame of sentimentality that was essential to the form’s widespread acceptance. Moreover, she remains wedded to the literary scholar’s preference for the book, and does not explore the form’s deep dependence on the development of American periodical forms.

<sup>64</sup>Hamilton points out that Melville’s “The Heaven of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” was an attack on the bachelor of literary sketches. For Melville, the bachelor was a female man, unattached, genial, apathetic, sentimental, unmotivated by politics. Irving’s Geoffrey Crayon was the prototype for the bachelor sketch

both men and women could explore the nature of American culture from a private, “personal” and nonpolitical vantage point. Caroline Kirkland, for instance, characterized her collection of sketches of Western life “a meandering recital of common-place occurrences—mere gossip about every-day people.” But as gossip, she was quick to add, her sketches did not have less truth value but more, for “deriving no interest from coloring [i.e., aesthetic practice], [the collection] can be valuable only for its truth.”<sup>65</sup> This was a claim to a plain, simple, homely truth that passed from person to person. Hawthorne himself affirmed the necessity of gossip-as-truth, noting in *The House of the Seven Gables* that “It is often instructive to take the woman’s, the private and domestic view, of a public man.”<sup>66</sup> Emerson as well, in “The American Scholar,” had foreseen the coming of a new, sentimentally true literature “of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life....”<sup>67</sup> Truth here, taken from “the woman’s, the private and domestic view,” was a way of envisioning external society that did not make claims to social laws, but was bound up in the problem of personal, psychological motivation, or the truth of our internal human nature as it was molded by the American climate and informed by the American spirit. For sentimentalists, the less artistry involved the greater the moral content. No one expressed this better than the English writer George Eliot, when she asserted that the “faithful representing of commonplace things” provided “the raw material of moral sentiment.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, there was no greater sentimental mode of writing than objectivity.

Sentimental moral reform, however, created a difficult literary dilemma. Moral themes always rode a thin line between righteousness and titillation. To make themselves physically felt, sentimental authors sometimes believed they had to expose readers to

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narrator. Melville also attacked the sentimental in the second of these two linked stories, linking “the maids,” women mill workers, to the invasion of the countryside by industrialism and commerce, for in “Tartarus,” as Hamilton observes, “the feminine (or the domestic) and the commercial are cast as co-agents in enslaving” the male sketch writer (*America’s Sketchbook*, 127).

<sup>65</sup>Cited in Hamilton, *America’s Sketchbook*, 29.

<sup>66</sup>Cited in Hamilton, *America’s Sketchbook*, 29.

<sup>67</sup>Emerson, “American Scholar,” in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 61.

<sup>68</sup>Cited in Hart, *Popular Book*, 98.

gruesome details of crimes and punishments. These details, because they were aimed at creating feelings in a reader far from the scene of an event created a form of writing later known (particularly in reference to newspaper articles that stripped away any pretext to moral purpose) as “sensationalism.”

This sensationalism was particularly attentive to a relatively new sort of literary genre, the gory murder narrative.<sup>69</sup> Originating in the eighteenth-century American execution sermon, these narratives stripped away the overt didacticism of the sermon. Because the sermons were mired in the doctrine of innate depravity, they paid relatively little attention to the crime itself. Instead they focused on the community’s identity with the murderer. The murder narratives of the early 1800s grew out of the criminal confessions often printed along with execution sermons. Soon, the sources for these murder narratives switched to trial reports. Both sources allowed readers to witness, through the visual medium of print, the crime itself. Both sensationalized crime through heightening the objective depiction of crime scenes, criminals, and victims. Increasingly, these narratives “adhered to the central novelistic conventions of formal realism.”<sup>70</sup> They employed more extensive descriptions of gore and carnage to heighten reader’s sympathetic response. In the process, these murder narratives were cast in sentimental terms, blaming environmental causes for inciting the criminal’s passions and sundering his or her innate morality. Where the murderer was once merely an extreme example of each and every person’s sinful nature, the objectively depicted murderer of sensationalized sentimentality was alien to human nature because he or she had assaulted the normal structure of human feelings.

The widely popular novel of seduction, which served as an important medium of social criticism throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, provided another source for determining both the sorts of subjects the penny press might offer the reading public and

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<sup>69</sup>This description of murders narratives is based on Karen Halttunen, “Early American Murder Narratives,” in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Power of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 67-101.

<sup>70</sup>Halttunen, “Murder Narratives,” 79.



the best strategies for presenting those subjects.<sup>71</sup> Like the sentimental murder narrative, seduction novels eschewed overtly didactic moralizing. They presented themselves, instead, as documents of moral truth. The subtitles to American seduction novels typically read: “A Novel Founded on Fact,” “Founded in Truth,” “Founded on Incidents in Real Life,” “Founded on Recent Facts.”<sup>72</sup> These subtitles were a defense against the criticism that they were contributing to the spread of depravity through a sensationalism shorn of moral lesson. They could have countered such critiques by attaching didactic morals. But this would have run counter to the very idea of objective truth on which they were founded: Objective stories made sensationally present did not have to didacticize because they appealed directly to readers’ innate morality.

The seduction narrative was quite well-known to Americans by the 1830s. The most popular American novel of the Early Republic was Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797). This novel, in turn, was based on earlier narratives, which had percolated through American culture for some years in pamphlets and the press through the exchange system, of an incident that produced much moral grist for the first sentimental mill of New England. This was the story of Elizabeth Whitman, a woman of some intellectual accomplishment and social standing, who died in a tavern after having been seduced and abandoned.<sup>73</sup> The reports of Whitman’s downfall also had a literary predecessor. The works of the English founder of the novel, Samuel Richardson, were the most popular literature in post-Revolutionary America.<sup>74</sup> His *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady* followed the education, seduction, abandonment, and death of a young woman who rebels against her domineering family in the name of love. So powerful was this cautionary tale that even strident Christians who abhorred

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<sup>71</sup>On sentimental and gothic novels as social criticism, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. chs. 6, 8.

<sup>72</sup>Hart, *Popular Book*, 55-56; Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 79-80.

<sup>73</sup>James L. Woodress, *A Yankee’s Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow* (New York: Greenwood, 1958), 60-64; Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 140ff.; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 248-49. Kerber notes similarities between these early novels and Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*.

<sup>74</sup>Hart, *Popular Book*, 55-56. Kerber points out that Richardson’s subtitle claims his narrative is a history and not a novel (*Women of the Republic*, 248). It is interesting to note that Samuel Richardson was also a printer.

novels and novel reading could rank it along with the Bible as the age's two most important moral guides.<sup>75</sup>

A key element of the sentimental social project was the exposure of wrong-doing and unvirtuous behavior. Reformist sensationalism built on Enlightenment rationality and Lockian conceptions of objectivity through the practice of exposure of evil to the light of inquiry. The optimistic assumption (even buffeted as it was by doubts over how much of a wrong should be exposed) was that a publicized wrong would soon be righted as social conscience naturally reacted.

The dilemmas of sensational moral exposure are well illustrated by the short-lived career of John R. McDowall.<sup>76</sup> A Princeton Divinity Student and agent for the American Tract Society, McDowall was horrified by the plight of prostitutes in New York's notorious Five Points slum district. With the assistance of the wealthy, evangelical, reform-minded Tappan brothers, McDowall formed the Magdalen Society with the intent of reforming the city's prostitutes. He also issued a weekly journal to publicize the need for reform. McDowall graphically recounted abortions, infanticides, and the spread of venereal diseases. Abortion was so rampant, he intoned in 1833, that "dead infants are frequently found; sometimes in privies, wells, sewers, ponds, docks, streets, [and] open fields."<sup>77</sup> Such

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<sup>75</sup>Hart, *Popular Book*, 55.

<sup>76</sup>David Reynolds calls McDowall's form of sensationalism "subversive" and lists him as one of the "immoral or dark reformers" (*Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* [New York: Knopf, 1988], 57-64; emphasis in original). Reynolds claims that this subversive sensationalism became a vital element in works by those antebellum authors grouped together under the canonical label of the American literary Renaissance (59). Reynolds, however, does not adequately place sensationalism in an ideological and historical context, resting content to assume that there was simply a "public thirst" or a "demand" for sensational news (63, 173). Moreover, he does not adequately separate out criticisms of America's vile *political* press from its socially and morally sensational press. He thus misreads much criticism of the American press as attacking prurient sexuality rather than its actual target: *political* scurrility. For more on McDowall see Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros* (New York: Norton, 1992); Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The American City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971); idem, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Larry Whiteaker, *Seduction, Prostitution, and Moral Reform in New York, 1830-1860* (New York: Garland, 1997), ch. 5.

<sup>77</sup>Cited in Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 68.

accounts, while spurring many New Yorkers to join the movement for reform, also received widespread condemnation. Papers like the *Commercial Advertiser* and the *Courier & Enquirer* argued that the sensational depiction of prostitution risked seducing women into the very vices the Magdalen Society sought to prevent. The *Advertiser* condemned McDowell's weekly "news" paper as "a sort of Directory of Iniquity—a brothel companion" that "under the pretense of reforming mankind, excites the imagination of youth by the most glowing pictures of sensual debauchery."<sup>78</sup> The city's leading Presbyterian paper, the *New York Observer*, reviled McDowell's journal as "calculated to promote lewdness."<sup>79</sup> The society's journal was even censured by a New York grand jury.<sup>80</sup> Not to be outdone, the forces of religious authority, in the person of the Third Presbytery of New York, convicted McDowell of corrupting public morals and defrauding subscribers.<sup>81</sup> In the face of these attacks, the society disbanded. The lesson offered to reformers was that those who made social problems *too evident* would not be praised as reformers but condemned as promoters of vice and discord (as would be the case with the abolitionists for decades to come). The lesson taken by the conductors of the penny press was rather different.

The success of McDowell's sensational *Journal* revealed to penny press printer/editors that there was a massive, untapped audience for the sensational exposure of vice.<sup>82</sup> Reformers feared this transformation of exposure would strip it of its moral framework, leaving only the experience of brutality and the glorification of vice.<sup>83</sup> Their fears

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<sup>78</sup>Cited in Reynolds, *Beneath*, 63.

<sup>79</sup>*Memoir and Select Remains of the Late Rev. John R. M'Dowall, the Martyr of the Seventh Commandment, in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1838), 213; Whiteacre, *Seduction*, 101-102. The *Observer* was owned by Sidney and Richard Morse, brothers to telegraph inventor Samuel Morse.

<sup>80</sup>*Memoir and Select Remains*, 213; Whiteacre, *Seduction*, 101.

<sup>81</sup>Reynolds, *Beneath*, 63; Whiteacre, *Seduction*, 102-103. See also *Memoir and Select Remains*, 419. McDowell was defrocked by the Presbytery and died an early death in 1836 at the age of 35. No doubt a great part of the Presbytery's anger was based in McDowell's criticism of aid that was offered along strictly sectarian lines (*Memoir and Select Remains*, 205).

<sup>82</sup>*McDowell's Journal* reached a circulation of about 14,000 at its height, with 7,000 copies going to subscribers across the Northeast and Midwest and another 7,000 distributed as free tracts in New York City (Whiteacre, *Seduction*, 100). Reynolds's claim that subscribers to the journal numbered around a hundred thousand seems largely inflated (*Beneath*, 63).

<sup>83</sup>Schiller makes much of the penny papers' use of journalistic exposure (*Objectivity*, 54ff.). But his exclusive focus on the republican political context, to the exclusion of other philosophical, cultural and ideological

were magnified by their belief that the danger of sensationalism was not simply its educational power, but its ability literally to create bodily sensations in one's experience of distant objects and acts. To defend against this sort of criticism the penny press adopted two strategies. The first was to claim for themselves the mantle of sentimental reform. Morality became codified in the penny papers, even more than in the reformists' own materials, as a problem of the manners of private as well as public behavior. The penny papers presented themselves as the public enforcer of this morality. The *New York Sun*, in 1834 for example, warned young men not to frequent "bad company." For no matter how innocent a youth's intentions in visiting a neighborhood such as Five Points, he ran the risk of becoming implicated in nefarious activities and damaging the feelings of those he loved. The *Sun* made clear that its weapon of enforcement was exposure. It was inevitable, the paper declared, that the day following the youth's slum sojourn he would "figure... in a 'police report' [in the paper] before ten thousand readers, as the hero of some disgraceful night occurrence. His reputation is stabbed..."<sup>84</sup> In perfect sentimental form, the paper warned it was not the youth but "the feelings of virtuous parents and sisters [that would be] wounded." The paper added, ominously, "Young men should take warning."<sup>85</sup>

The second strategy was to present sensationalism as objectivity. McDowall's downfall was his overt moralizing, for it set him up to be accused of hypocrisy. The penny press avoided didacticism by claiming, along with James Gordon Bennett, that its goal was but "to record facts, on every public and proper subject."<sup>86</sup> "A truce to moralising," Bennett

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contexts, leads him to emphasize the facticity of the penny press's journalism. He thus is left with having to argue that objectivity arose virtually overnight when it was a process that took decades of formulation. Schiller is also too ready to equate the strategy of exposure with artisan republicanism. He thus forces an identity between workingmen's democratic rhetoric, aimed at aristocratic and capitalist corruption, and Truth. In this way, he undercuts his earlier emphasis on the necessity of examining cultural constructions of truth and bias, rather than accepting the classic argument of the news industry that any news can be value free.

<sup>84</sup>The warning against visiting the slums has been taken by some historians as evidence that these papers were directing themselves to a coalescing urban middle class (e.g., Schudson, *Discovering the News*). But the lower-order background of the *Sun's* conductors, its large workingmen's audience, and its corresponding low price, evinces the paper's aim to reform youth from *all* ranks of society, not merely those of a middle class.

<sup>85</sup>18 April 1834, cited in Schiller, *Objectivity*, 67.

<sup>86</sup>Cited in Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts*, 39. The claim was from the *Herald's* prospectus, printed in the specimen copy of 6 May 1835.

once speciously declared, “let us come to facts.”<sup>87</sup> A number of historians have taken Bennett at his word and have declared that the penny press invented journalistic objectivity and popularized the “mania for facts.”<sup>88</sup> But, as an exploration of the most infamous early series of sensational reporting of the early penny press years reveals, the genres of literary sketch, murder narrative, seduction novel, and moral exposé were central to the invention of both the “news” and the social imagination it expressed.

### *The Murder of Helen Jewett*

Someone murdered the prostitute, often known as Helen Jewett, on 9 April 1836. A young clerk, Richard Robinson, was arrested for the crime within days. He had visited Jewett on her last night, and not for the first time. But he proclaimed his innocence. He denied having bludgeoned her with the ax discovered in the yard behind the brothel where Jewett plied her trade. He also denied owning the blue cloak dropped near the ax, apparently as the murderer escaped over a high fence. Robinson’s trial was a political circus. His employer hired Ogden Hoffman, one of the city’s leading Whig lawyers to defend the clerk. The public’s response to the trial became tied up in a series of labor disputes, particularly one involving striking tailors. Hoffman won the case, and Robinson disappeared into history.

Penny press editors had a field day reporting both Jewett’s murder and the subsequent trial. This was the second great crime covered by the new daily papers, and in some ways coverage of the murder and resulting trial established the template for the

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<sup>87</sup>[Bennett], “Police Office,” New York *Herald*, 31 August 1835, 3:1; and see also Schiller, *Objectivity*, 55; Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, 19-20.

<sup>88</sup>The phrase “mania for facts” is from James Herbert Morse, “The Element in American Fiction: Since the [Civil] War,” *Century* n.s. 3 (July 1883): 362. For this mania in general, see David Shy, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Shy uses the term but without citing its original source. For all the claims that the penny press discovered/invented objectivity in the modern journalistic sense, it is instructive to note that the first issue of Bennett’s *Herald* opened neither with a hard-hitting political exposé nor a sensational murder, but two columns of a literary sketch on the inconveniences of stage coach travel and the pleasures of rural scenery. The first page of the first issue of the New York *Sun*, likewise, was filled with poetry and short fiction.

modern conception of “the news.”<sup>89</sup> The first sensational crime had been the trial of the “prophet” Matthias in 1834. But by 1836 there was a new player in the penny press field. Bennett founded his New York *Herald* in May 1835. The paper was deeply immersed in the culture of sentimentality. Bennett, who wrote virtually every article in the *Herald* for several years, was a Scottish immigrant educated in Aberdeen, one of the centers of common sense philosophy.<sup>90</sup> He was immersed in the works of Scottish common sense, as well as the Scottish literature of Burns, Scott, and Byron.<sup>91</sup> In covering the Jewett case, Bennett flaunted the literary sources of his various narrative strategies. His coverage thus lays bare the literary influence on the invention of both the news and the social imagination it gave rise to.

Bennett’s opened his first report of the murder scene in the sauntering style characteristic of literary sketches. He was in no hurry. Speaking in the first person (the quintessential sketch point of view), he described his urban gambol toward Jewett’s brothel: “Yesterday afternoon, about 4 o’clock,” Bennett wrote, “the sun broke out for a moment in splendor.”<sup>92</sup> Writing as if he were on a pleasure jaunt, Bennett continued, “I started on a visit to the scene at 41 Thomas Street.”

On gaining entrance to the site of the crime, Bennett switched to the novel of seduction to frame Jewett’s biography. In his very first report of the murder, he discovered a print of Lord Byron hanging on Jewett’s wall as well as several volumes of his poetry—Byron being of course a widely acknowledged symbol of licentiousness.

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<sup>89</sup>See Schiller, *Objectivity*. But note that Schiller’s emphasis is on the concept of objectivity and not on either the literary sources of narrative strategy or the influence of sentimental culture in the coverage.

<sup>90</sup>He attended Blair College, a Catholic school from 1810 to 1814. In the five years following college, he spent much time visiting the hallowed sites of Scottish history and literature. He read widely, including Byron, Burns, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*.

<sup>91</sup>Oliver Carlson, *The Man Who Made News: James Gordon Bennett* (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1942), 17, 20, 21; James L. Crouthamel, *Bennett’s New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 6. Bennett belonged to a literary club in college that met in Byron’s old school room (Carlson, 17).

<sup>92</sup>“Most Atrocious Murder,” New York *Herald*, 11 April 1836, reprinted: 12 April 1836 4:1. The lag time from the day of the murder (the 9th) to Bennett’s first report (on the 11th) was due to the 10th being Sunday, a day when no papers were printed.

Moreover, Jewett had apparently been a novel reader (another sign to many of moral corruption). Bennett found volumes of Scott and Bulwer-Lytton, and a well-read copy of Thomas Moore's Persian-scented *Lalla Rookh*, as well.<sup>93</sup> On the fourth day of the story, Bennett drew explicit parallels between Jewett's past and *Clarissa*.<sup>94</sup> He described Jewett's story as if lifted from Richardson's novel and from *The Coquette*. Jewett's real name was Dorcus Doyen, Bennett reported. She had grown up an orphan in a small Maine town. She had tasted privilege during a five-year apprenticeship as a servant to a well-to-do family that delighted in novel reading. She was well-educated and possessed a "great intellectual passion." Other, more sinister passions, however, "began to control her life." Dorcus lost her innocence when she met a cashier, a "fine youth, elegant and educated." This young man took advantage of her own "wild, imaginative mind" to seduce from her "all... that constitutes the honor and ornament of the female character."<sup>95</sup> Dorcus, disgraced, left Maine, drifted to New York, and changed her name. A

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<sup>93</sup>"Most Atrocious Murder," *Herald*, 11 April 1836, reprinted 12 April 1836, 4:2; "Still Further of the Tragedy," *Herald*, 13 April 1836, 1:2. Bulwer-Lytton was often criticized for lewd writing. Bennett also discovered copies of various periodicals that specialized in "light city literature," including the *Knickerbocker*, the *Lady's Companion*, the *Mirror*, and the *Albion* newspaper ("Still Further," 1:2).

<sup>94</sup>"Rapid Increase," *Herald*, 14 April 1836, 1:1. Andie Tucher (*Froth and Scum* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994]) has noted the similarities between coverage of the Jewett-Robinson affair with sentimental fiction, but without paying attention to either the context of the ideology of sentiment or the literary trope of the sentimental victim. Tucher maps two penny press responses to the case. The *Sun* and *Transcript* depicted Jewett as a "Poor Unfortunate" whose death should serve as a critique of the new exploitation of workers. This, claims Tucher, was "classic subversion" (72, suggesting Reynolds's use of "subversive" in *Beneath*). Bennett, according to Tucher, cast Jewett's bordello-mates as "Sirens" bent on tearing society asunder. Tucher casts Bennett as a protector of the interests of "masters and capitalists" (73) without catching any of his blatant conspiracy mongering, which strongly hinted that the Police, his rival papers, and some of the city's most important figures (who he suggested had been present at the bordello the night of the murder) were all bent on scape-goating Robinson. Tucher makes the unsubstantiated charge that Bennett was extorting money from the wealthy by threatening to name them in his newspaper. Tucher is, in the end, too mired in flippant critique. Her final analysis would seem to be that the penny press's coverage of the trial was but a "humbug" on the order of Richard Allen Locke's celebrated moon hoax, built on Jewett as "an archetype, a symbol, a myth, a heroine of popular tradition"—take your pick (55, 62). Tucher claims that the *Transcript* and the *Sun* were highly accurate in their coverage, while Bennett fabricated evidence and charges. Patricia Cline Cohen, in her exhaustively researched history of the case, counters Tucher: "on the whole, Bennett was far more accurate in his reportage than the *Transcript* or the *Sun*" (*The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth Century New York* [New York: Knopf, 1998], 367n14). Bennett came closer to unmasking the rich and powerful Livingston, one of the city's most important figures than did his rival papers. Cohen points out that within days of the murder Bennett charged that the house was "knowingly let out for such purposes [as prostitution] by one of our most respectable and pious citizens" (cited in *Murder*, 103).

<sup>95</sup>"The Recent Tragedy," *Herald*, 12 April 1836, 1:1.

deflowered naïf, she was forced into one sordid trade open to a woman of her status. But in high sentimental fashion, the penny paper's depicted her as redeemed due to her continuing faith in the power of love. Her story was made all the more poignant in the penny press accounts by the revelation that she and Robinson (also a young immigrant to the city) had had an affair that transcended the prostitute–client relation. (“I have often told you that I love you...,” she had written Robinson in July of 1835.<sup>96</sup>) The seduction novel may have even aided Jewett in conceptualizing her own life story. She apparently read *Clarissa*, which, in the words of one contemporary commentator, “inspired her with sentiment.”<sup>97</sup> (In an extraordinary irony, Pierpont Edwards, the uncle of the presiding judge in Robinson's trial, Judge Ogden Edwards, was widely rumored to be the model for the seducer in *The Coquette*.<sup>98</sup>) It is this association with the tragic fallen woman of seduction literature that explains why no penny paper impugned the prostitute Jewett herself.

Bennett's tour of the murder scene shifted from literary sketch to murder narrative as he came to Jewett's room, where her corpse still rested. Before picturing Jewett's “ghastly corpse,” he followed reform practice and warned his readers of the grisly images to follow: “I could scarcely look at it for a second or two.” But the demands of the murder genre required him to describe it in some detail. First, Bennett sought to heighten the chiaroscuro of the tragedy by eroticizing Jewett's corpse. He described the “perfect figure—the exquisite limbs—the fine face—the full arms—the beautiful bust.” After comparing Jewett's lifeless body to the statue of the Venus de Medicis, he noticed “the first process of dust returning to dust.”<sup>99</sup> He carefully described, in shockingly objective terms, how “One arm lay over her bosom—the other was inverted and hanging over her

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<sup>96</sup>Cited in Cohen, *Murder*, 227.

<sup>97</sup>George Wilkes, “The Lives of Helen Jewett,” in *The National Police Gazette* (1848), cited in Cohen, 179.

<sup>98</sup>Cohen, *Murder*, 319; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 249; Caroline Healey Dall, *The Romance of the Association; or, One Last Glimpse of Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1875), 68.

<sup>99</sup>“Most Atrocious Murder,” 4:1-2.



head.” He skirted the bound of propriety by describing how “The left side [of her body] down to the waist” had been burned in a fire set by the murderer. It was charred and discolored by the heat. He inspected “the dreadful bloody gashes on the right temple, which must have caused instantaneous dissolution.” Such reporting, common in the murder narratives consumed in private were joltingly new in the public medium of the newspaper.

Bennett immediately began the process of searching for the best target for moral exposure. He first considered sketching Robinson as the murderer, calling the clerk “a villain of too black a die for mortal. Of his intentions there can be no doubt...”<sup>100</sup> His initial impulse was to render Robinson as the sentimental criminal, that is, as a monster whose passions thwarted his innate morality. This was the tack taken by the other penny papers. They attempted to expose Robinson as an exemplar of upper-class hypocrisy which preached public morality but practiced private vice in the city’s burgeoning prostitution trade. But by the second or third day of the story, Bennett began to suspect Robinson’s culpability. He sensed a secret wish among the city’s elite to railroad Robinson. He warned his readers, “There is some mysterious juggle going on. Look to it—look to it.”<sup>101</sup> Bennett, who toyed with blaming Jewett’s fellow prostitutes (jealous, presumably of her learning and her ability to charm numerous johns), turned the case into a means for attacking the entire interlocking system of elite society.

The murder of Helen Jewett and subsequent trial of the accused Richard Robinson let loose a torrent of sentimental moralizing in the penny press. Ironically, at the time of the murder, the *Herald* was in midst of a series of articles by reformist John McDowall in which he defended his sensational program for reforming prostitution.<sup>102</sup> Bennett closed his first article on Jewett’s murder by wondering, “In what a horrible condition is a portion of the

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<sup>100</sup>“Most Atrocious Murder,” 4:1.

<sup>101</sup>“Further Particulars,” *Herald*, 12 April 1836, 1:3.

<sup>102</sup> Bennett himself chastised the “uncharitable, the unchristian, the inhuman spirit with which the Presbytery” had hounded McDowall (“[No title],” *Herald*, 14 April 1836, 1:2).

young men of this devoted city?"<sup>103</sup> The next day he commented, "It is horrid. It creates melancholy. It produces horror. Will it work a reform? Will it make the licentious pause?"<sup>104</sup> He then turned the case into an indictment of New York's urban life. Jewett's murder was "the natural result of a state of society and morals which ought to be reformed altogether in unhappy New York. That horrible tragedy is the legitimate fruit of laxity in our old men—want of principle in many of the married—and unregulated passion in the young."<sup>105</sup> But he kept his guns trained on the elites who profited from prostitution and who thus facilitated vicious passions of youth. Throughout the trial, Bennett kept the pressure on one of the key elite players in the crime, suggesting his identity in every way short of naming him. This was the powerful John R. Livingston, who owned the building where Jewett prostituted herself.<sup>106</sup>

### **The Daily Newspaper: A Nationally Local Institution**

The penny press changed the way urban Americans envisioned their social connection to one another. Where preindustrial groups imagined their world in supernatural terms and peopled life with gods and spirits, the penny press expressed the changing social relations of the urbanizing community. It helped make the very ability to imagine society a requirement of social life. Key to this new social imagination were the sentimental literary sources penny press printers employed to tell their news stories. Through the use of moral sensationalism and objectivity, the new papers sharpened urbanites' powers to imagine a social world that stretched beyond their day-to-day interpersonal relations. They fused the sentimental conception of morality with a popular understanding of truth as objectivity. Morality would

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<sup>103</sup>"Most Atrocious Murder," *Herald*, 11 April 1836, Reprinted 12 April 1836, 4:2. (A foul-up at the printers apparently made the 11 April edition a rarity.)

<sup>104</sup>"The Recent Tragedy," *Herald*, 12 April 1836: 1:2. These repeated references to horror suggest Bennett's familiarity with another mode of sentimental literature, the Gothic story. On the Gothic genre in the Early Republic, see Davidson, *Revolution*, 212-53.

<sup>105</sup>"Still Further," 1:2. Bennett's harangue at society and his belief in Robinson's innocence of the murder did not prevent him from chastising the clerk. When Robinson was acquitted by a jury, Bennett pronounced his own harsh sentence on the young man: "Robinson, like Cain, has mingled with wickedness, and will wander like him, over this earth, an outcast and a wretch" ("Robinson's Case—Another Hoax," *Herald*, 15 June 1836, 1:1).

<sup>106</sup>Cohen, *Murder*, 103. For more on Livingston as a brothel landlord, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 42-46. Gilfoyle refers to Livingston as "New York's leading landlord of vice" (44).

henceforth exist in things and concrete social relations and require no supernatural justification or metaphysics. As the penny press widened the audience for sentimental culture, it brought moral culture down from the Parnassus of elite and privately read forms of literature to the every day life of urban streets.

But the geographical and social spread of the newspaper as a social institution was severely uneven. The penny press revolution was an urban phenomenon limited chiefly to the cities of the northeast, especially New York. The telegraph would later extend and consolidate the revolution in smaller cities, but even then the daily sentimental newspaper remained a decidedly urban institution. It could not transform itself into a medium for imagining national community.

Even within the context of a single city, the newspaper had created as much social division as cohesion. Political, religious, and mercantile papers all, by their very nature, created sharp boundaries of party and sect.<sup>107</sup> Their subscription practices, in which potential subscribers signed a list on which all other subscribers' names were visible, publicized distinct communities of readers. These communities could experience intense political friction, as one Virginian discovered in 1856. His slave-owning neighbors indicted him for conspiracy when he attempted to form a club to subscribe to the weekly edition of Horace Greeley's abolitionist leaning New York *Tribune*.<sup>108</sup>

The intensely polarizing political papers had not disappeared with the onslaught of the penny press. Indeed, these papers adapted to the new practices and carried on the partisan tradition in new guises. Their reputation for salacious partisanship often redounded on all newspapers. "[N]o man," scoffed John Neal in 1843, "expects the truth of them."<sup>109</sup> Through

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<sup>107</sup>Leonard, *News for All*, 49.

<sup>108</sup>Leonard, *News for All*, 50. The religious papers created somewhat different communities of readers. They were less limited to specific urban locales. And some of them achieved relatively high circulation numbers. But, while they did less to advertise their subscriber community, their sectarian nature fostered an often powerful sectarian divisiveness.

<sup>109</sup>John Neal, "Newspapers," *Pioneer* 1 (January 1843): 62.

the 1880s, parties still controlled enough newspapers to make the polarizing invective a subject of major concern.<sup>110</sup>

The penny papers did little to create a sense of cohesive social interaction. Four other attributes in particular prevented them from becoming a source for a national social imagination. First, the newspapers were virulently commercial. Especially in the early years of the penny press revolution, low start-up costs made the newspaper business intensely competitive. The hunt for readers forced the newspaper editors into a raw personal enmity for one another.<sup>111</sup> In the fever of reporting the Jewett murder case, for example, Bennett derided the *Sun* and the *Transcript* as “those advocates of prostitution and wickedness.”<sup>112</sup> The *Transcript* shot back, reviling Bennett’s paper as “corrupt, profligate, and contemptible.”<sup>113</sup> In the next decade, Horace Greeley continued the tradition of invective, bellowing at New York *Post* editor William Cullen Bryant, “You lie, you villain, you sinfully, wickedly, basely lie!”<sup>114</sup>

Second, the penny press popularized the fascination with local news and local audiences. Whitman, in his 1846 *Daily Eagle* declaration about speaking to “all the people of Brooklyn” concomitantly implied that he would be speaking to *only* the people of Brooklyn. The penny press had made its fortune by exploiting local issues as much as by obtaining fresh news from a great distance. For many years, local news was the dominant element of the penny press, with news from a distance sneaking only irregularly. Name changes signalled the increasingly local focus of the penny papers. Where the partisan papers had once employed national and state names, the masthead the dailies prominently displayed

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<sup>110</sup>Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 49.

<sup>111</sup>Mott, *American Journalism*, 310; Richard A. Schwarzlose, “Early Telegraphic News Dispatches: Forerunner of the Associated Press,” *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (1974): 596.

<sup>112</sup>“Who is the Murderer? Still Say I,” *Herald*, 10 June 1836, 1:3; “Wickedness Revived,” *Herald*, 7 June, 1836, 1:5. In these editorials, Bennett also accused the *Sun* and the *Transcript* of joining with the conspirators who were protecting the real murderer.

<sup>113</sup>Cited in Tucher, *Froth*, 40.

<sup>114</sup>Cited in Mott, *American Journalism*, 310. Bennett worked up a thorough distaste for Greeley, tuanting him as a “crazy, contemptible wretch,” a “monster,” an “ogre” (Mott, *American Journalism*, 310).

a city name. Human interest stories, and increasingly sports sections, further tied newspapers to a particular locale, sometimes intensifying extremely local associations. Moreover, the always intense competition among dailies subdivided some cities into acutely antagonistic factions. As business enterprises, newspapers remained jealously local. The vast majority were locally owned and centered in local circulations until the extensive development of newspaper chains after the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>115</sup> None of them could speak in the name of an entire state, much less the entire nation.

Third, the penny papers “social-scape” was always distinctly urban.<sup>116</sup> “Cities,” as one historian has argued, “were not simply the contingent sites of news production; they were the primary and novel subject of the new dailies.”<sup>117</sup> The penny press printer/editors often jeered at country life and custom. Bennett attacked the small town home of the murdered Helen Jewett as a hive of hypocrites for calling New York licentious. “By whose hellish arts and where,” Bennett rhetorically slashed, “did Ellen [*sic*] Jewett first lose her virtue? Is it not acknowledged to have been in the... town of Augusta, and the pure state of Maine?”<sup>118</sup> He accused small towns from across the land of “cast[ing] the poor object of their hot passion ‘like worthless weeds away’—they send them to New York as a place of refuge, having rifled them of all that is valuable to innocence—and then, if misfortune awaits her here, they turn up the whites of their eyes—and exclaim against our wickedness and our want of morals.”<sup>119</sup> In this possessive sense of the city, Bennett consistently reinforced a barricade between

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<sup>115</sup>Schudson notes that “Circulations of newspapers were small everywhere until late in the nineteenth century” (Michael Schudson, “News, Public, Nation.” *American Historical Review* 107.2 [April 2002]: 484; and see Mott, *American Journalism*, 460-62, 551-54).

<sup>116</sup>Henkin makes a similar observation in regard to the historiography of the newspaper, which tends “to frame the story in national terms (even when the papers analyzed were, overwhelmingly, published in Manhattan) and to describe the kind of public created in print as an abstract entity. the newspaper, we are often told, replaced spatial communities with imagined ones, unsettling geographical boundaries and nullifying physical distances” (*City Reading*, 103). Henkin goes on to argue that newspapers must be examined “in a way that takes seriously the local character of that history [of New York’s penny press] and connects the print public to the broader experience of public space in the city. For while the penny press did recast notions of community and the public, the communities and publics projected in their columns were *decidedly urban*” (103; emphasis added).

<sup>117</sup>Henkin, *City Reading*, 103.

<sup>118</sup>Cited in Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, 20.

<sup>119</sup>[Bennett], “Ellen Jewett Authentic,” *New York Herald*, 28 April 1836, 1:3; and see quotation cited in Huntzicker, *Popular Press*, 20.

country and city. Even Horace Greeley, the poor son of a country farmer, came to rue the enforced individualism, the lack of society of rural living. The one moral he drew from his youth was that farming was “*a mindless, monotonous drudgery* [with] neither scope for expanding faculties, incitement to constant growth in knowledge nor a spur to generous ambition.”<sup>120</sup> Urban society, for him, had become the very source of masculinity: “I deem it impossible that beings born in the huts and hovels of isolated society, feebly, ineffectively delving and grubbing through life on the few acres immediately surrounding each of them, shall there attain the full stature of perfect manhood.”<sup>121</sup>

Fourth, in the decades following the penny press revolution, sensationalism became divorced from its moral underpinnings. It had ossified into the stimulation of feelings for *no* moral purpose. As such, it came to suggest pure commercialism, that is, a journalism bent on selling newspapers through an amoral appeal to the senses. Rather than potential vehicles of moral reform, newspapers devolved into instigators of dangerous passions. Newspaper reading, Oliver Wendell Holmes lamented, had become a compulsion. It produced a “nervous restlessness.”<sup>122</sup> The newspaper’s connection to moral reform, for all intents and purposes, had been cut.

By the early 1840s, the penny press had become mired in a contradiction. It had invented an urban social imagination but it simultaneously produced contorting social divisions among its readers. Moreover, the penny press revolution had been an urban phenomenon restricted mostly to a handful of northeastern cities. The telegraph would extend the newspaper’s audience to more and smaller cities after 1844. But even then it remained decidedly urban. As such, it could not forge a medium of national imagination. For that, the American magazine would have to be invented.

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<sup>120</sup>Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1868), 60; emphasis in original.

<sup>121</sup>Greeley, *Recollections*, 158.

<sup>122</sup>Holmes, “Bread and the Newspaper,” *Atlantic* 8 (September 1861): 347.

As sensationalism lost its moral character in the cauldron of journalistic competition, a new group of literary minded publishers sought to forge a new medium that could recover the moral and unifying elements of sentimentality. The critic Evert Duyckinck caught something of this conflict in an 1841 article. “The newspaper,” argued Duyckinck, “is the daily guardian of truth, the sworn friend of right and justice in the community.”<sup>123</sup> This formulation clearly harked back to a political ideology that distrusted and feared the corrupting influences of centralized power. But alongside this political rhetoric, Duyckinck set something new. The newspaper now had a new “requisite” function that Duyckinck labeled “Sympathy of feeling.” This language of sympathy sought to move beyond the sphere of narrowly political relations to a larger realm of moral and social relations. The “Journalist,” averred Duyckinck, must no longer be a political propagandist, but must “pledge... himself to the welfare of society.”<sup>124</sup> Significantly, Duyckinck’s article did not appear in a newspaper. Rather, it appeared in a new magazine, *Arcturus*. The magazine was at the forefront of a movement to recover the sentimental high ground once claimed by the penny press.

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<sup>123</sup>Evert Duyckinck, “Newspapers,” *Arcturus* 1 (January 1841): 73.

<sup>124</sup>Evert Duyckinck, “Newspapers,” 74.

## Chapter 3

### **The Whole Tendency of the Age Is Magazineward: The Post-Jacksonian Magazine and National Culture**

#### **Edgar Allen Poe and the Periodical Grail**

The desire to publish his own monthly magazine obsessed Edgar Allen Poe throughout the last decade of his life.<sup>1</sup> “The whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward,” he exclaimed in the mid 1840s.<sup>2</sup> Soon, he predicted, magazine writing would be “the *most* influential of all the departments of Letters.”<sup>3</sup> No other medium—books, quarterlies, or newspapers—could capture “the *rush* of the age.”<sup>4</sup> Books and quarterlies were too “verbose and ponderous,” and newspapers were but “popgunnery.”<sup>5</sup> The modern American demanded a “light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused.”<sup>6</sup> The magazine was the medium, Poe insisted, that could deliver this light artillery. Poe had great faith in its potential popularity. He envisioned a monthly periodical reaching over 100,000 readers in an era when few magazines could claim a circulation above a few thousand.

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<sup>1</sup>As Charvat noted, “in the later years, Poe thought more and more like an editor and less and less like an author” (“Poe: Journalism and the Theory of Poetry,” in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* [Athens: Ohio State University Press, 1993]: 93).

<sup>2</sup>“Marginalia,” December 1846, in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 1414-15. Much of this article originally appeared in the *Broadway Journal* (1 [1 March 1845]: 139-40). See also *Essays and Reviews*, 1487. Mott mistakenly attributed the authorship of the earlier piece to Poe’s *Journal* co-editor at the time, Charles F. Hoffman (Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 1: 1741-1850 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938], 341).

<sup>3</sup>Poe, “Magazine Writing—Peter Snook,” *Broadway Journal* 1 (7 June 1845): 354; emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup>“Marginalia,” December 1846, in *Essays and Reviews*, 1414-15.

<sup>5</sup>“Marginalia,” December 1846, in *Essays and Reviews*, 1414-15.

<sup>6</sup>“Marginalia,” December 1846, in *Essays and Reviews*, 1414-15.



Poe's ardor was no doubt fueled by the immense success of the British *Penny Magazine*. The goal of the *Penny Magazine* was to bring "useful knowledge," particularly through literature and illustration, to a popular audience. Published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge beginning in the mid 1830s, the British weekly achieved a circulation of over 200,000 in all corners of the kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Poe and other magazinists believed that America, with its twin faith in democracy and education, could easily surpass the *Penny Magazine*'s numbers.

Thousands of Americans caught the magazine fever between 1825 and 1850. They launched as many as 5000 magazines in those years. But this "extremely luxuriant" fecundity masked a fatal flaw.<sup>8</sup> "[M]onthly journals are not popular with our reading public," lamented one periodical prospectus.<sup>9</sup> Literary gadfly N.P. Willis knew his new magazine would require a prodigious effort, and that he would have to wear numerous editorial hats, including those of "publisher and editor, critic and contributor." He was soon chagrined to learn that "I might as well have added *reader* to my manifold offices," for he could not procure "the light yet condensed—the fragmented, yet finished—the good-tempered and gentlemanly, yet high-seasoned and dashing papers necessary to a [monthly] periodical." "[L]ike all rapid vegetation," wrote New York *Mirror* editor George Pope Morris, magazines "bear the seeds of early decay within them.... They put forth their young green leaves in the shape of promises and prospectuses—blossom through a few numbers—and then comes a 'frost, a

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<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., announcements for *Sears' New Monthly Family Magazine*, which explicitly made claims not only to resembling the *Penny Magazine*, but to including "the choicest selections from the most popular English magazines of that class" (*New Englander* 1 [April 1843]: 299; *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 12 [January 1843]: 111). On U.S. imitators of the *Penny Magazine*, see also Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 363-65.

<sup>8</sup>George Pope Morris, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 341.

<sup>9</sup>[Prospectus], *Literary Gazette* 1.1 (6 January 1821): 1. The *Gazette* was the third series of the *Analectic* magazine. Its two monthly predecessors had failed. Its strategy of publishing on a weekly basis fared no better than the earlier *Analectics*. It folded in less than a year.

killing frost,' in the form of bills due and debts unpaid." Morris estimated that the average life of magazines was a mere six months.<sup>10</sup>

The problem was no one seemed to know just what a magazine was or what it should do. The 1850 census, for example, made no distinction between newspapers and magazines in its enumeration of periodicals.<sup>11</sup> Postmasters sometimes refused to let them be carried through the public mails, and, when they did admit them, always charged them exorbitant fees. Worst of all, however, magazine editors themselves seemed hopelessly muddled about their own medium. One abruptly cut off listing American magazines, disgusted that the list was a "barren catalogue, nor does any eligible principle of selection appear."<sup>12</sup> Another compared newspapers to a series of "other publications," but left out magazines altogether—the task of defining them apparently too arduous.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the *Democratic Review*, rejoicing in the rising popularity of education, neglected to mention its own medium: "One of the best signs of the times is the growing demand for newspapers, cheap books, and literary and scientific lectures."<sup>14</sup> Another *Review* article even warned readers against reading magazine literature.<sup>15</sup>

The American magazine seemed to reflect the chaos of post-Jacksonian American society. The country was convulsed by seemingly endless religious sectarianism, political partisanship, and cultural warfare between cities and regions. Religious, political, and cultural groups proliferated and vanished as quickly as magazines. Entrepreneurs of all sorts opened shop and quickly went bust. Magazinists were no different. Like Poe, they dreamed that capturing all of American life in the pages of a magazine would make them wealthy. The production of national culture became their search for El Dorado.

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<sup>10</sup>George Pope Morris, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 341. Mott surmised that the average life span of magazines in the period was more likely two years. But he offers no evidence for this periodization (342n6). Pope and Willis worked together on the periodical *The New Mirror*.

<sup>11</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 342n6.

<sup>12</sup>Palfrey, "Periodical Literature of the United States," *North American Review* 39 (October 1834): 300.

<sup>13</sup>"G.," "On Newspapers," *Southern Literary Messenger* 7 (October 1841): 696-97.

<sup>14</sup>"Journalism," *Democratic Review* 10 (January 1842): 61-62.

<sup>15</sup>Kirkland, "Periodical Reading," *Democratic Review* 16 (January 1845): 61.

Historians and literary critics have not adequately considered the role the American magazine had in post-Jacksonian wrangling over the question of nationalism. Historians have tended to focus on the politics of the day, especially the raucous development of the party system, while critics have concerned themselves almost exclusively with books. But when the question of American national identity is placed in the realm of culture, a different picture emerges, one that challenges the political reading and the emphasis on books. The problem of post-Jacksonian nationalism was deeply involved not only with the *content* of American culture but with the best *medium for devising and disseminating* that culture. Neither books nor newspapers could provide the medium for national culture. Books were too expensive, their distribution was too uneven, and European novels were vastly more popular than homegrown works. Newspapers were too local and ephemeral. “[N]ewspaper literature,” noted one contemporary magazinist, “is so scattered, so mixed up with what is impure and noxious, and withal presented in so frail and perishing a form, that it can neither be made available nor preserved.”<sup>16</sup>

Commercial magazines increasingly experimented with culture as the basis of their intellectual content, their strategy for achieving wide popularity, and their response to the country’s political chaos. But this experimentation was halting, self-conscious, and always short-lived. The problem was that culture, as an antidote to politics, was crippled by a seeming fatal flaw. Critics of culture ridiculed it as inherently “female.” Historians and literary critics have largely followed suit. The 1850s were long dismissed from serious study as “the feminine fifties,” as if the very idea of the American magazine died with Poe in Baltimore and American literature evaporated with Hawthorne’s screed about the “damned

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<sup>16</sup>Brownson, “American Literature,” *Boston Quarterly Review* 2 (January 1839): 18. Brownson, wanting to salvage some positive out of this impure and noxious medium, gesticulated to the shibboleth that whatever the newspaper discusses, it is imprinted “in the hearts and intellects of the people” (18). A statement which would be quite dangerous were he seriously to entertain its ramifications.

mob of scribbling women.”<sup>17</sup> What they have missed is a conflict that ran deeper than either of the problems of nationalism or democracy. This was the intense battle in the forging of the American magazine over what would be the medium’s gendered nature.

This chapter will examine the forces molding, shaping, and constituting the terrain of the American general magazine in the 1840s, the decade following the penny press revolution. Magazinists (the editors, publishers, and literary champions of the magazine) faced a dizzying array of obstacles in defining their medium and forging an audience. Jealous local pride, irrational post office policies, and the fragmented railroad system severely limited post-Jacksonian magazine distribution. But even if these had been soothed, rationalized, and networked, the future of the magazine hung on one major question: What would be its relation to the culture of sentimentality?

### **Antebellum Impediments to the Formation of the American Magazine**

Because the American magazine did not exist it had to be invented. The process was fraught with numerous dilemmas. But they all revolved around a major issue. Newspapers had already become the medium of the urban locale. Magazinists set their sights on a far larger audience, that of the entire nation.

#### *Culture Wars: Ladies’ Magazines and Jacksonian City-States*

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<sup>17</sup>Benjamin T. Spencer, for example, spent much time in the magazines of the 1840s but then dropped them altogether by 1850, barely mentioning the important magazines of the 1850s, *Harper’s*, *Putnam’s*, and the *Atlantic* (*The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1957]). Edward Widmer ends his account of the Young America movement in 1852 when it crashed in conflict between its political and literary variants and the growing bellicosity and accompanying inconsistency of all its adherents (*Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 193). This endpoint suggests that literary nationalism simply faded away, rather than, perhaps, taking another form in the magazines, especially those aimed at women. Feminist scholars have in recent years focused on the women writers of the period, but have continued the gender divide by seeking to redeem women writer’s themes, without, however, examining what was common to men and women of the sentimental persuasion. Patricia Okker, for instance, at no point addresses Sarah Josepha Hale’s opinions on the literary nationalism debate nor her conception of how a female literature might be related to it (*Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth Century American Women Editors* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995]).

In an 1829 review of a “ladies’ magazine, *Bower of Taste*, the magazinist John Neal waggishly opined: “Verily, verily, if our sister-editors get along so merrily, merrily—they will soon be obliged to kill their own mutton. What need have they of our guardianship, the guardianship of he-editors, now they are able not only to mend their own pens, but to mend our manners along with them? not only to sharpen their own instruments, but to bleed *us* with them after they *are* sharpened? Would that we had fifty more of these female magazines, all at work together, all charged with brilliant fire-works, and ready to be let off one after the other, till our whole northern sky were in a blaze.”<sup>18</sup> Neal was responding to the recent, rapid rise of a magazine genre that catered to women. His critique would later come to haunt him as he and other male sentimentalists attempted to establish a sentimental magazine that could appeal to men.

American ladies’ magazines had always figured themselves as a cultural medium. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, their intellectual formula had been entertainment and knowledge: “the Mind t’improve and yet amuse,” as one ladies’ magazine put it.<sup>19</sup> Or another: “To wake the soul by tender strokes of art/To raise the genius and to mend the heart.”<sup>20</sup> But such sentiments did not pay off until the 1830s.<sup>21</sup> Two key events occurred in that decade. Louis Godey founded his *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1830 in Philadelphia (“book” was a synonym for magazine in this era). Seven years later he hired the ablest woman magazine editor in the country, Sarah Josepha Hale, away from her own Boston magazine.

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<sup>18</sup>Neal, “Literary Notices,” *Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* n.s. no. 4 (October 1829): 218. Okker, because she does not appreciate the widespread influence of sentimentality, can only read this statement as criticism of the ladies’ magazines. In fact, Neal was praising them.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Bertha M. Stearns, “Early New England Magazines,” *New England Quarterly* 2 (July 1929): 423.

<sup>20</sup>Cited in Bertha M. Stearns, “Before *Godey’s*,” *American Literature* 2 (November 1930): 252.

<sup>21</sup>The first so-called ladies’ magazines were published in the U.S. in the 1790s. Into the late 1820s, however, they suffered the same anemic fate as American magazines in general. In the first thirty years of the nineteenth century only a handful of the several score of magazines aimed at women lasted more than a year, or even a few issues. The year 1828, however, marked the beginning of a new phenomenon. Ladies’ magazines, according to their historian, “sprang up in every direction.” Sarah Josepha Hale began her long and illustrious career in 1828 as a magazine editor by founding *The Ladies’ Magazine* in Boston. The ferment of these magazines directed at women was such that, when Louis Godey founded *The Lady’s Book* in Philadelphia in 1830, “a reading public was ready and waiting for him” (Stearns, “Before *Godey’s*,” 255. See also Stearns, “Early New England Magazines for Ladies,” 420-57; and Okker, *Our Sister Editors*).

Their partnership set the stage for the development of a new and stable genre of magazine that has lasted, for the most part, to the present day.

Godey's commercial acumen combined with Hale's astute literary taste, adroit domestic advice, and moderately liberal ideology made *Godey's* the most important of all antebellum women's periodicals.<sup>22</sup> Numerous magazinists copied the *Godey's* model, including two of the other best-selling magazines of the antebellum era, *Peterson's* and *Graham's*.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, they legitimated themselves in the terms of Republican motherhood. *Godey's*, for example, took on the mantle of nationalism, proclaiming itself to be "The Book of the Nation."<sup>24</sup> Hale soon established herself, according to one literary historian, as "the most vocal exponent of... feminine nationalism..."<sup>25</sup> Yet, other magazinists ridiculed such nationalism as a mere pose. Noting that the leading ladies' magazines were all published in a single city, Philadelphia, critics in other cities ridiculed their claims to nationalism as nothing but crass commercial gestures.

Through the 1840s, American magazines dotted a feverish cultural landscape of savage city-states all warring with one another over phantasmal, arcane, or forgotten wrongs. The magazine business was a minefield of commercial uncertainty, personal and ideological infighting, and grueling wars of aesthetic attrition erupting into political battles royal. Magazines struggled to wrest an independent identity away from newspapers, books, gift books, and mammoth story papers (literary periodicals that

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<sup>22</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 350.

<sup>23</sup>So close did competitors follow the model that Edgar Allan Poe mused in 1845 that all the ladies' magazines "are so alike that if the covers were changed it would not be easy to distinguish one from the others. They nearly all have the same contributors [including Poe himself] and the same embellishments [i.e., illustrations]" (*Broadway Journal* 1 (25 January 1845): 60, cited also in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 352).

<sup>24</sup>See the *United States Magazine's* criticism of this reference: "H.," "Parlor Periodicals," *United States Magazine* 30 (January 1852): 76.

<sup>25</sup>Spencer, *Quest*, 216. Okker, unfortunately, says little of the connection of *Godey's* to the critical issues raging in other magazines of the period. Her only brief brush with the topic of nationalism, for instance, is to note Sarah Josepha Hale's argument in the late 1850s that the national celebration of Thanksgiving would avert the possibility of Civil War (*Our Sister Editors*, 79). This is mentioned in the context of Hale's conception of women in politics. Hale eschewed a direct role for women in the sordid ventures of political parties, but advocated participation in political issues (76-77). Many men agreed that politics was a reprehensible task and found little honor in holding the supposed reigns of political power. While Hale saw the Civil War as the outcome of men's partisanship, many men sentimentalists agreed.

masqueraded as newspapers). Then, particular magazines fought for commercial survival against others. The magazines of mercantile Philadelphia were arrayed against those of hard-driving commercial New York, and both of these set out against those of cultured Boston, with other cities from Charleston to Cincinnati to Portland joining first this coalition and then that. There was little sectionalism in this. John Neal of Portland, Maine, sent his *Yankee Magazine* to Boston to root out the entrenched culturists there and William Gilmore Simms allied his *Southern Quarterly Review* of Charleston, South Carolina, with New York City Locofocos and Young America. He rigged his periodical corsair to make raids against New York City's Whiggish *Knickerbocker* magazine. A national culture was all but impossible, lamented William Cox in the New York *Mirror*. Citizens, he wrote, "frittered away" their proper and natural national feelings on "their little localities." The social "self-love" in America could extend no further than particular counties, towns, even villages. This parochialism, Cox scoffed, was "simply ridiculous."<sup>26</sup>

What was worse, each of these cities was in cultural ferment within itself. New York was riven by Whigs, old-line Democrats, the ultra Democrats of Young America, and other parties all crusading for cultural supremacy.<sup>27</sup> Their cannon were such magazines as the *Knickerbocker*, *Arcturus*, and the *United States Magazine and*

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<sup>26</sup>William Cox, "Philadelphia—New-York—Boston," orig. in New York *Mirror*, signed merely, "C," reprinted in *Crayon Sketches* (New York: Conner & Cooke, 1833), 191, 192. William Cox, writing in New York *Mirror*, noted the deep enmity among American localities, particularly the three great cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. The article is instructive in that it lays out the key tenets of nationalism, which have little changed down to the present day. Cox found "the feelings of pride and love with which a man looks upon his native country" to be "very proper and natural" (192). All men, he said, feel "braver and wiser" for sharing in the heritage of a country's "laws and institutions,... the fame of its literature and science, and the long train of its glorious deeds..." (192). "There is something noble," he concluded, "in this feeling in the aggregate." But Cox was forced to admit, after hearing a tense conversation among three representatives of the nation's three leading cities, that such nobility existed in America only in the abstract. (Cox's own narrative however wanders away from his argument to a long plaint about a corpulent steam-boat traveler who prevented an entire boat-load of passengers from getting to their lunch.)

<sup>27</sup>Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Writers in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1956), 82; John Paul Pritchard, *Literary Wise Men of Gotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 3-8; Sydney D. Moss, *Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), esp. ch. 4.

*Democratic Review*. Boston was a divided camp of “Brahmins” and transcendentalists, radicals and conservatives, skirmishing through short-lived magazines such as the transcendentalist *Dial*, the long-lived Brahmin quarterly *North American Review*, the Congregationalist *New-England Monthly*, and William Lloyd Garrison’s radical *Liberator*.<sup>28</sup> Philadelphia’s magazines, such as *Graham’s Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* and *Peterson’s Ladies’ National Magazine*, struggled each to be more like that city’s *Godey’s Lady’s Book* than the others. And *Godey’s* threatened them all with immanent demise in self-parody. The constantly erupting enmities, reversals, rivalries, breaks, and jealousies among magazinists created a byzantine labyrinth of literary connections and allegiances. This was further complicated by the fact that both authors and editors (who were often authors themselves) had to follow the money: Political partisanship or aesthetic convictions mattered little to authors if a magazine could pay.

All these magazines faced each other as piranha in a tank with no other source of food than themselves. Magazines had short life spans, with only a handful lasting beyond a few years, or even a few issues. “Indeed,” lamented a later nineteenth-century magazine editor, “this provincial, almost parochial, pride and jealousy made a national magazine, and therefore a national literature, impossible.”<sup>29</sup>

*Transportation, Federal Postal Policy, and the Problem of Reaching a National Audience*

Historians have likened the development of the railroad and the steam ship in the antebellum era to a revolution in transportation. They note, for instance, that the length of passenger travel time plummeted and railroad track mileage rose from under 100 miles in 1830 to over

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<sup>28</sup>On the divisions among Boston literary folk in the 1850s, see Ellery Sedgwick, *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 22-23.

<sup>29</sup>L. Frank Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York: Century, 1923), 6.



30,000 miles by 1860.<sup>30</sup> But this expansion of the transportation grid was decidedly uneven across and even within different regions. News traveling from Philadelphia, for example, could reach Augusta, Maine, several days before it reached wide sections of western Pennsylvania.<sup>31</sup> Steamships could penetrate the continent's interior only along large rivers. Railroad lines extended only a few hundred miles at best. The lack of long-distance coordinating communication and the multitude of different track widths forced passengers and freight to have to transfer often.<sup>32</sup> The lack of standard time frustrated the easy transfer from line to line.

Building on this metaphor of revolution, other scholars have posited a concomitant information revolution, with information being disseminated at ever faster rates. Studies examining the diffusion of information, however, have focused almost exclusively on newspapers.<sup>33</sup> This revolution did not do much to extend the domain of the magazine prior to 1850, and only in the mid 1870s (with changes in post office policy) did it become integral to magazine distribution.<sup>34</sup> Without these long-distance markets and timely delivery, magazines were hampered in differentiating themselves from and competing with newspapers.

Magazines were further deterred in creating broad markets by federal post office policy. The generic fuzziness between the magazine and newspaper was a source of consternation in mid nineteenth-century America. The magazine had always been poorly distinguished from the newspaper. Nowhere was this more evident than in the federal post

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<sup>30</sup>George Rogers Taylor, *Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951), 79. News emanating from New York City in 1794 took at least five days to reach Washington, D.C., almost ten days to reach Boston, eleven days to reach Pittsburgh, twenty days to reach Charleston, South Carolina, and thirty-four days to reach Lexington, Kentucky (Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973], map 2.5, p. 41). But by 1841, three years before the advent of the telegraph, the news from New York reached Washington and Boston within a couple of days, Pittsburgh and Charleston within six days, and Lexington in ten days (Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information*, map 2.9, p. 51).

<sup>31</sup>Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information*, 53.

<sup>32</sup>Long-distance coordination would become feasible only after the integration of the telegraph into the rail network after the middle 1850s.

<sup>33</sup>See, e.g., Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information*.

<sup>34</sup>Post office policy regarding magazines will be addressed in the next chapter. On the post-office's use of fast mail trains, see Richard Burket Kielbowicz, *Origins of the Second-Class Mail Category and the Business of Policymaking, 1863-1879*, Journalism Monographs no. 96 (November 1985), 17.

office's wrangling over how to define the magazine for purposes of postal rates. At times, federal postmasters general banned magazines from the mails altogether.<sup>35</sup> At other times, they charged exorbitant rates for shipping monthly periodicals. Newspapers, particularly as political sheets, were heavily subsidized by the federal government. They were charged only a penny or a penny and a half regardless of the distance they traveled or their weight or size. Magazines were charged at varying rates according to both size and distance. The top rates for magazines were as much as 800% higher than the newspaper rates.

While rate differences are easy to grasp, the problem of post office definitions is exceedingly confusing. Federal postmasters general had to define, for the thousands of local postmasters who charged and collected the rates, exactly what a magazine was. Were magazines different from newspapers by dint of periodicity (monthly versus weekly or daily)? Or by content? If the latter, how much "news" was required to tip the balance to the penny newspaper rate? In an era of political papers, what differentiated political party propaganda from a political essay (with the latter supposedly being a sign of magazineness)? How many poems or tales would shift a political party paper into the magazine realm? What sorts of literary subjects would deny a periodical the status of newspaper? Even when postmasters general attempted to avoid the thorny definitional issues by adhering to purely arbitrary size and periodicity criteria, the plethora of periodical forms failed to allow for clarity.

The problem of definition was further complicated by the problem of interpreting the ever changing dicta of the post masters general. Each of the nation's tens of thousands of local postmasters was responsible for defining each periodical coming through his or her particular post office as either a magazine or a newspaper. Their decisions could have a major impact on the success or failure of a periodical.<sup>36</sup> Magazines cost more to mail. This

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<sup>35</sup>Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1989), 123.

<sup>36</sup>Local postmasters had great control over what passed through their offices due to three practices that are completely unknown in our current postal system. First, there was virtually no delivery of the mail. Patrons had

cost was born by the magazine's recipient (due to post office policies) and could not be paid by the magazines themselves. Thus, if a local post master labeled a periodical as a magazine rather than as a newspaper, it could significantly raise the periodical's price to the consumer. In one case, a New York City literary periodical, the *New Mirror*, publicly abused an Oneida County postmaster for defining this weekly "newspaper" as a magazine. His decision raised the \$3.00 yearly subscription rate by \$7.28 in postage, for a total cost of \$10.28!<sup>37</sup> The *New Mirror* soon ceased publication as a weekly, blaming such postage rates, and quickly returned as a daily paper that also (wink wink) issued a weekly edition.<sup>38</sup>

These post office practices caused a wild proliferation of experiments in periodical format and content in the 1830s and early '40s. The *New Mirror* was only one of numerous periodicals that attempted to pawn literary magazines off as newspapers to take advantage of the lower postal rates.<sup>39</sup> Inspired by the entrepreneurial spirit of the penny press, these magazines began in the late 1830s to experiment with ways of skirting the magazine status and reach a broad audience by qualifying as a newspaper. Some, like the *New Mirror*, although it was heavily literary in orientation, adopted a weekly periodicity and printed as little news as they thought they could get away with. Other periodicals experimented with all manner of gimmicks. The mammoth story papers took advantage of "printed page" limits. They printed multiple pages on a single huge sheet of paper that was then folded over and over into a newspaper size. These mammoths, or "leviathans" as they were also called, crammed tens of thousands of words onto sheets that measured as much as four feet by ten

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to come to the post office to obtain anything sent them (the first urban delivery of mail began in the 1850s and rural home delivery did not begin until the 1890s). Furthermore, *periodical subscribers*, and *not* periodical publishers, paid the postage for newspapers and magazines sent through the mail. The postage was collected by the postmaster at the office of delivery, when a patron dropped in to pick up his mail. (I use the male pronoun here because post offices, like saloons and barber shops, were considered to be male preserves. Women who visited the post office often met with slanderous talk. Indeed, Helen Jewett was remarkable for her frequent visits to the post office. In her case, the whispered accusations of "prostitute" were accurate.)

<sup>37</sup>"Post-Office Abuses," *New Mirror* 3 (24 May 1844): 127-28.

<sup>38</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 329.

<sup>39</sup>A second periodical form confused the distinction between the magazine and the book. The so-called giftbooks, such as Samuel Goodrich's *The Token* (which contained a number of Hawthorne's early stories), were annual anthologies that appeared under a single name and contained all manner of poetry, prose, and engravings.

feet.<sup>40</sup> Other mammoth papers took advantage of the newspaper extra. These leviathans issued entire novels, again printed on huge sheets, as “extras” to their regular papers. Some of these “extras” sold as many as twenty thousand copies.<sup>41</sup> Such huge works, when defined as “newspapers” could be sent from New York to New Orleans for only a penny and a half; while a letter (which was charged at the highest of rates) cost 25 cents to travel the same distance and a magazine cost 17.5 cents.<sup>42</sup> By the mid 1840s, Congress legislated the mammoths out of existence and greatly limited experimentation with the newspaper format.<sup>43</sup>

The brief explosion of the hybrid forms of literary “newspapers” was highly significant for the development of the American magazine. The popularity of the mammoth story papers demonstrated that there was a much larger audience for literary materials than book and periodical printers had previously thought. But magazinists were virtually incapable of capitalizing on this realization. Even if the extraneous problems of intercity rivalry, transportation, and federal postal policy had been solved in the 1840s, it is highly doubtful that magazines could have grabbed a national audience. These economic barriers paled in comparison to the turbulent anxiety magazinists expressed over the nature of post-Jacksonian culture. This anxiety was expressed in two intense debates over what culture was and its relation to politics in general, and democracy in particular.

### *The Problem of Cultivating Literature: Inventing a Nation*

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<sup>40</sup>In other terms, this single sheet of paper was a thousand square inches larger than a queen-sized bed.

<sup>41</sup>James J. Barnes, *Authors, Publishers and Politicians: The Quest for an Anglo-American Copyright Agreement, 1815-1854* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 10.

<sup>42</sup>Kielbowicz, *News*, 122-24. The British *Penny Magazine* offered American magazinists a case study for post office reform in the 1840s. As with the penny newspapers in the U.S., cost was a crucial determinant of its success. The *Penny Magazine* depended on the cheap British postal rates. American magazines sharply noted that magazine’s publishers believed that even a half-penny rate increase would decrease the magazine’s circulation by as much as 50%. American magazinists were convinced that no matter how successful they were at copying the British magazine’s format, they could not match its sales if they had to pay high postage rates (“Post Office Reform in England,” *Democratic Review* 6 [August 1839]: 90; “The British System of Postage,” *New Englander* 6 [April 1848]: 163-64).

<sup>43</sup>Kielbowicz, *News*, 129-30; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 518. For an argument that minimizes the actions of the Congress in the demise of the mammoths, see Barnes, *Authors, Publishers and Politicians*, 24. He argues that they went out of existence basically because they had run their course in providing cheap literature during an extended economic downturn.

There was no American nation in the 1840 and '50s. "America has not national novel," lamented one critic, "for the very good reason that there is no such thing as American society."<sup>44</sup> This was the dour assessment found in myriad periodical articles of the day. The assessment was fueled by an intense desire to discover any of the vital signs that Americans formed a world historical people, a single family bound by blood and experience. Post-Jacksonian Americans were aware that their country lacked most of the traditional attributes of nationhood. The U.S. had no mythic past, nor a "natural" and bounded territory, a singular biological ethnicity, a language of its own, social stability, long-established cultural institutions, or a centralized federal state.<sup>45</sup> Nationalist doctrine was divided into two competing (albeit often overlapping) camps. One looked to politics, the other to culture. But neither carried much force in post-Jacksonian America.

Political nationalism was built on the tattered political tradition of the founding fathers. It hailed the virtue of American political institutions even as it reveled in bitterly captious partisanship, the likes of which Americans had not experienced before. By the 1840s, this partisanship had become enshrined in the extra-Constitutional institutions of party and caucus. Parties and their newspapers alienated masses of voters, except during the brief presidential campaigns, when all became invective.<sup>46</sup> Even the one potentially uniting force of political life Americans could point to, the Constitution, had become a lightning rod for rancor. The Nullification Crisis, the continual wrangling over slavery, territorial expansion, the partisan battles over internal improvements, and the very partisanship of the political parties made the federal government's legitimating document seem to be less a sacred national artifact than a cat o' nine tails: The country seemed to be a congeries of competing political parties grasping for the nine razored tips rather than one people holding the hilt. Some Americans repudiated the Constitution. With the rise of Jacksonianism, artisan

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<sup>44</sup>William Swinton, "Novels: Their Meaning and Mission," *Putnam's* (October 1854): 394.

<sup>45</sup>On the lack of a national antiquity, see, e.g., W.A. Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," *Arcturus* 1 (1841): 236.

<sup>46</sup>Glenn Altschuler & Stuart Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), chs. 2 and 3.

republicanism, and abolitionism, they turned against statist and even governmental solutions for the country's problems and put a greater faith in the promises of the Declaration of Independence, leaving the Constitution to burn in a Whig hell.

Cultural nationalism was too diffuse. It had not yet found either an institutional embodiment or an effective medium for its dissemination. European visitors to America testified to the lack of American cultural nationality. Charles Latrobe wondered at the multiplicity of racial and national origins, life styles, and habits. The only distinctive marks of Americanness he could discover were hatred for monarchy in government, a dedication to republicanism of some sort, and a violent and disproportionate reaction to all foreign criticism of things American.<sup>47</sup> Those Europeans who did see some positive semblance of American uniqueness found it not in cultural or political achievements, so much as in material advances. Tocqueville's fears of a mind-numbing mass culture, for instance, were balanced by his admiration for the way democratic nations excelled in "the genius of commerce and the pursuits of industry."<sup>48</sup> But when it came to the cultural elements of nationalism, Harriet Martineau adequately summed up the prevailing opinion in 1837: "The Americans have no national character as yet."<sup>49</sup> America in the 1840s floundered between two nationalisms: A political one powerless to die (until its self-immolation in April 1861) and a cultural one arrested in a chaos of conception.

An emerging group of Americans made the invention of American national culture their holy grail. Following on European theorists, they envisioned literature as the vital means for cultivating national character. For them, literature was the only permanent trace of national greatness. It embodied a people's history and expressed the unique yearnings of their national spirit. The *Southern Quarterly Review* of New Orleans declared that literature

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<sup>47</sup>Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper, 1943), 397.

<sup>48</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, 140. The Austrian immigrant Francis Grund emphasized the dream of property as the most characteristic feature of American life (Curti, *American Thought*, 397-98).

<sup>49</sup>Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Saunders & Otley, 1837), 152.

was the source of admiration for a nation by other nations. Literature—not empire, not political institutions—was the mark of value that posterity recognized. Referring to the culturally accomplished nations of Europe, the *Review* marveled that “it is their literature, which has impressed its footsteps on the age in which we live, and rendered it noble and imposing.” Literature was a nation’s thought. It was the product of the nation’s “scholars, poets, artists, philosophers, mathematicians, and men of genius.” Thought grew out of intellectual pursuits and not its “common and indifferent matters, such as how... to obtain a livelihood or a fortune....”<sup>50</sup> The *Knickerbocker* magazine of New York, echoing widely held sentiments among intellectuals, conceived of literature as a nation’s vital self-expression: “[A] nation can never acquire a profound, permanent character, until she owns a home literature, whose roots are planted and nourished in the habits and nature of her people.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the *Knickerbocker* argued, the political competition with Europe had shifted onto cultural grounds. If Americans would not record their past, they were destined either “to sink into oblivion, or faintly live in the misrepresentations of adverse contemporaries.”<sup>52</sup>

Even the leviathans of the 1840s, which pirated European works with impunity, clamored for internal improvements of a literary sort.<sup>53</sup> The influential critic and editor Park

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<sup>50</sup>Daniel K. Whitaker, “The Newspaper and Periodical Press,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 1 (January 1842): 48. The *Review* moved to Charleston within a year of its inauguration. See, for a similar statement of the theme of literature as posterity, [W.A. Jones], “Nationality in Literature,” *Democratic Review* (March 1847): 271.

<sup>51</sup>“L.M.P.,” “Necessity for a National Literature,” *Knickerbocker* 25 (May 1845): 423. On the relation between literature and nation among antebellum intellectuals, see Spencer, *Quest*, ch. 4, “Cis-Atlantic Impulses.”

<sup>52</sup>“L.M.P.,” “Necessity for a National Literature,” 424.

<sup>53</sup>See the conductors of *Brother Jonathan* attempt to justify their eclectic piracy of European works in their ostensibly American literary periodical, “Our Weekly Gossip,” *Brother Jonathan* 1 [quarto edition] (5 February 1842): 155. One could argue that the mammoths’ calls for a national literature were merely lip service paid to a patriotic clientele. But the careers of the editors of the mammoths, especially the two mentioned in this paragraph, are too dedicated from beginning to end to the development of American authorship to give credence to any charge of hypocrisy in this matter. Note also, that these magazines often chose names that directly referenced American symbols. Isabel Lehuu (*Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000]) reads the mammoths as rowdy and carnivalesque expressions of popular culture that challenged the “custodians of legitimate culture” (127). But this reading of public culture depends too strongly on conceptions of high and low culture that do not seem to be borne out by the magazines themselves. Precisely the kind of hurly burly cultural world she portrays so well, combined with the utter lack of generic definition among the magazines themselves, prevented the development of any rigid *class* boundaries among periodicals. Certainly, different magazines appealed to different audiences. But even a relatively brief examination of the mammoths shows them making statements that, according to a high-low thesis, should be impossible among magazines aimed at popular audience.

Benjamin, writing in the 4 July 1840 *New World*, attempted the metaphysical trick of naming something in order to give it existence: “Let then our literature assume, at once, a character as national as our politics, and we shall, in this respect become very successful and eminent at home and abroad.” John Neal conceived of books and authors as the nation’s “peace-militia.”<sup>54</sup> Writing in *Brother Jonathan*, he sarcastically belittled the “consequences” of building “our own bridges, and palaces and churches” and maintaining “our fifteen hundred newspapers, such as they are.” He admitted that these beginnings were positive: “We begin to *feel* together as a Nation—to *act* together as a Nation; and to *respect ourselves*.” But a full and true national self respect would only come when America could support its own authors. If the nation could build palaces and publish myriad newspapers, “Well then,” he charged, “why not endeavor to bring up a generation of American Authors—Authors wholly American?—American to the back bone—American in speech—American in feeling—American through life, and all the changes of life—and,” he added, following through on his martial metaphor, “American, if it must be so, while fighting the battles of their Country—American in death.”<sup>55</sup>

Benjamin, Neal, and their fellow agitators were building on the work of European theorists whose work was central to sentimental culture in the nineteenth century. After 1815, Americans gained access to the works of Johann Herder, August Schlegel, and Madame de Staël.<sup>56</sup> Their overriding concern was to demonstrate that a nation was a cultural universe, whole and sufficient unto itself and far larger than the handful of its great men of politics. Overthrowing the classical humanist tradition of universal laws governing a

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<sup>54</sup>Neal, “Encouragement of Native Literature,” *Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* n.s. no. 6 (December 1829): 324.

<sup>55</sup>Neal, “American Authors,” *Brother Jonathan* 6 [quarto edition] (18 November 1843): 324. Neal’s image also referred to his bitterness over the American public’s neglect of native authors which left the country’s committed authors to starve.

<sup>56</sup>It was then that the writings of such European cultural nationalists as first gained publication in cis-Atlantic journals such as the *Analectic* and the *Port Folio*. Spencer, *Quest*, 35, 91; Benjamin Lease, *That Wild Fellow John Neal and the American Literary Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 72-73; John W. Rathbun, *American Literary Criticism, 1800-1860* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 51, and see 45-60 *passim*. Many Americans were exposed to Schlegel in particular in the pages of *Blackwood’s*, which, after 1817 was a major source of translations of and commentaries on the German critic (Lease, *John Neal*, 72n7).



universal human nature, these historians argued instead that nations were unique entities and that each developed its own specific forms of thought, culture, and society. Literature, these critics argued, was the vital element of a nation. Literature expressed a people's soul and limited its character. The study of the nation was the study of its literary expression. The literary nationalists understood literature as metaphysical fusion of word and idea, of matter and spirit, of action and thought. Language attained a central place in literary nationalist thought because it limited and shaped national experience and gave rise to a nation's unique literature. This conception of literature as national expression thus ran counter to the Enlightenment's claim that knowledge was constituted only by what was supposedly universal, eternal, and immutable in human behavior and thought.<sup>57</sup> Literature, for them, was a nation's continual invention and reproduction of itself and its values.

These ideas were brought to American soil by the likes of Harvard professors George Ticknor and Edward Everett (who also served for a time as editor of the *North American Review*), and John Neal, conductor of *The Yankee* and later editor of a mammoth weekly paper.<sup>58</sup> But even as they adopted literary nationalism as their cultural credo, the Americans of the day could not stop thinking in decidedly local terms. Neal, for instance, writing from his lonely perch in Portland, Maine, could think of American history only as local history. He urged authors in 1829 to "describe the genuine Puritan-spirit," its "roughness" and its "persecuting and destroying" zeal against those not of the faith, "let them describe the character of the American husbandmen,... the unsophisticated hospitality of New England manners, her holidays, sports, and amusements."<sup>59</sup> Neal, whose literary power was deeply

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<sup>57</sup>On Herder's original treatment of the idea of national expression, see Isaiah Berlin's excavation and recuperation of Herder's reputation, "Herder and the Enlightenment [1976]" in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1998), 359-435, especially the section on Herder's doctrine of expression, 380-97.

<sup>58</sup>George Ticknor was one of the key figures responsible for disseminating the theories of the literary nationalists at Harvard, and his 1849 history of Spanish literature was one of the most thorough-going American attempts to carry out those theories. See David Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), ch. 4: "The True Uses of Literature."

<sup>59</sup>Neal, "Impediments to American Literature," 179. Neal was heavily influenced by the works of August Schlegel, and he had lived for some time in the home of Jeremy Bentham, from whom Neal adapted the sentimental aspects of utilitarianism, particularly its emphasis on social reform. Everett had received university

admired by the likes of Hawthorne, Lowell, and Poe, could hardly separate “America” from the rocky soil of New England.<sup>60</sup> If Scott and Burns, he mused, could “give an interest to the barren scenery and unromantic character of Scotland,” why could not American authors do the same for American regions such as New England? But Neal could not sustain his localism. As a starving magazinist, he discovered that he had to write for distant magazines in New York and Philadelphia, where Puritan history held little interest.

This very mobility, however, offered a spark of national vision. Magazinists came into contact with one another and a nucleus formed around the literary nationalism of Herder, de Staël, and the Schlegels. By the mid 1840s, it was becoming an axiomatic principle of American thought that literature was *the* expression of a nation’s mind.<sup>61</sup>

But the axiom, magazinists discovered, was almost impossible to operationalize. Seemingly intractable problems of audience, content, and professionalization haunted every newly born magazine. A favorite plaint of the post-Jacksonian era was that Americans were simply not ready for a home-grown literature. Potential readers were too busy razing the primeval forest and scattering the original inhabitants to give time to cultural pursuits.

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training in Germany. He was editor of the *North American Review* in the early 1820s. The *Review* had been founded in part to extend these ideas of national literature to Americans, and Everett discussed them thoroughly in his 1824 Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard (in *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions* [Boston, 1836]; see also Spencer, *Quest*, 91). Everett, even after his editorship, was a leading force in the *Review*, writing over 116 articles for the quarterly. On Everett and the dilemmas of applying these ideas to American culture, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 2: 1850-1865 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 228-29.

Emerson’s “American Scholar” address (1837, reprint; New York: Modern Library, 1968) was both a summation and extension of the American uses of these ideas. “The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not?—of new vigor when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and feet.” What he’s referring to here is a metaphor of history and literature, the vigor is not in people but in a literature that depicts them. Note, too that Emerson went further than the Germans who attempted to see the universal through the national. Emerson, in a move that easily blended Protestant antinomianism with Romanticism, proclaimed that it was one’s own self and not one’s nation that best served as the individual’s window onto all of humanity: “The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature.” And thus he holds up Goethe as “the most modern of the moderns” (61-62). Yet it was in this very development of the individual that true nations would come into existence. For Emerson closes his essay by proclaiming that through the development of the independent, individual scholar “A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (63).

<sup>60</sup>Hawthorne playfully referred to Neal as “that wild fellow” and Poe ranked him as a man “of indisputable genius” (Lease, *John Neal*, 193-94).

<sup>61</sup>Spencer, *Quest*, 152; Rathbun, *Criticism, 1800-1860*, 45.

Likewise, potential American authors had no opportunity to cultivate new literary forms in native soil. The nation was reduced to a colonial dependence on European, particularly English, literary forms and themes. Even as the wave of mammoth story papers swelled, contemporary critics feared that there was “no great demand for literature among us.”<sup>62</sup>

Another subject of jeremiad was the purported lack of uniquely American literary material. The editor of the *North American Review* defended the quarterly’s overwhelming attention to European literature by saying, “There is really a dearth of American topics; the American books are too poor to praise, and to abuse them will not do.”<sup>63</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, in his *Notions of the Americans*, aired one of the most well-known laundry lists of American literary lacks: “There is scarcely an ore which contributes to the wealth of the author that is found here in veins as rich as in Europe. There are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offences against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry.”<sup>64</sup> Acclimated to a literature in which dramatic tension was built on sharply stratified social distinctions, American authors could hardly conceive of what literary forms would match their materially burgeoning society.<sup>65</sup> As a result, they simply copied European models and wrote novels of seduction and gothic horror in deracinated, generic locales.

Perhaps the most daunting problem post-Jacksonian American literature faced was the lack of international copyright.<sup>66</sup> American publishers pirated European novels at will, paying no royalties to their authors. As a consequence, American publishers could reprint the

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<sup>62</sup>Brownson, “American Literature [An Oration],” *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (January 1840): 66.

<sup>63</sup>Cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 229. Everett also noted, referring to his own European training and proclivities, that “You cannot pour anything out of a vessel but what is in it. I am obliged to depend on myself more than on any other person, and I must write that which will run fastest.”

<sup>64</sup>James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor* (1828, reprint; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 348.

<sup>65</sup>Oddly, it did not occur to Cooper and his compatriots that the American Revolution might provide the very themes they sought. It is largely invisible from the literature of the day.

<sup>66</sup>The standard work on the topic is Barnes. See also, for some contemporary discussions, Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, 346-47; Poe, *Broadway Journal*, 4 October 1845, in *Essays and Reviews*, 1076.

cream of European literature far cheaper than paying American authors for American novels. This created a wild competition among American publishers to obtain books of popular authors, such as Dickens and Bulwer, to pirate for American publication.<sup>67</sup> Without American publishers to support them, American authors could not invent an American literature. “A year or two more of neglect of their [American authors’] interests,” warned a pamphlet issued by some of the country’s most prominent authors, “a year or two more of free reproduction of foreign books... and the craft of American authors is dead and extinct... The popular mind will [then] be in full and undisturbed possession of foreign writers, to shape and mould it as they choose. A pleasant prospect indeed! Speaking our own tongue, yet babblers of the language of strangers: at home yet abroad: free, yet servile as the dog that whimpers in his master’s track.”<sup>68</sup> To a generation of literary nationalists, the infant death of American literature would spell the end of the nation as surely as would a third British invasion.

Cutting through these problems of audience, content, and professionalization was a series of precipitous aesthetic and ideological rifts. American literary nationalists sharply disagreed on how best to foster a national literature. Orestes Brownson, for instance, complained that “we seem to have no adequate conception of what American literature should be, and what it is capable of becoming.”<sup>69</sup> Beyond this widely held diagnosis,

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<sup>67</sup>In 1835, for example, the British publisher of Bulwer-Lytton’s *Rienzi* sold advance sheets of the novel to two American publishers: Philadelphia’s Carey & Hart and New York’s Harper and Brothers. The two sets of sheets arrived in America on the same boat. Carey & Hart shot twelve different sections of the sheets from which the printing plates could be made to twelve different Philadelphia print shops. Working furiously overnight, the printers had printed sheets delivered the very next morning to the binder. The binders sewed and bound the printed sheets in hard covers they had prepared in advance. Carey & Hart bought up all the seats on that day’s stage to New York and stuffed it with copies of *Rienzi*, getting the novel into New York stores a full day in advance of the Harpers’ edition (J.C. Derby, *Fifty Years Among Authors, Books, and Publishers* [New York: G.W. Carleton, 1884], 551).

<sup>68</sup>Cornelius Matthews [also signed by William Cullen Bryant and Francis L. Haucks], *An Address to the People of the United States in Behalf of the American Copyright Club* (New York: American Copyright Club, 1843), 14. Part also cited in Neal, “American Authors,” *Brother Jonathan* 6 (18 November 1843): 324. The Club’s membership ran the political gamut, from ardent Democrats such as Matthews and Bryant to Whigs and conservatives such as John Quincy Adams, Nicholas Biddle, Lewis Gaylord Clark, Henry Clay, and Horace Greeley.

<sup>69</sup>Brownson, “American Literature,” 5.

nationalists provided numerable and diverging cures. They broke into confusing knots of politics and theoretical tendencies, only to unravel and knot in different configurations. Individuals changed positions with maddening frequency. Magazines published opinions that diverged from their own editorial stands. But three key strands of nationalist thought can be teased out.

Whig-leaning critics were benign nationalists. They saw American unity as the inevitable outcome of national expansion and technological progress. Speaking from faith rather than any sustainable evidence, they considered the railroad in particular as the future agent of national unification. Railroads, exulted a Whig lecturer in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1832, “will contribute eminently to the improvement of society.” The British had faith that the railroad was to form the island of Britain “into one vast institution.” And, if so, then the same effect in the U.S. would be much grander. The U.S. “will present the most magnificent association, that the sun shall shine on. Her knowledge, and feeling, and power will be ONE. She will be ONE, in all her attributes, without the least disposition to divide herself, while no earthly force can compel a division.” This lecturer, with the aid of 20-20 foresight, proclaimed that “our sectional feelings and interests will be extinguished...” as the railroads extended across the country<sup>70</sup> Given the actual extent of the railroads in the early 1830s, such faith was nothing short of miraculous.<sup>71</sup>

Democratic critics tended to be anxious nationalists, perpetually fearing that America was collapsing into a culture-less abyss. The opening of a regular steam ship packet service to England could send magazinist N.P. Willis into a paroxysm of nationalist fret. Because it

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<sup>70</sup>Charles Caldwell, “Thoughts on the Moral and Other Indirect Influences of Rail-Roads,” *New-England Magazine* 2 (April 1832): 291.

<sup>71</sup>The Whiggish *North American Review* argued in similar terms in the wake of the Nullification Crisis. Geographic mobility, spurred by internal trade, steamboat and railroad travel, and circulating newspapers, the *Review* claimed was constantly strengthening the bonds that held the states together. But, just in case these material changes might fail, the *Review* reverted to the bonds of a higher power, asserting that “the will of Providence has decreed that these States shall be united...” (“The Union and the States,” *North American Review* 37 [July 1833]: 247). The reviewer’s sanguine outlook (as well as his ability to read the mind of God) met with only one potential stumbling block: slavery and the agitation carried out against it by the abolitionists. His faith was restored only by assuring himself that slavery bore the seeds of its own death to be expected “at one time or another” (249).

would make British periodicals quickly available in the U.S., he cried out, “*In literature we are no longer a distinct nation. The triumph of Atlantic steam navigation has driven the smaller drop into the larger, and London has become the centre. Farewell nationality!*” London was to be the center of “a new literary empire,” and America was to be but “a suburb.”<sup>72</sup> James Russell Lowell was equally concerned, but feared the threat came from within the country. American literature, he warned, “has no centre.... It is divided into many systems, each revolving around its several sun, and often presenting to the rest only the faint glimmer of a milk-and-watery way.” For Lowell, the problem was that the U.S. was riven by sectional and intercity rivalries and disjunctions. Washington, D.C., did not serve the country as European capitals did, it was not “a great central heart, from which life and vigor radiate to the extremities....” The country’s commercial cities produced competing cultures: “Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, each has its literature almost more distinct than those of the different dialects of Germany; and the Young Queen of the West has also one of her own....” The jealousies of these literary systems only heightened the hollowness of the calls for a national literature: “a great babble is kept up concerning a national literature, and the country, having delivered itself of the ugly likeness of a paint-bedaubed filthy savage, smilingly dandles the rag-baby upon her maternal knee, as if it were veritable flesh and blood, and would grow timely to bone and sinew.”<sup>73</sup> Parochialism defeated the nation from within, where foreign armies had failed.

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<sup>72</sup>N.P. Willis, Letter XVI, New York *Mirror*, reprint; *Letters from Under a Bridge* (nc: np, nd [1844], 28). Willis went on to provide a catalogue of the themes unique to American literature just then coming into focus: “the disappearing savage, and the retiring wilderness, the free thought, and the action as free, the spirit of daring innovation, and the irreverent question of usage, the picturesque mixture of many nations in an equal home, the feeling of expanse, of unsubserviency, of distance from time-hallowed authority and prejudice—all elements which were working gradually but gloriously together to make us a nation by ourselves...” (28). Before the advent of the steam packet, Willis claimed, the U.S. had been to England and Europe “a strange country; the few books that reached them they criticised with complimentary jealousy, or with the courtesy due to a stranger...” (28). Now, American literature was surely to be sucked back into a subservient role within the English literary empire—to the intense detriment of the young American author who now had no Atlantic Ocean as a wall behind which he could develop a powerful literature to rival that of the mother country.

<sup>73</sup>Lowell, “Edgar Allan Poe,” *Graham’s* 27 (February 1845): 49.

The anxiety over the lack of a national literature spanned the cultural and political spectrum. The radical young Orestes Brownson, supporter of workingmen's causes, lamented, "American Literature can scarcely be said to have a being."<sup>74</sup> The desperation of all was captured in the august and conservative *North American Review* in an essay on "The Philosophy of History." The essayist, like a gold rusher maniacally digging in a vein of pyrite, vainly declared that if only some American author could write a history of "the whole human race" it would provide "the nucleus of a distinct national literature." At the opposite end of the critical spectrum, the mammoth conductor Park Benjamin also advocated for some American to write a universal history. It "would at once give us an original national character [and] place us on equal [cultural] terms with our opponents...."<sup>75</sup> Oddly, they did not consider the effect of writing a history of their own country.

The cant of anxiety disturbed a third group of nationalists, the universalists. Located chiefly in Boston and Cambridge, universal nationalists were humanists more immersed in the Enlightenment tradition than were the anxious nationalists. They saw nationalism as the expression, not of a unique cultural essence, but as the local expression of universal culture.

<sup>76</sup> The *North American Review*, for example, criticized the "extravagant nationality" of Nathaniel P. Willis in 1846. Such nationalism was "at war with good taste and general progress in liberal culture."<sup>77</sup> The *Review* even bearded the anxious nationalists' tail by insinuating that it was *they* who aped English critics in calling for an American literature confined to Indians, Niagara Falls, and "the crash of trees in the primeval forest."<sup>78</sup> Such criticisms were aimed at essentializing conceptions of nationalism. The universalists did not

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<sup>74</sup>Brownson, "American Literature," 4.

<sup>75</sup>Even in the late 1850s, the staunchly Republican *Putnam's* was still looking into the future for the arrival of an American literature. An author admitted that the country had not yet produced much, but what little it had produced was "an earnest of a creative future. We are to have a national literature and a national drama" ("A National Drama," *Putnam's* 9 [February 1857]: 148).

<sup>76</sup>The conservative *North American Review* recognized the nationalist rhetoric from its own early days. Under the early influence of the literary nationalists, the *Review* had instructed its readers in the 1820s that in cases where a critic's opinion was at variance with that of the multitude, the critic was wrong ("Goethe," *North American Review* 19 [October 1824]: 306).

<sup>77</sup>"Simms [Review]," *North American Review* 63 (October 1846): 376.

<sup>78</sup>"Simms [Review]," 378.

condemn nationalism entirely. James Russell Lowell, in the 1843 introduction to his magazine the *Pioneer*, advocated a limited nationality in literature while attacking the ardent nationalism of Young America.<sup>79</sup> He wrote that “any literature, as far as it is national, is diseased, inasmuch as it appeals to some climatic peculiarity, rather than to universal nature.” For Lowell, a too strong emphasis on nationalism was akin to all other literatures that tended “to encourage the sentiment of *caste*,” and these would “widen the boundary between the races, and so... put farther off the hope of one great brotherhood.”<sup>80</sup> Lowell did not mean to ignore the national altogether, and took the occasion of a review of Longfellow’s novel *Kavanagh* to explain.<sup>81</sup> Lowell followed the literary nationalists to the extent that he recognized that “Art in America will be modified by circumstances.”<sup>82</sup> He admitted that “There are undoubtedly national, as truly as family, idiosyncrasies, though we think that these will get displayed without any special schooling for that end. The substances with which a nation is compelled to work will modify its results, as well intellectual as material.”<sup>83</sup> But these substances, for the universalists, were always the building blocks of a universal human expression.

These various positions on the nature of American nationalism were largely lost on American readers. They seemed utterly disinterested in fostering an American literature, so enamored were they of British and French novels. The debates over American nationalism were even less interesting to those who rarely read more than the penny papers. Politics was the arena for American action, particularly for men, and culture to them smelled of the lady’s

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<sup>79</sup>Despite this attack, Lowell counted a number of group among his friends. On Lowell’s relations with Young America members, see Martin Duberman, *James Russell Lowell* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1966), 58.

<sup>80</sup>Lowell, “Introduction,” *Pioneer* 1.1 (January 1843): 1.

<sup>81</sup>Longfellow had been something of a nationalist in his young adulthood, but had adopted the humanist position by the 1840s. This conversion was evident in his novel, where he had two characters argue the case of naturalism versus nationalism (Spencer, *Quest*, 153, 198, 216).

<sup>82</sup>Lowell, “Nationality in Literature [Review of Longfellow’s *Kavanagh*],” *North American Review* 69 (July 1849): 209.

<sup>83</sup>Lowell, “Nationality in Literature,” 208. He had clearly hardened against the Young America position by 1849, stating: “Nationality... is only a less narrow form of provincialism, a sublimer sort of clownishness and ill-manners. It deals in jokes, anecdotes, and allusions of such purely local character that a majority of the company are shut out from all approach to an understanding of them” (207-208).



boudoir. Culture was redolent of all that revolted the American democracy. The benign nationalists, while they paid close attention to culture, had little interest in challenging the place of politics in American society. It would have meant abandoning the realm of thought hidden in their ponderous quarterlies. But the anxious nationalists were not content to wait for culture to trickle down to the masses. The very survival of the nation seemed to be at stake. They forced the issues of American national culture to a head. In the early 1840s, they and their locofoco fellow travelers founded magazines such as *Arcturus* and the *Democratic Review* to take the idea of national culture to the democratic polity. The Whigs countered with their own magazines, particularly *The American Review* (later *The American Whig Review*). The stage was set for a battle over the nature of American culture. The fate of the American magazine hung in the balance.

### **Democratic Criticism for a National Culture**

Largely founded to relieve the pressures of anxious nationalism, the Young Democrats faced a seemingly intractable dilemma. On the one hand, they were adepts of Herder, de Staël, and the Schlegels. “The literature of a people,” proclaimed W.A. Jones, one of the group’s leading critics, “should be its written thought, uttered ‘out of the abundance of its heart,’ and exhibiting its interior as well as exterior life.”<sup>84</sup> Or as fellow traveler Orestes Brownson expressed it, literature “is the expression and embodiment of the national life. Its character is not determined by this man or that, but by the national spirit.... Great men do not make their age; they are its effect.”<sup>85</sup> But in one crucial way, the Europeans’ ideas were unsuited to the American situation. Where England, France, and Germany had centuries of literature to historicize, the Americans had none. There was as yet no identifiably American heart. What literature existed in America in 1840, they insisted (before the canonization of the writers of

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<sup>84</sup>[W.A. Jones], “Nationality in Literature,” 267.

<sup>85</sup>Brownson, “American Literature,” 19-20. Culture, he added, was “predetermined by the spirit of the age and nation.”

the New England Renaissance), was embarrassingly derivative of European models. This meant that the anxious nationalists had to produce an American literature out of whole cloth. “[B]efore we have an American literature, we must have an American criticism,” Lowell proclaimed in *Graham’s*.<sup>86</sup> American literature was in dire need of critics who could determine literary, moral, and social standards for the production of distinctly unique national settings, narratives, and literary forms. What the country desperately needed, avowed N.P. Willis, was a “Washington among the critics.”<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, any project of literary criticism was wide open to charges of elitism. The anointing of critics to sit in judgment of the people’s cultural work seemed anathema to Jacksonian democracy. Washington, after all, had been a Federalist. And the Young Democrats were acutely aware of how any talk of criticism smacked of Whig snobbery. To counter such charges, the Young Democrats devised strategies for justifying a national literary criticism.

They attacked Whig critics for giving criticism a bad name. Whigs and other conservatives, Jones suggested, were a “critical tribe” that reveled in churlish, spiteful judgments.<sup>88</sup> Such critics, writing in the New York *Knickerbocker* and Boston’s *North American Review*, cast the cultural “curse of blue-stocking-ism” and committed the political sin of “literary toryism.”<sup>89</sup> Whiggish criticism, Jones claimed, ran counter to democratic ideals because it weakened national culture. It solidified class distinctions in literature and fostered colonial subserviency to foreign literary forms.<sup>90</sup> The goal of a democratic criticism should be to encourage unique literary forms, root out foreign literary influences, and push for a thematic focus on *all* sectors of democratic culture. Its themes should be “the necessity

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<sup>86</sup>Lowell, “Edgar Allan Poe,” 49. Poe soon added his own plea for criticism, “Who thinks of making his critique a work of art in itself?” (Poe, “Magazine Writing,” 354).

<sup>87</sup>Willis, Letter XVI, 27.

<sup>88</sup>He was on track here, of course, with Poe’s calls for criticism based on principles rather than personalities.

<sup>89</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 15 (September 1844): 243, 244.

<sup>90</sup>Brownson makes the same argument, “American Literature,” 64-65.

and dignity of labor,... the native nobility of an honest and brave heart; the futility of all conventional distinctions of rank and wealth...; the brotherhood and equality of men....”<sup>91</sup>

Democratic critics likened criticism to public instruction. The democratic critic’s function, they argued, was simply an extension of the long-hallowed educational purpose of the free press. His duty was to guard the gates of culture and stymie the forces of political corruption. The democratic critic was the cultural representative of the people, demonstrating the powers of an educated, independent judgment. To be an effective guide to American authors, the critic’s knowledge had to be of “a genuine, liberal, and philosophical cast.”<sup>92</sup>

The anxious nationalists attempted to define the relations between the critic and the democratic cultural polity. The critic’s objective, Orestes Brownson explained, was to “make the whole nation a ‘fit audience.’”<sup>93</sup> To meet this objective, the critic had to follow two essential rules: First, he had to speak to no clique or fraction “but to the entire nation.” Second, he must not allow his “attainment [to] far outrun the capacity of the masses to comprehend and relish his speech.”<sup>94</sup>

Sentimentality was crucial to the anxious nationalist’s project. Under the aegis of literary nationalism, of course, “literature” meant something much more than the technics of poetry and prose. Criticism had to engage ideas, history, and *life*.<sup>95</sup> Jones declared that American critics, before attempting to discuss the products of American culture, should obtain “[m]uch general acquirement, knowledge of life and character, dabbling in science and the arts, thorough knowledge of history, and (at least) American politics and economy...”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Cited in Spencer, *Quest*, 117-18.

<sup>92</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America,” *Arcturus* 3 (May 1842): 406.

<sup>93</sup>Brownson, “American Literature,” 16.

<sup>94</sup>Brownson, “American Literature,” 16. Brownson also added a third, somewhat odd task. It was the critic’s duty he charged to ensure that all Americans had enough leisure time in which to read: This required the business class to be supported in its production of wealth so that all might have more leisure. Brownson offered no practical guidance as to how the critic was supposed to accomplish this last task.

<sup>95</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America” (1844): 249; Harry Hayden Clark, “Lowell’s Criticism of Romantic Literature,” *Publications of the MLA* 41 (March 1926): 209.

<sup>96</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America” (1844): 249.

This intellectual breadth was essential if the critic was to perform his most high holy duty: guide the nation's social morals. "He is a moral anatomist throughout," a reviewer in *Arcturus* approvingly proclaimed of a literary character, "a critic on every page."<sup>97</sup> The critic was a sentimental reformer carrying out a vast project of public education.<sup>98</sup> To the extent that the ultimate goal of literature was right behavior, the lack of a specifically American literature was compensated for by the growth of the nation's critical faculty: As Daniel K. Whitaker suggested in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, "our [critical] Reviews, at least in part... constitute our native literature [and] are an evidence, and a fair one, of our literary pretensions and our national character."<sup>99</sup> Their goal was to create, not a religious morality imposed from above, but what William Gilmore Simms's *Southern Literary Review* called a "social moral" that arose from the people.<sup>100</sup> This is why the anxious nationalists believed the magazine would be the primary medium of national culture.

The magazine did not have the elite connotation of books, and it could claim a place in the vaunted democratic tradition of the free press. The critic, appearing monthly in the magazine, was to be a sort of a sentimental preacher. From the pulpit of the magazine, he could use literature as the text for his cultural homilies. He could exhort Americans to a better life by reflecting on the stories presented in a national literature. The critic, for the anxious nationalists, was a sentimental Vergil for the American comedy, guiding the people to the paradise of a national culture through the medium of the magazine.

But the project of a democratic criticism was mired in a deep contradiction. The acute necessity for cultural leadership often clashed with the idealized "people" in Jones's work. Out of one side of his mouth, he argued it was essential that both critics and authors be governed by popular opinion. But, out of the other, he condemned popular culture. It was

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<sup>97</sup>"Magazine Literature," *Arcturus* 2 (1841): 343.

<sup>98</sup>Jones, "Criticism in America" (1844): 249.

<sup>99</sup>Whitaker, "The Newspaper and Periodical Press," 42.

<sup>100</sup>The term "social moral" is in "American Authorship," *Southern Quarterly Review* 23 (April 1853): 499. Simms took over the *Review* which Whitaker had founded in 1849 (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 729n, 725).

polluted with “quack advertisements and the quotations of flour and molasses.”<sup>101</sup> The project of forming a national literature was simply too important to the anxious nationalists to leave to the rambunctious workings of a democratic culture spread across a vast continent. Jones thus advocated a literary republicanism. He could not resist separating critics out from the populace to give them a superintending role over American literature and, in a sense, American society.<sup>102</sup> As such, critics, and authors as well of course, had a cultural duty to shun popularity for its own sake. For if literature was to be a social moral, if it was to have an educative function, it could not afford to surrender either its sincerity or its independence—these inevitably being the first two casualties of a slavish subservience to “flattering the ignorant and low-minded.”<sup>103</sup>

When the anxious nationalists spoke in these terms, they sounded much like Whig critics. Whigs, broadly speaking, read the literary nationalists differently than the Young America group. The conservative periodicals generally took literary nationalism to be a heuristic tool for considering a people’s past and its present.<sup>104</sup> The avowedly Whig magazine, the *American Review* (later the *American Whig Review*), ridiculed the notion that a literature (and by extension a national culture) could be consciously brought forth, as the Young Democrats hoped to do. E.W. Johnson riddled the Young Democrat’s program of inventing a national literature with a series of penetrating questions. Wondering if they had any conception of the literature they sought, he asked, “Do they mean a new body and mode of thought? or a new vehicle, a new dialect, for the old ideas? Is the change to arise out of a greater refinement and cultivation? or is it, on the contrary, to spring from a return to simplicity—a banishment of artificial forms of life?”<sup>105</sup> American culture was, for all intents

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<sup>101</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America” (1842): 402.

<sup>102</sup>For a similar expression of the contradiction between a democratic criticism and the need for specialized critics, see Brownson, “American Literature.”

<sup>103</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America” (1842): 403.

<sup>104</sup>“[L]iterature,” wrote E.W. Johnson, “must ever be, in the main, an image, an expression” of the society that produces it (“American Letters—Their Character and Advancement,” *American Review* 1 [June 1845]: 579).

<sup>105</sup>Johnson, “American Letters,” 576.

and purposes, English. Nothing but “a long line of glories,” Johnson scoffed, could ever efface that history. Literature’s work, for Whiggish critics like Johnson, was to reinforce traditional culture and established forms of power. As such, it was essential that both literature and its criticism remain in the hands of an educated and decidedly male elite.

### **Magazine/Feminine**

Two epithets dominated post-Jacksonian criticism. Both whigs and democrats sneered at works they disliked by calling them “namby-pamby,” or redolent of the “milliner’s” shop. Thus, when James Russell Lowell launched his magazine, *The Pioneer*, in 1843, he made liberal use of the terms. To differentiate *The Pioneer* from other, popular magazines, Lowell proclaimed its mission was “to furnish the intelligent and reflecting portion of the Reading Public with a rational substitute for the enormous quantity of thrice-diluted trash, in the shape of namby-pamby love tales and sketches, which is monthly poured out to them [the Reading Public] by many of our popular Magazines....”<sup>106</sup> *The Pioneer*, by comparison, was to provide “a healthy and manly Periodical Literature, whose perusal will not necessarily involve a loss of time and a deterioration of every moral and intellectual faculty.” Lowell castigated the offending literature as nothing but “the crape and wire flowers of the daintiest Paris milliners.” He did not need to spell out what he meant by these images. Here was a series of coded terms that any reader of the 1840s could decipher: reading public, intelligence, reflection, health, and manliness were arrayed against trash, namby-pamby writing, commercial popularity, and the oft-despised symbol of all that was “female” literature: the milliner. This rhetorical burst did little to help *The Pioneer*. It failed after only three issues.

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<sup>106</sup>“Prospectus,” *Pioneer* 1.1 (January 1843): before p. 1. This prospectus may actually have been written by the magazine’s publisher. But it is clear, given Lowell’s dominating position in the project that he thoroughly approved of the statement. William Wetmore Story, after the magazine’s demise, praised it in these same terms, as standing against the namby-pamby magazines (see Duberman, *Lowell*, 53). Poe also praised the magazine as a strong blow in “the cause of a Pure Taste” (Duberman, *Lowell*, 53).

To whiggish critics, *The Pioneer*'s failure was due precisely to the very factors it claimed to battle against. It could not differentiate itself from the popular ladies' magazines. The Congregationalist quarterly *The New Englander* for example, savaged it as one of the "fashionable monthlies" aimed solely at women readers.<sup>107</sup> Brimming with sarcasm, the article's author found it "very creditable to the conductors and correspondents of these magazines, that, so far as they are men, they have given up their manly appetites, and devoted themselves to the amusement of our citizen ladies." This insult seems mysterious. How could a magazine which published several of the most important writers of the day—Edgar Allen Poe, Lydia Maria Child, John Greenleaf Whittier, Elizabeth Barrett, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jones Very, and John Neal—be classified as the namby-pamby work of "men-milliners"? What was it in the *Pioneer* that made it a "fashionable" and by the merest extension a *female* monthly? The answer is bound up in the cultural onslaught of sentimentality in the 1840s.

Magazinists and critics, from the democrat Jones and to the whig Johnson, were swept up in a gender crisis in the 1840s. Even as they increasingly valorized culture as a nationalizing force, culturists increasingly feared that culture was becoming the work of women. The social movements for sentimental reform were already closely identified with a female ethos in the 1830s. Through the 1840s and early 1850s, a tidal wave of women's sentimental literature broke across the nation. The magazines aimed at "ladies," such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Graham's*, and *Peterson's*, each sold over ten times more copies than the *United States Magazine*. By 1852, three sentimental novels had smashed all records for American book sales: Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, and Susan Cummings's *The Lamplighter*.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>"The Fashionable Monthlies," *New Englander* 2 (January 1844): 96-105. Ironically, one of the founders of the magazine was Horace Bushnell, author of the groundbreaking sentimental work, *Christian Nurture*, which appeared in 1847.

<sup>108</sup>William Charvat noted that, as late as 1829, book publishers did not believe that any one book could sell more than 6,500 copies (*Profession of Authorship in America*, 81). For more on the sale of these novels, see Susan

These and other novels by women threatened to make all of public life their purview. They regularly depicted aspects of life once thought to be preserve of male authors alone, including “poverty, coarseness, brutality, exploitation, treachery, pettiness, illness, exhaustion, degradation, and suffering.”<sup>109</sup> They built on and refined matters of “politics, law, philosophy, and history” that had been evident in sentimental novels from the beginning.<sup>110</sup> The sentimental novel by the 1850s (almost always written by women) had become a prime site for the discussion of American culture, politics, and destiny. Sarah Hale exclaimed in *Godey’s*: “Novels are now the great vehicle of public sentiment, where politics, religion, or political economy are discussed and all new ideas, or at least the extravagant opinions of each would-be reformer, are promulgated. In this way the masses are reached, for everybody reads novels....”<sup>111</sup> The growing popularity only threatened to intensify.

Many male critics were revulsed. “Manliness... is on the decline,” the whiggish Johnson wailed. American culture, he warned, was “sinking into effeminacy.”<sup>112</sup> A democratic critic anxiously declared that “our periodicals of a more sensible and masculine stamp are in danger of going down altogether.”<sup>113</sup> Even those who welcomed sentimental culture worried that the production of literature by women threatened sentimentality’s influence over politics. Young America leader Evert Duyckinck, for instance, grouched that

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Geary, “The Domestic Novel as a Commercial Commodity: Making a Best Seller in the 1850s,” *Bibliographical Society of America Papers* 70 (1976): 365-393.

<sup>109</sup>Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 24.

<sup>110</sup>The list is from Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 123.

<sup>111</sup>Cited in Okker, *Our Sister Editors*. “Novels,” noted a *Putnam’s* critic in wonder in 1854, “are one of the features of the age.” He observed that “every subject of interest, every principle of science, of art, of politics, of religion, finds a graceful appreciator and interpreter through the popular novel.” The country seemed inundated with novels, as the critic noted sarcastically: “So, do you wish to instruct, to convince, to please? Write a novel! Have you a system of religion or politics or manners or social life to inculcate? Write a novel! Would you have the ‘world’ split its sides with laughter, or set all the damsels in the land a-breaking their hearts? Write a novel! Would you lay bare the secret workings of your own heart, or have you a friend to whom you would render that office? Write a novel!... Have you any tit-bits of wit or humor—any morceaux of fun or frolic—any ‘insight’ into art or aesthetics” Why write a novel! Do you wish to create a sensation? Write a novel! And lastly, not least, but loftiest... would you make money? Then in Pluto’s and Mammon’s name! Write a novel!” (Swinton, “Novels: Their Meaning and Mission,” 31-32).

<sup>112</sup>Johnson, “American Letters,” 578, 577.

<sup>113</sup>“H.,” “Parlor Periodicals,” 80.



“There can be no inspiration gained from the milliner’s figures in the frontispiece or the milliner’s literature inside” the ladies magazines.<sup>114</sup> These critics feared that if culture became the province of women alone, it would lose any hope of reaching the male audience heavily attracted to newspapers and politics. The problem for male critics was how to forge a more robust sentimentality that could reach males as well as females. To understand the scope of the problem, it is necessary to examine sentimentality’s appeal to culturists in general and magazinists in particular.

Sentimentality had already become an informing principle of much of American literature and literary thought. Even Lewis Gaylord Clark, the whiggish conductor of the *Knickerbocker*, lauded Charles Dickens in sentimental terms: “His calm philosophy, his love of nature, and of poor humanity,” enthused Clark, “warmly commend him to the hearts of his readers.”<sup>115</sup> Lowell tipped his sentimental hand in the motto he chose for *The Pioneer*: “Reform, therefore, without bravery or scandal of former times and persons....”<sup>116</sup> The tenets of sentimentality infused much of what all the culturists did, whether liberal or conservative, Young America or Whig. Early sentimental novels such as Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* and Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield* were widely popular in America.<sup>117</sup> Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and *Sentimental Journey* were vital to Thomas Jefferson’s worldview.<sup>118</sup> Sentimentality flowed from the colleges of the era. As the social expression of Scottish common sense it was a bedrock of the capstone course at most colleges. “Man seldom acts from reason,” went one typical moral lesson, “in society feeling rules all.”<sup>119</sup> Sentimentality encompassed far more of culture than the emotionally wrought literature for popular

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<sup>114</sup>*American Review* 4 (October 1846): 408. Here is an example of the ideological slippage of the era, a leading democrat writing in the leading whig cultural magazine.

<sup>115</sup>Cited in Miller, *Raven*, 35.

<sup>116</sup>Cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 736. The quotation is from Bacon.

<sup>117</sup>James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 59-62.

<sup>118</sup>On Jefferson’s sentimentality, see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage, 1979), part 4, “A Sentimental Paper,” especially 273ff. Indeed, James Parton was fond of referring to Thomas Jefferson in the middle nineteenth century as “a man of feeling.”

<sup>119</sup>President Eliphalet Nott, of Union College, cited in George Schmidt, *The Old Time College President* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 138.

audiences dominated by women.<sup>120</sup> It had strands working through different parts of American culture.

The influence of sentimentality has often been obscured in American historiography. Too often, because of the traditional academic bias against sentimentality, it has been confused with Romanticism. But Romanticism, particularly in its Byronic mode, barely obtained a foot hold in American life. Romanticism was far too personal, passionate, and rebellious for the development of ideas of social cohesion. Because America already suffered from a surfeit of social fragmentation, sentimentality offered ways for Americans to imagine connections with one another in ways Romanticism and democratic individualism never could. Sentimentality promised to be the cultural antidote to the disease of American politics. To do so, however, it had to be re-forged so as to correspond, to some degree, with American political conventions.

Sentimentality provided American culturists with a democratic social psychology. When the Scottish common sense philosophers placed morality in the natural structure of the mind, they inadvertently made it possible to do away with traditional forms of moral authority. A democratic people no longer needed either God or aristocrats, for virtue was now inborn in each every citizen of the culture.

In sentimental culture, sentimentality secularized the moral order. It was a celebration of what one historian has called “the immanence of moral and emotional meaning in the

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<sup>120</sup>The iron curtain some historians have come to perceive between the separate spheres of men and women is the product of a reification of republicanism and sentimentality into sexed, and not gendered, categories. In superficial readings of history, sentimentality has come to be seen as a prison house of women, locking them away in a private domestic sphere. But this is far from the truth. Sentimentality was equally available to antebellum men, and indeed required male participation as a crucial element of its self-justification. Horace Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture*, for example, was thoroughly imbued with sentimentality as it repudiated the Calvinist doctrine of original sin and argued for the development of the Christian household as a means for drawing out the essential goodness of all children. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler’s collection of essays, *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) is a vital corrective to this perception of a gendered iron curtain in regard to sentimentality. See in particular their introduction (1-16), which offers an excellent overview of the historiography that has drawn up this curtain ever higher throughout the twentieth century.

everyday.”<sup>121</sup> This celebration of the quotidian legitimated moral action by sacralizing the natural world. That is, it replaced religious and social forces with the inherent morality that arose from the interaction of the individual’s mind with the world of local objects that surrounded him or her.

Sentimentality achieved this shift by formulating an aesthetic moral. For sentimentalists, building on the common sense philosophy, beauty was analogous to virtue.<sup>122</sup> The problem for the common sense philosophers had been that virtue was not sensible, that is, it was not visible in things. Beauty, however, was visible. Beauty was, in a sense, defined as the quality of a thing that produced in an observer agreeable feelings. Because virtue was the most agreeable of feelings, beauty and virtue were inextricably intertwined in sentimental thought. The feeling aroused by beautiful things, wrote the Scot Thomas Reid, is “gay and pleasant. It sweetens and humanises the temper, is friendly to every benevolent affection, and tends to allay sullen and angry passions. It enlivens the mind, and disposes it to other agreeable emotions, such as those of love, hope, and joy.”<sup>123</sup> Beauty was the world stimulating the individual’s inherent will to virtue and to benevolent action.

But America was a notoriously rough place in the Jacksonian era. The culturists had to develop some mode of education to heighten Americans’ awareness of the role of beauty in producing moral behavior if they were to curb the excesses of politics. Fortunately for them, one of the hallowed tenets of American democracy was the importance of education and a free press as safeguards against democracy’s corrupting enemies. The culturists thus

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<sup>121</sup>David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57.

<sup>122</sup>On beauty in common sense philosophy, see S.A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (1960, reprint; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973), 230-35. Terry Eagleton discusses the aesthetic moral at length in “The Law of the Heart: Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke,” in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>123</sup>Cited in Grave, *Scottish Philosophy*, 232. A classic formulation of this point is Adam Smith’s statement in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “The tendency of virtue to promote and vice to disturb the order of society... reflects a very great beauty upon the one and a very great deformity upon the other.... Human society... appears like a great, an immense machine whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects” (Adam Smith, *Adam Smith’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Herbert W. Schneider [New York: Harper & Row, 1948], 52).

called for various programs for refining American taste as a vital step toward the creation of a cultural democracy. The turn toward culture provides an essential clue for explaining the otherwise exceedingly odd triumvirate of qualities the *Democratic Review* saw as fundamental to American life: “liberty, refinement, and progress.”<sup>124</sup>

Taste was democratic literary criticism applied to life. In this context, it was far more than an effete love of precious artworks. Rather, taste was analogous to the moral office of the literary critic. Taste signified the ability to discern action that was beautiful and right because it was expressly concerned with the aesthetic moral. It was the individual’s ability to choose between what is morally attractive and repelling in the absence of universal, external standards set by religious or social hierarchs. In a world riddled with counterfeit men and painted ladies, it was also necessary to display taste through one’s manner and attraction to literary or artistic works. No critic of the time deemed taste itself as a natural ability. Americans, buffeted by the intense passions of a frontier society, were in need of refinement.

As taste was not effete appreciation, so refinement was not a process of creating a high culture elite. It was the clearing away of political barnacles and socially occluding traditions to release Americans’ aesthetic abilities and hence to produce a democratic moral order. Refinement, the culturists argued, was the essence of democratic progress because it was the process of discovering within oneself the imminent values of sentimentality and expressing them through association with objects of beauty in the world. Refinement was the critical project of judging life on one’s own terms with the guidance of the best ideas democratic culture had to offer. A writer in the *Knickerbocker* captured the democratic formula: “refined, but not curbed by civilization.”<sup>125</sup> Thus, refinement, far from an elite refuge from the democratic hurly burly, far from being a reformulation of Puritan limitations in secular guise, was rather the very promise of democracy. Refinement was the means

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<sup>124</sup>“Journalism,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 10 (January 1842): 62.

<sup>125</sup>“L.M.P.,” “Necessity for a National Literature,” 415.

through which individuals could escape social slavery, through broad literary imaginings, into the liberty of cultural growth.

These issues were at the heart of perhaps the most coherent contemporary discussion of the influence of sentimentality on American literature, W.A. Jones's 1841 essay, "The Culture of the Imagination."<sup>126</sup> Inveighing against the Enlightenment's faith in empirical reason, Jones declared that imagination was a higher form of knowledge. For Jones, reason produced only a dour materialism in thought and philosophy and "incredulity and coldness" in religion.<sup>127</sup> Imagination was the route to a greater knowledge. Imagination "sees more of a subject at once; takes in a broader field of relations and contingencies; more delicately distinguishes; more vividly contrasts. It is argument by pictures; a poetic analogy; a creative analysis."<sup>128</sup> As a pedagogy, imagination was also superior to reason. Unlike oppressive rational pedagogies, the imagination "charms, it delights, while it instructs."<sup>129</sup> Literature was, for Jones, the supreme mode of imaginative pedagogy. As the embodiment of the imagination, it was akin to religion, for both required a participant's faith in something beyond his or her experience. Indeed, even irreligious poets displayed moments of religiosity by the very nature of their imaginative activity. But for Jones, literature was far better suited than religion to the formulation of a morality of social life. Religion was too reliant on God's authority dominating social life from outside the individual. It denied subjective feelings inspired by the objective world and prevented the observer's sympathetic sense of nature's bounteous beauty. Those stuck in religious forms of imagination had, Jones lamented, "no heart in their understanding; no sentiment in their perceptions."<sup>130</sup> The sympathetic imagination recognized man's inability to know all, but compensated by providing social

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<sup>126</sup>Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," *Arcturus* 1 (March 1841): 236. Jones began with a conundrum that reveals his theoretical influences. He was unsure whether the imagination was a faculty of the individual, as common sense philosophy would suggest, or a cultural force that works *through* the individual, as the literary nationalists contended. Unable to decide, he declared one thing with certainty: the imagination is the highest form of teaching.

<sup>127</sup>Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," 237.

<sup>128</sup>Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," 241-42.

<sup>129</sup>Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," 236.

<sup>130</sup>Jones, "Culture of the Imagination," 240.

beings with the paramount sentimental ability “to place ourselves in the conditions of others.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, the great project of democracy, which would create an enfolding and informing force of order among the fragmenting polity, was to diffuse culture throughout the populace. “Religion and true poetry,” Jones enthused, “would then become co-workers with taste and fancy.” What Jones called “the moral use of the imagination,” a phrase he felt sure would “strike some strangely,” would bring about a worker’s paradise: “The artisan would be a Christian and a critic; and equally a good man and a skilful craftsman. The heart of man—that fountain of all that is good—or, if poisoned by the world’s corruption, that sink of utter impurity—would be truer, and more affectionate; more earnest, and more confiding.”<sup>132</sup> All men, under the sway of the sympathetic imagination, would become friends and brothers, and business would lose its martial character: “The natural warfare of trade, the competition of business, would be merged in an universal harmony and brotherly love.... The body social would then be in its most perfect state; for ‘out of the heart cometh all the issues of life;’ and then the heart would be the ruling principle of the world.”<sup>133</sup>

As Jones suggested in his conclusion, sentimentalists conceived the imagination as a new force for social cohesion. This was possible because of the way culturists reacted against the two then-dominant modes of sentimentality, the newspapers’ over-use of sentimental sympathy and the female magazines’ overemphasis on the affective display of inner emotions (particularly the flood of tears).

By the mid 1840s, the newspapers seemed to have confirmed sentimental reformers worst fears. They had turned the act of sympathizing with the victims of crime and social evil into a prurient addiction to stories about vice. The sentimental revulsion for public executions and vice, set side-by-side with sensational reports of them, had become something

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<sup>131</sup>Jones, “Culture of the Imagination,” 239.

<sup>132</sup>Jones, “Culture of the Imagination,” 242, 243.

<sup>133</sup>Jones, “Culture of the Imagination,” 243.

of a stock formula in the daily papers.<sup>134</sup> Newspaper sensationalism had been stripped of its moral function.

Culturists in the 1840s began to counter this sensational formula by reconceptualizing the function of sympathy. If sympathy with a victim brought readers into too close proximity with their brutalizers, then why not do away with both? Focus instead on American life and other sorts of moral example. This is what the nationalists (of all sorts) were calling for. In essence, they wanted to transform sentimentality's process of imaginative association from sympathy for victims/brutalizers to identity with real people like oneself. "Like" here could be a highly elastic term, indexing, as one's social or political bent prescribed, members of various sorts of cultural group: all of humanity, a specific nation, a far-flung religious sect. As the theoretical conflicts among the various nationalist camps in America indicate, however, this transformation was only in germination in the 1840s. What was clear, at least to the male critics, was that the transformation could not occur if women inundated the production of culture.

The tearful sentimentality that dominated the ladies' magazines disturbed male critics because it reprised a whole set of cultural conventions about women. Sympathy's preoccupation with victims flowed too easily into stereotypes of women's purported helplessness and vulnerability in the public sphere. The excess of tears, moreover, threatened to efface the moral sensibility and replace it with an emotionality that was merely reactionary. There were two literary solutions sentimentalists would eventually take up: First, they would

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<sup>134</sup>"The lover of the marvelous and horrible may have his taste gratified," noted one commentator from New Orleans, "by an account of the last duel that took place, the latest murder or suicide that has occurred, with perhaps the dying confession of the felon, and a minute account of all that took place at the time of the execution, accompanied probably by some judicious remarks from the editor against the practice of public executions, as having a tendency to increase, rather than prevent the frequency of crimes..." (Whitaker, "Newspaper and Periodical Press," 10). Whitaker went on to note that this formula was profitable for the newspaper conductor because "notwithstanding which sage opinion, he continues to feed the depraved appetite of his readers with all such items of intelligence, seeming to forget, that the publicity which he himself thus gives to crime, renders it more interesting and less odious in the eyes of its perpetrator" (10). Whitaker thus simultaneously detected the contradiction of the sentimental project of sensational exposure and revealed his own distaste for the popular audience of the daily paper. This latter point gains a poignant emphasis in the last ten pages of the article, which is a jeremiad against the pernicious influences of the Northern, English, and urban presses on the South.

seek a gendered balance by shifting away from narratives that focused chiefly on individuals (especially individual young women) toward narratives that emphasized family settings. This would allow Americans to conceptualize an extremely abstract and complex set of social relations in terms of knowable family relations. Second, it became crucial to male critics to recuperate sentimental literature from its affective excesses by turning it toward a greater realism (albeit a realism, of course, conditioned by sentimentality). This is what Lowell thought he was doing in his introduction to the *Pioneer*.

The fact that Lowell could not differentiate his magazine from the ladies magazines demonstrates the dilemma culturists had in advancing any nationalist program in the 1840s, especially in a popular magazine. Their problem was philosophical on the one hand and generic on the other. Sentimentality was too threatening to male prerogatives. To Jones's contemporary opponents, Jones's preference for imagination over reason was anathema. Sentimentality seemed to run counter to all the vital precepts of male politics. This, Jones's critics snarled, was women's talk—no matter what his intentions might be. Moreover, there was not a suitable outlet for disseminating the sort of cultural imagination championed by the likes of Jones and Lowell. The ladies' magazines already dominated the medium.

The very concept of the magazine seemed too female. As such, even as *Godey's Ladies' Book* and its imitators published the likes of Poe, Lowell, and Longfellow and made their own calls for literary nationalism, they could not reach far beyond their gendered audience. The reasons for this had to do with certain conventions of magazine publishing of the day. A return to the *New Englander's* critique of Lowell's *Pioneer* and other "fashionable magazines" will illustrate why magazines in general were so often thought of as female.<sup>135</sup>

What was it in the *Pioneer* that made it a "fashionable" and by the merest extension a *female* monthly? There were four interlocking reasons. Many of *The Pioneer's* contributors

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<sup>135</sup>The critic castigated the producers of "our lady-literature." The *New Englander* castigated six magazines by name, including *Graham's*, *Godey's*, and Lowell's own *Pioneer*.



had published in the ladies' magazines, its articles were short, it included pictures, and it printed the names of its authors.

The *New Englander* found *The Pioneer* guilty by association. Many of its contributors had published in the ladies' magazines. Longfellow, Poe, Hawthorne, Holmes, Catherine Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lowell—virtually all the authors of the American Renaissance and all the important writers of the day had sold work to *Graham's*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, and *Peterson's*. John Neal had long championed ladies' magazines and was an early advocate of a variety of sentimental reforms, especially women's rights and antislavery.<sup>136</sup> Even more galling to the *New Englander* was the very format of the “fashionable monthlies.”

Short articles (both fiction and nonfiction) proved to the *New Englander* that the “boudoir books” were patently irrational. Short works, the critic puffed, denied readers “the fatigue of thinking.”<sup>137</sup> Their emphasis on imagination and on subjectivity undermined the prime purpose of the press in a democratic republic: to disseminate “rational information to their readers.” They beclouded topics of public importance through their style of “extemporaneous [and] charming idlesse.” Were there not already, the incredulous critic wondered, enough “men's books [by for instance, Plutarch, Prideaux, Locke] to supply matter which presents some opposition, and so sticks closer to the ribs,” or of a lighter or poetic nature, such as *Gulliver's Travels*, Scott's *Waverly* novels, Pope, Dryden, and Donne to captivate leisure time?

A greater sign of irrationality was the fashionable monthlies' use of illustration. Antebellum periodical publishers (beyond the ladies' magazines) largely banned pictures from their publications.<sup>138</sup> Male publishers characterized words as information and news for

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<sup>136</sup>Lease, *John Neal*, 192-93.

<sup>137</sup>“Fashionable Monthlies,” 98.

<sup>138</sup>One of the great curiosities of American newspapers even beyond 1850 is their utter lack of illustration. While some journalism historians attribute this lack solely to technological difficulties, such arguments are unconvincing (Edwin Emery, *The Press and America*, 3d ed. [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972], 248, 339-40). Newspapers did, from time to time include pictures. But they required some advance planning. Two

the male individual in his particular locale. They consigned pictures to the utterly commercialized sphere of the sentimental, “mass” culture of ladies’ magazines.<sup>139</sup> Words signified reason. Pictures only showed the surface of sentimental affect. For male critics, that is, pictures were the graphic equivalent of tears.

For male critics, pictures in general and illustrated fashion in particular symbolized a welter of threats to American culture: the unsettling of traditional cultural authority by the exaltation of wealth, the uselessness of commercial commodities, foreign influences over American women, the disappearance of the individual among the mass, and the power of women to shape not only domestic culture but ultimately the American republic. As such,

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related reasons account somewhat for the lack of illustrations in newspapers. First, space in antebellum newspapers was generally at quite a premium. Limited often to four pages, with many of the columns devoted to advertisements and shipping and other business news, there was little room for a wide use of pictures. Second, engraving was a slow process and setting an image across columns required extra work for the compositor. This technological explanation, however, cannot account for Bennett’s banning from his New York *Herald*, from 1847 onward, all advertising illustrations and even confined ads to a single type size (agate), a move that was soon emulated by other papers. Technological limits could have been surpassed had the newspaper editors wanted to: the very fact that some magazines printed in the same era carried illustrations demonstrate this. Indeed, the mammoth papers and even certain editions of the newspapers themselves showed as much. Moreover, advertisers to Bennett’s paper would have been responsible for providing illustrations for their ads and thus cost Bennett nothing. David Henkin has provided a clue for understanding Bennett’s policy: It was “a conscious attempt to preserve and bolster a certain style of newspaper presentation.... Bennett’s policy helped confer upon the uniform newsprint the status of an official language, a standard mode of address that glossed over differences of perspective and interest [and] enhanced the claims of the newspaper to be a public text” (*City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 119). For Henkin, “Discrete news stories, tendentious political commentaries, competitive commercial claims, and ostensibly unrelated bits of information blended together in the print columns of the metropolitan press in a characteristically urban juxtaposition of unlikely neighbors that also imbued all of the texts with the appearance of sharing a single, impersonal authority.” What Henkin leaves out, is that this authority was that of a male domain being jealously guarded against a female pollution. The male newspaper was masking its own fears of a feminized commercialism that would undermine its claims to being the instrument of democracy.

<sup>139</sup>This gendered division between word and image suggests that “woman” and commercialization were linked far earlier than many historians have realized. Patricia Anderson (*The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 3) has noted that “In the early and mid-nineteenth century the printed image more than the word represented a cultural break with the past, for it demanded neither formal education nor even basic literacy. The new inexpensive printed image thus became the first medium of regular, ongoing, mass communication.” And Andreas Huyssen has convincingly revealed the long-standing relation between mass culture and woman feared by male (particularly modernist) critics. But, because Huyssen’s subject is the gendered nature of much twentieth century modernist criticism, his historical look swerves into Nietzsche rather than popular or mass culture itself (“Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 50-51). Anderson’s remark is key to this history in its link between images and popular cultures, but in the American context the link between the very use of illustrations and ladies’ magazines must be stressed.

male critics heaped abuses on periodical fashion plates in particular and embellishments in general throughout the antebellum era. Conservatives such as the *New Englander* recoiled in horror from “those grotesque fashion-pictures.” This same attitude even extended to some of the male defenders of sentimentality, such as the *Democratic Review*’s W.A. Jones. He condemned “the foolish notion of prefixing plates of the fashions to a literary periodical where they are entirely out of place.... The only fit ornament,” he continued, “is the head of a celebrated man of letters or public character, or *occasionally*, as a study and by way of an education of the eye, a drawing from the antique.”<sup>140</sup> For such otherwise female critics, the illustration of fashion was as injurious to the sentimental project as were tears and didacticism.

Fashion plates represented an odd confluence between a sort of Amazonian competition and an insidious foreign corruption. Fashion plates according to the male critics, were the chief point of competition among the Philadelphia ladies’ magazines. In their competition, these magazines revealed “a very obstreperous ambition.” This ambition, the purportedly principled male critics groused, pushed the Philadelphia editors to throw away any pretense to creating a moral periodical. Each, complained H., “interlards his magazine with bad cuts and worse letter-press, of which the sole argument is tape, lace, riband, and silk—all merged in the comprehensive title of Fashion.” And should any reader miss the equation of fashion with moral corruption, H. added, “It has never been our lot to meet with one of these cuts that was not intensely vulgar and we have often remarked them as being indecently and shamefully loose.” For H., as for the *New Englander* critic, the plates and embellishments in the ladies’ magazines were clear evidence of their shameless and sham commercialism: The fashion plates, male critics charged, were often used again and again,

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<sup>140</sup>Jones, “Criticism in America” (1844): 247; emphasis added.

with sometimes only their titles altered, even as the Philadelphia magazines claimed them to be original works.<sup>141</sup>

Fashion, for the male critics, was an agent of corruption every ounce as dangerous as the British occupation forces had been during the Revolution. The *New Englander* critic warned that fashion only served to widen “factitious distinctions in society”; to build up “exclusive classes”; to replace the simplicity of “those once merry-faced, bright-eyed whole-souled New England girls” with women who “now with their French, and fashion, and finery, become mouthing and mincing simpletons”; to conjure the “illusory dreams which wealth and fashion nourish”; to set alighting “the songs and sonnets... of ever singing sonneteers—rich in nothing but the quackery of words and sentiments”; and to remake life into “one everlasting round of soirées, and waltzes, and flirtations—ladies all belles, and men all apes....”<sup>142</sup> This quackery, predicted the *New Englander* would “sadly unfit the minds of our female and youthful population, for any thing like healthy vigorous, sustained moral action.”<sup>143</sup> Readers would be trapped between the Scylla and Charybdis of the naive victim and the flashy, immoral seducer: “on the one side, youth, susceptibility, ignorance; on the other, brilliancy, novelty, sensuality.” While grown men had built up the moral armor to withstand such insidious invasion, the *New Englander* feared both for the “ignorant city girl” who would be separated from her meager earnings by buying the magazines and the clothes they advocated and for the republican mother who bore the charge to raise up the coming generation of Americans.<sup>144</sup> At stake for the *New Englander* was the power to determine the cultural content of the public life.

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<sup>141</sup>“The Fine Arts in America,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 15 (July 1849): 338; “H.,” “Parlor Periodicals,” 81; [Edgar Allen Poe], “Our Magazine Literature,” *New World* 6 (4 March 1843): 303 (Algernon Tassin cites Poe as the author of this article in *The Magazine in America* [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916]).

<sup>142</sup>“Fashionable Monthlies,” 99, 102, 103, 105. The *New Englander* is quick to note a few “glorious exceptions,” especially W.C. Bryant.

<sup>143</sup>“Fashionable Monthlies,” 102.

<sup>144</sup>This argument is similar to Lewis Clark’s regarding the growing number of female readers mentioned above. Men would be able to withstand the corruptions of fashion by the nature of their labor. But as they accrued wealth, their wives, increasingly able to afford leisure time would fill that time with the sensual pleasures of fashion. See also “S.,” “Our Periodical Literature,” *United States Review* 1 (June 1853): 561-65; “Parlor Periodicals,” 76-82.

Another practice threatened to undermine all cultural authority in public life. The *New Englander* lambasted the boudoir books for dropping the policy of anonymous authorship. Anonymity was essential to a periodical's moral mission for it cast the magazine in the role of a preacher in the pulpit giving a single voice to a many-throated (though silent) consenting congregation. Signed articles dispersed responsibility for a magazine's opinions and diluted its moral authority. Signed articles prevented "fledgling" authors from developing a distinct style before writing full-length works because they forced authors to conform to the desires of fickle audiences. All new writers would learn, without anonymity, were "the delectable and very innocent devices for thrusting his name before the public—such as none but third-rate poetasters and essay writers know of..."<sup>145</sup> Worse, signed articles produced a disgusting "parade of names famous in the tittle-tattle of the day."<sup>146</sup> Lurking beneath the use of famous names, the *New Englander* detected the corrosive influence of an unethical commercialism: The ladies' magazines flashed famous names across their covers to veil the wide use of filler, "trash" written by hacks. The victory of the ladies' magazines meant, for critics such as the *New Englander*s, the victory of a commercial sentimentalism that would unman the Christian nurturer.

The ladies' magazines often challenged the male critics. William Kirkland, for instance, attacked the critics of the ladies' magazines for their "indiscriminate, unmeasured condemnation." In the poor state of American literature, Kirkland cautioned, periodicals were virtually the sole source of compensation for American authors. Directly rebutting male criticism, Kirkland argued that the ladies' magazines were instrumental in encouraging and disseminating the work of the nation's best authors. Echoing Lowell's call for an American criticism (uttered only four months earlier in *Godey's* rival, *Graham's*), Kirkland urged

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<sup>145</sup>"Fashionable Monthlies," 101. In fact, even the ladies' magazines followed this policy more often than not, especially with newer authors and unsolicited contributions. See, e.g., Okker, *Our Sister Editors*, 94, 97-98. Mott (*American Magazines*, vol. 1, 503) notes that the women's magazines and literary weeklies pioneered in publishing signed articles.

<sup>146</sup>"Fashionable Monthlies," 99.

critics to turn their energies toward the improvement of the American magazine as well as the nation's literature.<sup>147</sup> In the end, the Philadelphia magazines could claim the support of the most important critic of all in a democracy: the public.

Far and away the most alarming aspect of the ladies' magazines was their commercial success. Male critics were positively apoplectic over the power of female commerce to drive the moral imperatives of the American magazine (and by extension American culture). The ladies' magazines seemed to revel in the wanton competition and commercialism of the rough and wild capitalism of the day as they sold so well and seemed to seduce so broadly.

Of all the things that rankled the male critics, the most galling was the popularity of the ladies' magazines. *Godey's* and its imitators all sold in the tens of thousands by the late 1830s where the *Democratic Review* and the *New Englander* sold only in the few thousands, at best. Men sentimentalists were conflicted over this popularity. On the one hand, they saw commercial popularity as the very essence of democracy. On the other hand, the popularity of the ladies' magazines, they feared, could not give birth to a democratic culture. Men had to be involved to a greater degree. Thus, Young America theorist Evert Duyckinck sought to distinguish magazines that sold well from those that "generally... enter into an estimate of a national literature." While recognizing that authors should seek paying venues for their work, the Young America leader dismissed the ladies' magazines as a medium for producing a national literature. Even if these magazines published the likes of Longfellow, such work was spoiled by the "the adjacent soil" of fashion plates and namby-pamby stories. The ladies' magazines did offer hope that American public opinion was gathering at the base of an intellectual ladder, and was preparing to ascend to a higher level. But as this level was unattainable by the medium of the ladies' magazine, Duyckinck predicted that "it has had its day." Duyckinck was correct in his analysis but not in his prognosis. For it was the early attempts at creating a male-oriented sentimental magazine, such *Arcturus*, *The Pioneer*, and

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<sup>147</sup>William Kirkland, "British and American Monthlies," *Godey's* 30 (June 1845): 274.

*The Democratic Review*, that had proved sterile. Only when magazines found ways to merge both male and female periodical elements between their covers did the American magazine find a dynamic cultural form and a national appeal that spanned the genders.

By the early 1850s male magazinists' attempts to repel the onslaught of the female periodical had come to naught. In 1853, "S.," writing in the *United States Review*, followed a long train of critics when he complained about "the swarms and popularity of our other monthlies."<sup>148</sup> By "other," of course, he meant the ladies' magazines. In vain he called for a new periodical savior, a journal that could act as "the *true index of our national character*." But S. was grasping at the straws of a critical project that E.W. Johnson, W.A. Jones, Evert Duyckinck, and others had already thrown to the wind. Magazines on all sides admitted that a literature could not be "forced like a hothouse plant" or "ordered up like oysters in a restaurant."<sup>149</sup> Indeed, the *United States Magazine* seemed to be critiquing its own literary nationalist past when it grumbled that only "when we reach a distinctive nationality [by the apparently natural progression of national development] will books reach it, without the assistance of plaintive magazine articles."<sup>150</sup> By the time S. was writing in 1853, significant changes in the nation's periodicals were underway, changes that would eventually produce a series of magazines that incorporated both male and female elements balanced on the scales of a discovered, and not a forced, national culture.

The periodical battles of the 1840s irreparably altered the development of the American magazine. The new emphasis on culture allowed magazines to differentiate their mission and their product from the increasingly sensationalistic newspapers. Magazinists' disagreements over the goals of nationalism fostered a heightening awareness of the problem national culture. The question of sentimental culture led certain nationalists to reconceptualized the relationship between politics and culture. The magazine was on the

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<sup>148</sup>"Our Periodical Literature," 585.

<sup>149</sup>"Simms [Review]," 378; "[Review of] The Female Poets of America," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 24 (March 1849): 235.

<sup>150</sup>"[Review of] The Female Poets of America," 235.

culmination, by the early 1850s, of producing a new, national social vision, just as the newspapers had created a new urban vision in the 1830s. Just as the newspapers had made it possible for city dwellers to imagine their connection to vast numbers of strangers, these critics were formulating a means for imagining national culture.

But the internal contradictions of the form and the external barriers to its production and dissemination prevented the magazine from achieving more than a modicum of success, even on its own terms. While all 1840s magazinists advocated for a uniquely American literature, their actual achievement was to found a literary criticism that made life, not just literature, its subject. In doing this it laid the groundwork for a literary realism infused with the moral and aesthetic tenets of sentimentality. This realism would be the hallmark of the American social imagination embodied in the next generation of American magazines. Lowell, for instance, would make the realism of sentimentality his guiding editorial light at the founding of the *Atlantic* in late 1858.<sup>151</sup> But before that beginning, the periodical skies were to darken further. The advent of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1850 seemed to spell the doom of any project for a magazine advocating for a national literature infused with a male sentimentality.

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<sup>151</sup>On Lowell as a realist, see Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 49.



## PART II

### Cultural Reconstruction: The American Magazine

## Chapter 4

### **Competing for Culture: The Rise of the General Magazine**

Between 1850 and 1881, the American magazine became an identifiable genre. This genre has survived with relatively few substantive changes down to the present day. (Two of the early magazines in this process are still being published, *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*.) American magazines went through changes as significant as those that had hit the newspapers in the penny press onslaught of the 1830s. New features, formats, audiences, business practices, aesthetics, and relations to capital gave magazines a definition and form that set them off as a unique cultural institution. No longer an odd hybrid of newspapers and books, magazines developed their own generic identity as a print medium quite distinct from other forms of print.

The new magazines that appeared after 1850 were oriented toward popular audiences. Their editors were deeply committed to social reform, literary realism, and cultural inclusion. They came by these commitments through their experience of discovering culture. They were not members of elite orders of society, but were the children of poverty, laboring parents, yeoman farmers, or the lower middle strata of failed merchants and entrepreneurs. These editors sought to meld commercial success with sentimental ideals in order to avoid the cultural pitfalls that bedeviled the magazinists of the 1850s.

Two magazines in particular were responsible for the transformation of the American magazine. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* set the basic format of the medium, but it was *Scribner's* that turned the general magazine into an American literary genre.<sup>1</sup> Their intense competition forced them to jettison the narrow views and anti-commercial impulses of earlier magazinists. They found ways to avoid parochial views and balance the interests of male and female readers.

Each of these magazines spoke in grandiose terms of their audience. They claimed a national audience and suggested that they spoke for all Americans. This was especially the case after *Scribner's* early 1870s discovery that it could give up European authors and publish American writers almost exclusively. It is clear, however, that these two particular magazines were read by only a fraction of the population. What is not clear is just who their audiences were. Their cost (roughly equal to a year's worth of penny papers) would suggest readers mostly in the coalescing national middle class. But the spread of libraries and the "portability" of magazines (that is, the practice of passing magazines and newspapers from reader to reader) makes any such suggestion conjecture at best. Moreover, even though these magazines were associated with women readers for the most part, it is impossible to gauge accurately who read them in the home or library. These magazines, too, had an influence beyond their specific readers as newspapers copied from, reported on, and increasingly emulated them with Sunday editions. While the cultural impact is difficult to gauge, it is important to remember that, the magazines' claims notwithstanding, the subscribers to *Harper's* and *Scribner's* numbered less than 1% of the population. Even with a generous estimate of five readers per copy, this rate increases to only 4% of the total population in the 1870s. By 1880, the monthly

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this dissertation *Harper's* refers to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and "*Scribner's*" refers to the monthly published through the 1870s. Two other magazines had names very close to these. Harper and Brothers published a weekly magazine beginning in the late 1850s, *Harper's Weekly*. A business dispute led to *Scribner's* becoming the *Century*. In the middle 1880s, the publisher Charles Scribner, Jr., founded a new magazine also called *Scribner's*. When these two later magazines are mentioned below they will be designated as *Harper's Weekly* and *Scribner's Magazine*, respectively.

circulation for *all* monthly magazines reached 8,139,881, or 6.25% of the total U.S. population.<sup>2</sup> The number of readers then approached 30% of American readers, leaving a majority of Americans strangers to the magazine genre.

### **“The Gigantic Monstrosity of the Harpers”**

American magazinists first caught a glimpse of the national possibilities of their medium with the advent of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. *Harper’s*, remarked historian Frank Luther Mott, “marked the end of the old era” of magazing.<sup>3</sup> The magazines that had flourished during the early 1840s, except for *Godey’s* and *Peterson’s*, were already declining in both quality and circulation by the end of the decade. *Harper’s* not only ushered them out of the market, it introduced key new elements and transformed old ones to create the basic template of the modern American magazine.

*Harper’s* dominated the periodical competition from its first issue. At 144 pages per number, it contained almost three times more pages than *Godey’s*. It was forty and fifty pages longer than virtually all the other popular monthlies of the day. Moreover, the Harper brothers’ crammed more material into each page than other magazines by using a larger page size and small type set in double columns. Thus, although *Harper’s* charged the same \$3.00 per yearly subscription as all the other magazines (with the exception of the \$2.00 *Peterson’s*), its subscribers received substantially more printed matter for the cost.

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<sup>2</sup>S.N.D. North, *History and Present Condition of the Newspaper and Periodical Press of the United States* (Washington D.C.: np, 1883): 191.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 2: 1850-1865 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 30. Although called “new,” this was the Harpers’ first venture into this type of magazine. The “new” in the title distinguished the monthly from an earlier book-advertising periodical the firm had published.

*Harper’s* is central to understanding nineteenth-century American culture, and it has been used as a major source by myriad cultural historians, but there is no monograph on its work as either a business enterprise nor as a cultural institution. Exman’s two volumes on the Harper publishing enterprise are anecdotal and pay relatively scant attention to the magazines the house published (*The Brothers Harper* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], *The House of Harper* [New York: Harper & Row, 1967]).

*Harper's* transformed the production of magazines from a craft into an industry. The Harper brothers, more than any other magazine publishers, introduced economy of scale into the periodical market. Before 1850, magazines had been the projects of mostly small-time entrepreneurs. Like the early penny press innovators, they were relatively poor individuals who founded their periodicals with little capital.<sup>4</sup> The Harpers themselves had begun with little capital.<sup>5</sup> Emigrants from the hinterlands, they had apprenticed as printers early in the century in New York City. They turned to book making in the 1810s, and built a publishing empire over the next several decades. By 1850, Harper and Brothers was the largest manufacturer and distributor of books in the entire world, with over 1,500 works in print.<sup>6</sup>

*Harper's* was the first American literary magazine to begin its life with an abundance of capital. The Harper brothers' driving goal was commercial success. They did not share the cultural concerns of other magazinists. The magazine, for them, was little more than a tool for publicizing their books. Harper & Brothers' "machinery of agency and sale was already in motion," as one disgruntled contemporary put it, "requiring nothing more than to be supplied with material."<sup>7</sup> This power was crucial to *Harper's* ability quickly to grab an immense circulation. Within six months the magazine

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<sup>4</sup>Most had come chiefly from the ranks of the laboring or lesser merchant orders: Godey, the child of poor French immigrants, first worked as a printer. Graham studied law while working as a cabinet maker and threw over the law for magazines almost immediately after gaining admission to the bar in 1839. Sarah Hale, the daughter of a New Hampshire tavern keeper, took to editing to support her five children after the early death of her husband. The example of the peripatetic Poe stands above all, the orphaned child disinherited by his guardian, hungering from magazine to magazine, city to city, in search of editorial positions and periodical fame (John Tebbel & Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741–1990*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 32; Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 1: *1741-1850* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938], 545; Finley, *The Lady of Godey's, Sarah Josepha Hale* [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1931], 30, 39; and see Poe's diatribe against magazine conductors and the reading public whom he blamed for his pecuniary distress, "Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House," in *Essays & Reviews* [New York: Modern Library, 1984], 1036-38).

<sup>5</sup>They too were like the penny press innovators. They began adulthood as working men, immigrants to the city, looking out for the main chance, clawing their way to wealth. Their wealth, however, did not make it possible for them to achieve social position.

<sup>6</sup>John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 1: *The Creation of an Industry, 1630-1865* (New York: Bowker, 1975), 279.

<sup>7</sup>"An American Writer," "A Letter to the Proprietors of Harpers' Magazine," *American Whig Review* 16 (July 1852): 12.

had 50,000 subscribers, 10,000 higher than the twenty-year-old *Godey's*.<sup>8</sup> Monthly circulation rose to 135,000 by 1853 and then to 200,000 in 1860. This was an “unprecedented circulation,” as Mott noted, for a magazine of its type.<sup>9</sup>

This dominance of the market made *Harper's* the first truly national American magazine of culture.<sup>10</sup> Before *Harper's*, magazines, no matter their pretensions to an “American” audience, were identified with a distinct locality. The *Knickerbocker* by its very name, for instance, could hardly be seen as anything other than a product of New York City. Magazines rarely circulated much beyond a single city and its hinterlands.<sup>11</sup> The major competing magazines within different cities seemed, moreover, to bear a deep resemblance to one another: Philadelphia had its ladies’ magazines, Boston its intellectual reviews, New York its political journals. The only magazines with great literary pretensions that tended to escape this city identification were those of the South, such as the *Southern Literary Messenger* of Richmond. But even these magazines did not appeal to a regional audience. As their continual and pathetic pleas for subscribers reveal, these “Southern” magazines were of little interest to Southern readers.<sup>12</sup> In fact, they received more notice in the Northeast than in the South.<sup>13</sup> *Harper's* was a major factor in quelling the culture wars among regional literary and publishing centers. It even found a large audience in the South.

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<sup>8</sup>Godey claimed a circulation of 40,000 in July, 1849. He claimed 70,000 by the end of 1850 and 100,000 in 1856. *Godey's*, by the publisher’s accounts reached its highest circulation of 150,000 in 1860 (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 581n5).

<sup>9</sup>J. Henry Harper, *House of Harper* (New York: Harper, 1912), 86; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 391; Exman, *House of Harper*, 304, 322; Edwin G. Burrows & Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New City to 1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 683.

<sup>10</sup>A few other periodicals had circulations in the area of 100,000 in the late 1850s, but these were religious tracts, story papers like the *New York Ledger*, or sensationalistic papers like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 10).

<sup>11</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 102.

<sup>12</sup>The *Messenger* obtained a circulation of no more than 4000 in the 1840s (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 645). Its annual subscription cost of \$5.00 was prohibitively high for most Southerners.

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., the plaint of the *Messenger's* editor in 1835, “From our Northern and Eastern friends we have received more complimentary notices than from any of our Southern brethren without the limits of our State” (cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 631). This plaint was to turn into a jeremiad through the Civil War years, particularly for Paul Hamilton Hayne. See Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 648, regarding pleas for subscribers to pay their arrearages.

*Harper's* rapid rise in the national periodical market, ironically, derived from the growing concentration of American cultural production in New York City. Already by 1850, over 90% of American-authored fiction was published in the country's three largest cities.<sup>14</sup> After 1850, New York City dominated the production of American fiction and American books in general.<sup>15</sup> Harper and Brothers alone was printing over 4.5 million volumes per year in 1853.<sup>16</sup> Printing was now the city's third largest industry and Harper & Brothers was the city's largest single employer<sup>17</sup> In 1860, New York City issued approximately 30% of the country's aggregate periodical circulation.<sup>18</sup> The city produced three times more magazine circulation than its nearest rival, Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup> This proportion would continue to increase for years. In the decade following the Civil War, New York City issued 25% of the nation's periodical titles. Of the thirty magazines with a circulation in excess of 100,000 in 1870, ten were published in New York, six in Philadelphia, and only one in Boston.<sup>20</sup>

Commercial success, of course, depends on the product one is selling. The appeal of *Harper's* was based on far more than Harper & Brothers' industrial might. And virtually every aspect of that appeal was reviled by culturists, nationalists, and male

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<sup>14</sup>Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 206. See also, on the fading of regional publishing, Tebbel's "Introduction."

<sup>15</sup>Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 206.

<sup>16</sup>Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 681. Tebbel reported that this number was 2 million in 1850, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 279.

<sup>17</sup>William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 75; Diane Lindstrom, "Economic Structure in Antebellum New York," in John Hull Mollenkopf, ed., *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City* (New York: Russell Sage, 1988), 9; Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 681.

<sup>18</sup>North, *History and Present Condition*, Table 11, 190-91. North gives figures for New York State, but New York City was clearly responsible for the lion's share of the state's production.

<sup>19</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 103. This tracks with Pred's claims regarding New York City as a hub for controlling newspaper information by the 1840s (Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973]).

<sup>20</sup>Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 3: 1865-1885 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 26. By 1899, New York had achieved absolute dominance in the national production of periodicals. As William H. Hills noted, "The strongest [periodical] publishing houses are in the East... because the business centre of the country is in New York" (*The Writer* 12 [July 1899], 103).

critics. The *Democratic Review* jealously panned *Harper's* as a "gigantic monstrosity."<sup>21</sup> The *American Whig Review* denounced the magazine in similar terms as "simply a monstrosity." Its commercial success revealed its depravity: "the more widely it is diffused, the more clearly is its moral ugliness revealed. It is an ever-present, ever-living, insult to the brains of Americans, and its indignity is every day increasing in intensity."<sup>22</sup> A raft of critics charged *Harper's* with committing six mortal sins against the treasured project of nationalist magazinists. In detailing these sins, the critics laid out the basis of *Harper's* popularity.

First sin: *Harper's* was patently commercial. Harper and Brothers was among the first American publishers to think of publishing in purely commercial terms.<sup>23</sup> The company had little interest in enriching the store of a national American literature with its magazine. As Mott bluntly put it, British authors "Dickens, Thackeray, Bulwer, and Trollope were good business."<sup>24</sup> As Fletcher Harper, the Harper brother who had charge of editing the magazine into the 1870s, later admitted, "If we were asked why we first started a monthly magazine, we would have to say frankly that it was as a tender to our business...."<sup>25</sup> *Harper's*, for the brothers Harper, was little more than an advertising venture for the book publishing firm as well as for specific titles.<sup>26</sup> Parts of Harper books

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<sup>21</sup>"H.," "Parlor Periodicals," *United States Magazine* 30 (January 1852): 76.

<sup>22</sup>"An American Writer," "A Letter to the Proprietors of Harpers' [sic] Magazine," 15.

<sup>23</sup>Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 276.

<sup>24</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 387.

<sup>25</sup>Cited in Alden, "Fifty Years of Harper's Magazine," *Harper's* 100 (May 1900): 948. This quotation also appears in Harper, *House of Harper*, 84-85, and Mott's sketch, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 385-405.

<sup>26</sup>Older informal methods of promoting books, which depended on personal connections for puffs and the distribution of review copies to a handful of newspaper or magazine conductors, had become outmoded. The rapidly growing book market required new forms of book promotion. One form was the paid advertisement. By the mid 1850s, books were among the most heavily advertised of all products in the nation's newspapers, particularly in distant markets. See Susan Geary, "The Domestic Novel as a Commercial Commodity: Making a Best Seller in the 1850s," *Bibliographical Society of America Papers* 70 (1976): 365-393. Oddly, Geary does not mention the mammoth story papers stimulating the wider sales of literature (Barnes, e.g., points out that some of the novel "extras" of these papers sold upwards of 30,000 copies). Nor does she discuss publishers' distribution of monthly magazines, such as *Harper's*, as a mode of advertising their literary goods. See also William Charvat, "James T. Fields and the Beginnings of Book Promotion, 1840-1855," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 8.1 (November 1944): 89. See also the complaint of a critic in *Putnam's* in 1855 regarding "the great blast of advertisements with which every successive book is driven forth to life; as if shot out of a prodigious wind-gun" (*Putnam's* 5 [April 1855]: 440).



were printed as a tease to readers to buy the printed book. Advertisements in the magazine puffed only Harper books (no outside ads of any sort were accepted until the 1880s).<sup>27</sup>

The Harpers publicly masked this commercial strategy by claiming the democratic and cultural high ground. They attempted to link their magazine to the commercial success of the British *Penny Magazine*. The *Penny Magazine* had proved that inexpensive literature “was a practicable thing.”<sup>28</sup> The cheap British weekly had demonstrated that literature could descend among the populace and “befriend popular arts.”<sup>29</sup> The Harper brothers also framed their magazine’s mission in the rhetoric of the democratic marketplace: “Cheap [i.e., inexpensive] literature exists for the same reason that we have cheap public lands, cheap transportation, cheap cotton goods.... [I]t is primarily a question of trade, of demand and supply....”<sup>30</sup> The Harpers also attempted to wrap themselves in the democratic mantle of education and intellectual improvement: “[D]eprive the body of the people of this intellectual staple, and they are given over to mental starvation.”<sup>31</sup> The great mass of American readers, the magazine chided critics, could be trusted in their taste in literature just as citizens could be trusted in their choice of political candidates. Moreover, literature was now essential to the constitution of the American people: “The real state of the case is,” *Harper’s* declared, “that the people

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<sup>27</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 383-84. Frank Presbrey claims that *Harper’s* did carry a few small outside advertisements, comprising no more than two or three pages, from 1864 to 1866. It is unclear whether the monthly continued to carry any after 1866 (*The History and Development of Advertising* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1929], 466). It is difficult to independently confirm this because most bound volumes, microfilm, and electronic reproductions omit any ads.

<sup>28</sup>“Editor’s Table,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 19 (November 1859): 838. Compare the Harpers’ use of the phrase “cheap literature” with that of Cornelius Mathews in his American Copyright Club address (*An Address to the People of the United States in Behalf of the American Copyright Club* [New York: American Copyright Club, 1843], 14).

<sup>29</sup>“Editor’s Table,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 19 (November 1859): 838. Oddly, the Harpers did not mention the mammoth story papers as an influence—seemingly an inescapable one—on their decision to launch a literary periodical.

<sup>30</sup>“Editor’s Table” (November 1859): 839-40.

<sup>31</sup>“Editor’s Table” (November 1859): 840.

consider literature as their property—a new estate superadded to trade, commerce, politics—and they intend to enjoy their sovereignty over it without ‘let or hindrance.’”<sup>32</sup>

Second sin: Following on the Harper brothers commercial mission, *Harper’s* pirated British and European literature. That is, it took literature copyrighted in England and printed it without paying any royalties to authors or publishers.<sup>33</sup> The Harpers were not unique in this, all book publishers did it. But they were among the worst offenders.<sup>34</sup> The practice also bore a close resemblance to the system of exchange that American periodicals had used for decades. Not until the late fifties did *Harper’s* pay for serial rights to novels with any regularity.<sup>35</sup> *Harper’s* justified its piracy by claiming it was doing a Americans a cultural service. The magazine characterized itself as a deeply principled winnower of the best kernels of thought from the vast chaff of European and American periodical production.<sup>36</sup> Its purportedly democratic mission was to make the best thought of the day available to all Americans. On the first page of the first issue, the magazine declared that “The design of the Publishers... is to place within the reach of the great mass of the American people the unbounded treasures of the Periodical Literature of the present day. Periodicals enlist and absorb much of the literary talent, the creative genius, the scholarly accomplishment of the present age. The best writers, in all departments and in every nation, devote themselves mainly to the Reviews, Magazines, or

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<sup>32</sup>“Editor’s Table” (November 1859): 840.

<sup>33</sup>*Harper’s* was not the first eclectic magazine to reprint British works. *Littel’s Living Age* was already firmly established in Boston by 1850. But *Littel’s* was, first of all, avowedly eclectic. It printed no original matter whatsoever. Second, it was a weekly and thus structurally akin to weekly newspapers. Third, it never achieved a circulation above 10,000 (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 748).

<sup>34</sup>The *American Whig Review* lambasted the Harper brothers’ piracy as outright theft: “This plan of yours gentlemen, this practice of appropriating the articles and books of foreign writers without payment... is simply stealing...” (“A Letter to the Proprietors of Harpers’ [sic] Magazine,” 16).

<sup>35</sup>This shift to paying for British works was a business decision. The Harpers had discovered that they could sell these books twice: By buying the rights to the works of Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray, and Eliot, they could sell them first in their magazine and then again in book form. Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 385.

<sup>36</sup>These kernels “are scattered,” argued the editors, “through scores and hundreds of magazines and journals, intermingled with much that is of merely local and transient interest, and are thus hopelessly excluded from the knowledge and reach of readers at large” (“A Word at the Start,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 1.1 [June 1850]: 1).

Newspapers of the day.”<sup>37</sup> The upshot was that *Harper’s* printed little original material until after the Civil War.

Third sin: The magazine was resolutely “namby-pamby.” As a commercial venture, *Harper’s* scrupulously avoided religious or political controversy of any sort. “The [magazine’s initial] object was,” sputtered a critic in 1857, “to make a salable periodical—and manifestly this can best be done, by just keeping pace with the popular mind. Consequently, *Harper* had no opinions, no politics, no religion, no strong expression, except of pathos and humor, because, as it wanted to sell itself to everybody, it was necessary that nobody’s prejudices should be hurt.”<sup>38</sup> In essence, the critic was accusing *Harper’s* of too much female sentimentality. But here the critic was blinded by past criticism of the ladies’ magazines. *Harper’s* was in fact attempting to attract a male audience.

*Harper’s* early on attempted to nudge the neutral political ethos of the ladies’ magazines toward a middle gender ground. The first complicated step was to provide politics and news while avoiding the taint of political partisanship.<sup>39</sup> The Harpers did this by hiring editors and writers who were as notable for the quality of their work as for any political affiliation. The Whig Lewis Gaylord Clark edited the humor column while still editing the *Knickerbocker* and the Whig-leaning journalist Henry Raymond edited the news column while founding and then managing the *New York Times*. The Unitarian, utopian George Ripley, wrote the literary reviews, and was soon joined in this by the liberal Republican George William Curtis.<sup>40</sup> The Biblical and Greek scholar, Taylor

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<sup>37</sup>“A Word at the Start,” 1.

<sup>38</sup>“Harper Monthly and Weekly,” *Putnam’s* 9 (1857): 293-96; cited in Diffley, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, 1866-1876: The Popular Rhetoric of Reconstruction* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1984).

<sup>39</sup>The Harpers were adept at separating their politics from their business. They were staunch Democrats in the 1850s, and James Harper had been a Democratic mayor of the city for a term. But they strove to keep their personal political convictions out of the magazine.

<sup>40</sup>Both Ripley and Curtis were refugees of Brook Farm, the Fourierist experiment in socialist communitarianism. Curtis was known as the author of a series of “sensual” travel sketches of the Nile River. Lowell disliked these sketches for their namby-pamby taint of sensualism (John Tomsich, *A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press], 39).

Lewis of Union College contributed the majority of essays for the “Editor’s Table,” a space reserved for nondogmatic religious sentiment and nonpartisan political opinion. For the monthly column, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” the Harpers sought out “Ik. Marvel” (Donald K. Mitchell), author of the quintessential sentimental sketchbook of the day, the immensely popular *The Reveries of a Bachelor*.<sup>41</sup> The critics might slight *Harper’s* as namby pamby, but the policy of nonpartisanship and “politics light” made the magazine acceptable to all readers and to all parties in all sections.<sup>42</sup> This policy transcended the sectionalism of the 1850s and made *Harper’s* more popular in the South than any other Northern magazine.

Fourth sin: *Harper’s* featured ladies’ fashion. Through the early fifties every issue of *Harper’s* had a section discussing the latest trends and styles. This section was illustrated, of course, but not in the same manner as the ladies’ magazines had done previously. On the one hand, *Harper’s* sprinkled a handful of the low quality woodcuts directly into its fashion section, not one plate at the end of the work. On the other hand, these cuts were original to *Harper’s*. This would have been bad enough for the magazine’s critics, but perhaps even more galling was the fact that *Harper’s* was not published in Philadelphia, the capital of ladies’ magazines. It was published in the heart of New York, in Franklin Square. The Harpers, sneered their critics, were as able to separate commerce from parochial literary concerns as they were able to separate their merciless business practices from their fervent Methodism.

Fifth sin: *Harper’s* exploded with illustrations. The number of pictures in *Harper’s* was a positive embarrassment to *Godey’s*, *Graham’s*, and the rest. Godey and Graham had led in the popularization of illustrations in periodicals. But they rarely

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<sup>41</sup>Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 128-29.

<sup>42</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 392.

published more than four pictures per number.<sup>43</sup> The copper and steel engraving process was too expensive to allow for more illustrations. Moreover, pictures in the ladies' magazines were rarely integrated into the text. They appeared either as a frontispiece or at the very end of the issue. Nor did they relate in any direct way to articles or stories in the issue in which they appeared. These images did not illustrate stories or articles, nor did they reproduce fine art works. They were limited to scenes the newest fashions or lachrymously sentimental images of children with either pet or mother. Between these few visual oases, however, the pages of the ladies' magazines were vast deserts of words.

*Harper's* changed this periodical landscape by turning its pages into a visual cornucopia. Each issue of *Harper's* contained as many as fifty pictures *per issue*, or ten times more illustration than the average in *Godey's* and *Graham's*.<sup>44</sup> And these were not segregated fore and aft, they were interspersed throughout the text, appearing among the words they illustrated. In *Harper's*, words and images reinforced one another to create a richer texture of American culture than the old-line ladies' magazines could.

Sixth sin: *Harper's* virtually excluded American authors from its pages. There were some American works, even in the first volume, such as Benson Lossing's profusely illustrated sketch "A Pilgrimage to the Cradle of American Liberty, with Pen and Pencil" (a section of a book the Harpers were to publish the following year).<sup>45</sup> But these American works were single threads in a vast British tapestry. "*Harper's is a good foreign magazine*," seethed George Graham in his magazine in 1851.<sup>46</sup> The serial novels

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<sup>43</sup>This number includes the fashion plates. *Graham's* did include more pictures for a few months in the early 1850s, but soon gave up the attempt to compete with *Harper's* on this score.

<sup>44</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 390. For a year or so in the early 1850s *Graham's* included a more generous number of illustrations as one attempt to battle the *Harper's* juggernaut—to no avail (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 553). The new magazine was able to include so many pictures because it made extensive use of wood cuts, avoiding the far more expensive steel and copper engravings and mezzotints used in the fashion magazines.

<sup>45</sup>This and other extracts in the magazine actually represented a third manifestation of Lossing's work, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*. Harper & Brothers first issued the work in thirty installments in 1851 and 1852. The firm then published the entire work in a two-volume set.

<sup>46</sup>Graham continued: "But no man can long continue to read John Bull's [i.e., Britain's] self-glorification without saying to himself, 'Well, this is all right about Nelson, and Wellington and Bulwer and Southey, but what is Brother Jonathan [i.e., the U.S.] about? What says the leading American magazine about the

*Harper's* published remained British, with one single exception, until the 1880s when competition from another magazine (to be discussed in a moment), forced it to rethink its British-only policy.<sup>47</sup> *Harper's* rejection of American literature was a violent affront to all literary cliques of the day, no matter their stand on literary nationalism, for they all wanted to support American literature by supporting American authors.<sup>48</sup> The pirating policy of *Harper's* seemed to condemn American authors to the poor house.

To antebellum critics then, *Harper's* was the antipatriot. It was an un-original, un-American, pirating, ladies' magazine bent on abusing American authors by ignoring them. The magazine represented, for critics, the triumph of a feminine commercial culture over an independent male politics. The namby-pamby darling had slain the bull in the public marketplace.

Wrapped up in their frustration over the ladies' magazines, critics could not see that *Harper's* was innovative. The magazine lay the groundwork for a transformation of the American magazine that was as consequential as the penny paper's effect on the newspaper. *Harper's* was at the forefront creating a national imaginary. But where the penny papers had been forced to make themselves socially prismatic to attract an array of audiences, the magazines had to find a field of vision that gave them a wider purview than the newspapers. The magazinists of the 1840s had already determined that this field had to be culture. What *Harper's* made clear was that the magazine had to become culturally prismatic. Where the newspaper dramatized the discontinuities of urban life, the magazines had to discover the common thread that ran through culture and tied widely dispersed readers together. The magazine would deal in kaleidoscopic variety, but

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American flag, and Yankee Doodle, and Home Literature?' ... The veriest worshiper of the dust of Europe will tire of the dead level of silly praise of John Bull upon every Page" (George Graham, "Graham versus Reprints," *Graham's* 38 [March 1851]: 280; emphasis in original). Exman (*Brothers*, 310) suggests that the Harpers dropped attributions to the British sources of pirated works to counter these attacks on their patriotism.

<sup>47</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 393. The exception was Julian Hawthorne's *Garth*.

<sup>48</sup>On the desire of literary cliques across the ideological spectrum to foster an American literature, see Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1957), esp. 218.

its emphasis had to be on the sentimental cultural unity of national life rather than the sensational social conflict of cities. Ironically, the new magazine was able to do this because of the centralization of cultural production in large cities.

For all its national reach, *Harper's* was nonetheless very much a product of the city where it was published. *Harper's* and its imitators took the model of New York City's "commercial culture" and revamped it to appeal to national audiences.<sup>49</sup> As New York became the nation's center of print production it also emerged as the nation's cultural capital. Alongside the development of the city's urban society and its raging population growth, a plethora of new, widely popular cultural institutions and products sprouted into existence. From a single theatrical venue in the 1820s, the city's cultural life expanded to include by 1860 twelve theaters, six lecture halls, five photographic galleries, two art galleries, and a multitude of smaller, commercial entertainment venues.<sup>50</sup> These sites flowed into the city's streets, where wandering hawkers, peddlers, and entertainers offered up a phantasmagorical array of goods, amusements, and performances. Through the nineteenth century, these cultural sites, both private and public, mutated into new genres of performance, melodrama, burlesque, minstrelsy, tap dance and eventually vaudeville theaters, public museums, and amusement parks.<sup>51</sup>

*Harper's* was one of these cultural sites and reflected this proliferation of culture. But it could not have been a success if it had simply depicted New York City life. Magazinists had learned to avoid making the specific site of urban the subject of their

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<sup>49</sup>The term "commercial culture" is from Taylor (*Gotham*, 70). He uses it in place of the standard term "popular culture" to emphasize New York City's unique modes of cultural production and consumption in the 19th century and to distinguish that production from a strictly class-based analysis. "Commercial culture," for Taylor, emphasizes how a plethora of "new cultural bazaars" were "forms of inter-class orchestration" that had their beginnings in "the culture of the nineteenth-century street..." (70) Distinct from either "elite culture" or "the culture of working-class politics," commercial culture emphasizes both the wide array of urban audiences for and "the differing ways in which [those] audiences patronized" the new cultural forms that developed in nineteenth-century New York City (69).

<sup>50</sup>Buckley, "Culture, Class, and Place in Antebellum New York," in Mollenkopf, *Power, Culture, and Place*, 26.

<sup>51</sup>Buckley, "Culture, Class," 26; Taylor, *Gotham*, 70; Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

medium. This was the terrain of the penny press newspapers. The post-Jacksonian magazinists, while nodding to the rhetoric of nationality, had tried to cover this terrain. But their intensely parochial allegiances were their downfall. They simply could not compete with the penny press.

*Harper's* and its imitators understood that they had to formulate a different subject and frame a different audience than the urban dailies. The ladies' magazines had offered a way out of the parochial morass. By shifting their focus away from partisan politics and toward topics that were essentially a-regional, such as fashion, manners, and sentimental literature, the ladies' magazines had demonstrated that there were audiences eager to read about subjects beyond the ken of the urban dailies. The cultural emphases of the ladies' magazines pointed to a medium that would eschew scurrilous politics to examine instead the problems of private, personal, domestic relations. By including the works of authors from various regions of the country, moreover, these Philadelphia magazines offered the possibility that the many parochialisms could be bound up into a single national literature. Thus, where the newspaper had to be socially prismatic to reach its inter-class urban readership, the general magazine, to be broadly and *nationally* popular, had to form a cultural prism that could refract the many colors of American life. It had to forge a balance between a personal literature and an inclusive set of multiple regional scenes. Its promise was to make it possible for Americans to "read" the national culture and to imagine how to find their place in it.

But the ladies' magazines were severely restricted by their overt appeal to female readers. They could not become truly national until they reached across the gender divide.<sup>52</sup> They were also trapped in the intensely parochial culture wars that rendered Philadelphia, in the eyes of culturists, a female periodical ghetto. Ironically, the

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<sup>52</sup>Louis Godey claimed, however, that he received many subscriptions from Union soldiers during the Civil War (*Godey's* 70 [March 1865]: 284; cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 590).



insistence of *Harper's* on printing so much British literature turned out to be the solution to the problem of parochialism.

The preponderance of transatlantic, non-American literature allowed *Harper's* to frame itself as a national magazine in ways that other antebellum magazines simply could not. The British serial literature in *Harper's*, because it did not emanate from one American city or another, avoided the taint of warring city-culture factions. It made *Harper's* an a-regional magazine, avoiding the expression of a provincial culture, while providing some of the best literary works of the English language. *Harper's* banked on Americans' seeing themselves as members of this transatlantic culture, caring far more to read good literature than to quibble over where it was written. Sales of the magazine seemed to support the Harper brothers British strategy. But the problem of the gender divide remained. The prominence of fashion and similar milliner's material still gave the popular monthly too great an *ambiance* of the lady's boudoir.

*Harper's* looked for ways to appeal to male readers. *Harper's* clearly nodded to male readers by including such features as Raymond's round-up of world news. It began to publish different genres that could appeal to male audiences, particularly biography and serialized histories, such as Jacob Abbott's life of Napoleon and Benson Lossing's history of Revolutionary War memorials. These two serials not only appealed to male readers, they also challenged the long-standing association of illustration and corrupting fashion. These richly illustrated texts could not be lightly cast off as a female mode of culture.<sup>53</sup> This new genre of intertwined historical/biographical text and image became a hallmark of American monthlies after the Civil War. History and biography became key components in magazinists' attempts to differentiate their product from newspapers. The penny press, wildly bent on obtaining only the freshest news, was characterized by a wild

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<sup>53</sup>Brander Matthews, "American Magazines," *Bookman* 49 (July 1919): 536; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 390.

presentism. Newspapers lost their aura within a day, while magazines, with their newfound historical vision, usurped some of the cultural power of books.<sup>54</sup>

*Harper's* further breached the gender divide in the way it established a standard format that could appeal to a variety of audiences. The literary quality and editorial mix of earlier magazines had been distinctly uneven and unstable. As the product often of a single conductor (recall Willis's many editorial hats), earlier magazines could not command a steady flow of contributions. Each issue was made up from what was on hand. If the exchanges provided nothing interesting then the conductor had to write filler (often under a pseudonym to hide how few contributors the magazine had). Often, as much as 20% and even up to 33% of each issue of older magazines was filled with a conductor's chit-chat, including catty literary reviews or social gossip.<sup>55</sup> Under such conditions, magazinists could not establish standard formats. The balance of poems, essays, criticism, short fiction, and serials was haphazard, mercurially shifting. Poems were scattered through many of these magazines like romantic crab grass in an unruly literary lawn. In the era of the amateur author who wrote on inspiration and received no money for his or her contributions, magazinists got what they paid for.

*Harper's* rationalized all that. *Harper's* created a basic template of editorial features for the general magazine that soon became an industry standard. Where other magazines most often offered the oddments of an old curio shop, *Harper's* was a profusely and constantly stocked storehouse of literature, information, and culture—albeit

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<sup>54</sup>On the concept of an artwork's aura, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Machines," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217ff. I realize that this use of the term aura to refer to a mass produced object runs somewhat counter to Benjamin's attempt discerning an ontological difference between the unique art object and the mass-produced copy. But the idea of aura, as Benjamin uses it, suggests a power to attract attention that neatly characterizes the power of printed matter. But here, instead of the dualism of original/unique and copy, the difference concerns the time frame indicated by the date on the newspaper and that on the magazine.

<sup>55</sup>Okker claims that women editors spoke to their readers in a "sisterly editorial voice," which she defines as being "characterized by a relative informality and an assumed equal and personal relationship between editor and reader" (*Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth Century American Women Editors* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995]), 25). But this editorial voice was more common than not in all magazines of the era, whether geared toward male or female readers.

British culture. The magazine created various departments that appeared regularly. *Harper's* made serial novels a standard feature of the American magazine of the period.<sup>56</sup> The Harpers could afford it: Their publishing house was overflowing with items to channel into the magazine. They meant for the magazine to be a display for all the different sorts of literature, essay, history, travel, adventure, and thought the House of Harper trafficked in. As a later editor of the magazine observed, "The character of the general business of the house really determined the character of the Magazine."<sup>57</sup> Where other magazines often could barely scrape together enough material to make each issue, the Harper brothers had such a surfeit that they began a weekly magazine in 1857, in part, to publish even more literature.<sup>58</sup> In the first issue of *Harper's New Monthly*, there were over sixty items, both long and short, not counting the three departments, or regular sections. This was more than double the number of items in most other magazines. *Harper's* did not have to choose only two or three items from among travel, biography, science, technology, business, social observation, fashion, current events, and literary notices. It included something of all of them.

After *Harper's*, general magazines had to follow the basic *Harper's* format. Even magazines that sought to differentiate themselves from *Harper's* in politics or dedication to American literature had to provide a standard format and a wide breadth of material. Envious of the success of *Harper's*, two other publishing companies attempted variations on the Harper's format. But *Putnam's* and the *Atlantic* were managed by literary nationalists. They were intent on dragging the American magazine of culture across the gendered Rubicon.

### **Attempting an American *Harper's***

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<sup>56</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 547; Charvat, "Literary Economics and Literary History," in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 287–88.

<sup>57</sup>Alden, "Fifty Years of Harper's Magazine," 948.

<sup>58</sup>Exman, *House of Harper*, 80. The new magazine was *Harper's Weekly*.

Both *Putnam's* and the *Atlantic* were, to a great extent, modeled on the format template of *Harper's*. Both were projects of other publishing houses. The resources required to publish a variation on *Harper's* virtually demanded the amounts of capital that only an established firm commanded. But neither set out with the mission of simply advertising the wares of the parent firm. *Putnam's* and the *Atlantic* sought to challenge *Harper's* by engaging in politics and championing American literature. Both would eventually falter largely because they failed to imitate *Harper's* greatest popular appeal, the use of illustrations.

George Palmer Putnam, a former carpet maker, was by the 1850s a renowned New York book publisher. He was sufficiently inspired by the success of *Harper's* and his fervent belief in American literature to sail into monthly waters with his *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in January of 1853. Using the same basic format as *Harper's*, although there were rarely embellishments, Putnam meant from the outset for his magazine to be a male yet fundamentally sentimental competitor to *Harper's*.<sup>59</sup> The “cultural clash” between the rival monthlies was widely apparent.<sup>60</sup> Putnam charged the same price as *Harper's*, \$3.00 per yearly subscription. Using capital from his book publishing firm, he purchased the subscriber list of the recently defunct *American Whig Review* and brought out an initial issue of 20,000 copies. Such a large number was virtually unheard of for an American magazine launch. Putnam intended to compete with *Harper's* head to head.

Putnam and his band of editors, Charles Briggs, Parke Godwin, and George William Curtis (who was simultaneously writing for *Harper's*), built on the old

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<sup>59</sup>Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 309. One rare series of images was “New-York Daguerreotyped” which ran in 1853.

<sup>60</sup>The phrase “cultural clash” is from Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam: Representative American Publisher* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 294. George Graham, whose magazine had been severely hurt by *Harper's*, wrote to Putnam to wish him success: “The success of ‘Putnam's Monthly’ [will be] the salvation of ‘Graham's’ for it will stop the prevailing opinion in the trade and among the public that Harper is to master us all.... I am too poor to fight them” (cited at 294).

*Democratic Review* formula of “liberty, refinement, and progress.” They sought to differentiate their product from their rival’s in the name of American politics and culture.<sup>61</sup> They intended to publish, as they put it, “a work which shall combine the popular character of a Magazine, with the higher and graver aims of a Quarterly Review, but to preserve in all its departments an independent and elevated tone; and to make it as essentially an organ of American thought as possible.”<sup>62</sup> To achieve these ends, Palmer and his editors would trumpet a more visceral political voice and make American literature its stock in trade. The magazine’s motto was “An American Magazine—Original and National.”

Yet, *Putnam’s* proclaimed victory over the “namby-pamby” magazines of the previous era in a review of a collection of Parke Godwin essays that had originally appeared in the magazine. Godwin’s pieces, those on slavery in particular, were, the reviewer claimed, “the first ever published serially in an American periodical of acknowledged character and position, which treated the political difference between slavery and freedom in a truly American spirit.” *Putnam’s* exulted that the essays “instantly gave the magazine a value which no other could rival, as a vehicle for the best thought upon every subject...” The problem earlier magazines had faced was that “they came into the [publishing] field gagged.” They had either by the necessity to conform to the expectations of “milliners and young ladies’ boarding schools” or to the dictates of political partisanship. *Putnam’s*, however, claimed to be a clarion of democracy. The magazine’s publication of Godwin’s essays proved that, in this “political country, in which the gravest questions are political,” *Putnam’s* “broke away from the old ruts of magazine literature, and, while it avoided partisanship, it planted itself upon principle...”<sup>63</sup> But this sentimental stand upon manly principle, in the years of sectional

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<sup>61</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, see his sketch of the magazine 419-31.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 290.

<sup>63</sup>“Editorial Notes—Literature,” *Putnam’s* 8 (October 1856): 442.

breakdown, could not adequately square up in the political arena. The growing political enmity of the 1850s undermined the magazine's claims to embody American thought. Godwin's cutting attacks on slavery, the spoils system, and White House incompetence, alienated large numbers of potential readers, particularly in the South.<sup>64</sup>

*Putnam's* was widely respected by culturists for its support of American authors. Its contents are a veritable roll call of the significant American writers of the antebellum period.<sup>65</sup> Contributors included Lowell, Longfellow, Thoreau, Melville, and Cooper—all of whom wrote for the magazine with some frequency—as well as Emerson, Simms, Sedgwick, Greeley, Bayard Taylor, John Pendleton Kennedy, Charles Dudley Warner, Richard Henry Stoddard, Charles Eliot Norton, Henry James, Sr., Francis Lieber. The editors' literary goal meshed easily with the interests of all these authors. The authors were glad to be freed from having to submit to the Philadelphia ladies' magazines for pay.

But *Putnam's* soon failed. The editors had been unable to find an appealing balance between female culture and male politics. The magazine was of two minds. Putnam could never quite decide whether his magazine should be a confrontation or a collaboration with his readers.<sup>66</sup> He was only half-heartedly committed to making it a popular success. He hesitated on the gender divide and refused to cross too far for fear of abandoning politics. Sometimes Putnam emphasized that the magazine was aimed at a large audience. For example, he cautioned an abolitionist whose submissions he was considering, "Of course in a popular magazine like ours we can only mix such articles as these occasionally with lighter matter, for after all people expect to be entertained and amused rather more than they care to be instructed by what they read in a magazine."<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, when it was clear the magazine was failing, he printed Godwin's blast against popularity for its own sake: "It was never our purpose to issue a monthly

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<sup>64</sup>Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 301.

<sup>65</sup>On the stable of *Putnam's* contributors, see Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 298.

<sup>66</sup>Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 308.

<sup>67</sup>Cited in Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 292-93.

exclusively for milliners.... No!.... Our thought... is that literature is the full and free expression of the nation's mind, not in belles lettres alone, nor in art alone, nor in science alone, but all these, combined with politics and religion."<sup>68</sup> In the end, *Putnam's* editorial aim was too high and its actual audience extended little beyond New York City.<sup>69</sup> Although it claimed to be a juggernaut for American literature, it was in the final analysis more a privateer of New York culture—if not quite so scathing a one as the *Knickerbocker*.<sup>70</sup> It foundered on its inability to appeal to all the members of the family. The *Putnam's* emphasis on politics revealed that the formula for including politics in a “family” magazine was not yet clear. Indeed, it would take a civil war before it could be resolved.

Putnam sold his magazine in 1855 for \$11,000, despite yearly profits from the magazine of at least \$8,000.<sup>71</sup> Circulation, at a peak of almost 35,000 in mid 1854, had plummeted to 14,000. The new owners made the politics more strident<sup>72</sup>—a sure death sentence for an antebellum magazine. And so it was: the new publishers sold *Putnam's* in October 1857. The very next month, however, another magazine rose up to assault the *Harper's* fortress, this time from far-off Boston. The *Atlantic* was so similar in general plan, format, goals, and contributors to *Putnam's* that it was for some time commonly known as *Putnam's* Boston successor.<sup>73</sup>

The *Atlantic*, like *Harper's* and *Putnam's*, was not the product of an independent entrepreneur but of a publishing house looking to reach far into a national market. The Boston firm of Phillips, Sampson & Co. had shocked insular Boston soon after its

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<sup>68</sup>Cited in Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 294.

<sup>69</sup>Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 286-87. This is not to say that a magazine's influence could not travel farther: exchanges with newspapers meant that an article or story could reach far more Americans than those who subscribed to a particular periodical. But this influence was haphazard and serendipitous, and actually undermined the integrity of the individual antebellum magazine as a print force.

<sup>70</sup>Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 306.

<sup>71</sup>Putnam was forced to sell the magazine in early 1855 as part of a massive effort to save his book publishing firm from bankruptcy (Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 315; the rate of profits is derived from figures at 320-21n101).

<sup>72</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 427.

<sup>73</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 428.

founding in the early 1840s by seeking orders for its books from as far away as San Francisco.<sup>74</sup> By the mid 1850s, the firm, particularly its first partner Moses Phillips and his literary assistant Francis Underwood, were well aware of the commercial possibilities of a monthly. They joined forces with the Boston and Concord literati who were, as Emerson put it, anxious to start a magazine to provide “the manifest conveniency of having a good vent for such wares as scholars have.”<sup>75</sup> Thus bound together by ties of commerce and humanistic culture, the *Atlantic* sought the same sort of middle road that *Putnam’s* had searched for in vain. To guide this new enterprise, Phillips and Underwood chose James Russell Lowell—founder of *The Pioneer*—as the *Atlantic’s* first editor.

The *Atlantic* modeled its basic format on that of *Harper’s*, with the same price structure (although, as with *Putnam’s* there were no illustrations). Its political and literary goals were strikingly similar to those of *Putnam’s*. Its publishers proclaimed in the first number that “In politics, the *Atlantic* will be the organ of no party or clique, but will honestly endeavor to be the exponent of what its conductors believe to be the American idea. It will deal frankly with persons and with parties, endeavoring always to keep in view that moral element which transcends all persons and parties, and which alone makes the basis of a true and lasting national prosperity. It will rank itself with no sect of antis, but with that body of men which is in favor of Freedom, National Progress, and Honor, whether public or private.” The magazine, in short, would attempt to stand on the very sentimental ground of principle that *Putnam’s* had sought. As for literature, the publishers contended that they would “leave no [American] province unrepresented, so that while each number will contain articles of an abstract and permanent value, it will also be found that the healthy appetite of the mind for entertainment in its various forms of Narrative, Wit and Humor will not go uncared for....”<sup>76</sup> Here was the time-honored

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<sup>74</sup>Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 424-25.

<sup>75</sup>Ellery Sedgwick, *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 35.

<sup>76</sup>*Atlantic* 1.1 (November 1857): inside cover, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 499n22.



ladies' magazine formula, "the Mind t'improve and yet amuse." Lowell had learned his commercial lesson. This new magazine would not be antagonistic to female readers as his *Pioneer* had been. Instead, it would seek a rapprochement between male and female, though on solidly sentimental grounds. The monthly's cover telegraphed these sentimental intentions, with a banner proclaiming the *Atlantic* to be "Devoted to Literature, Art, and Politics." The claim was that the *Atlantic* would be for and about all Americans, even if the actual audience the magazine targeted was far narrower.

The contents of the magazine bore out the charge that the *Atlantic* was a New England, rather than a national, magazine.<sup>77</sup> It was to have followed the standard practice of authorial anonymity. This would have hidden the Boston connections of the authors. It would also have provided, as Emerson in particular insisted on (and the *New Englander* would have appreciated), a unanimity of tone. But Phillips was too much the business man to let flighty national principles and august tone stand in the way of sales. He leaked the list of the first month's contributors to the Boston press, and thereafter authorship of the monthly was an open secret until signed articles became the standard practice in the 1870s.<sup>78</sup> Although these Boston-area contributors were far more socially diverse and politically contrarian than critics have traditionally believed, they were nonetheless committed to creating and disseminating moral and cultural standards that accorded with their Brahmin ideals.<sup>79</sup> The magazine's nationalism was mostly pretense. Of fifty-four

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<sup>77</sup>The picture on the cover also suggested a New England bias. Peering out from the buff brown paper beneath the title was a portrait of John Winthrop. The old Puritan certainly symbolized the moral earnestness and integrity the *Atlantic* wanted to project. But he also dourly proclaimed the magazine to be a cultural product of insular Boston.

<sup>78</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 36, 83.

<sup>79</sup>Thoreau was the son of a pencil maker; Bronson Alcott was a former peddler; James T. Fields had grown up poor and fatherless in New Hampshire before being apprenticed to a Boston book seller; Whittier was a farmer's son and former cobbler. Only two of them were, by descent and breeding, eligible to be numbered among the Boston Brahmin: Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes. And most of those of privilege among the group hardly stood as conservative defenders of the established order during the antebellum era, rejecting, by their very choice of a literary profession, received ideas of social position, work ethic, and economic privilege. As Sedgwick pointed out, this group was "distinct from the dominant social and economic elites" particularly due to "their social function, the transmission of culture. They tended to enforce not social and economic but intellectual and moral hierarchies" (Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 5, 22-23; and see Buell, *New England Literary Culture* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 388-91).

authors in the first volume, thirty-five (65%) were from New England, ten (19%) from New York, and only three (6%) from either the South or West, while six (12%) were foreign.<sup>80</sup>

As for politics, despite the publishers' claim to remain above partisanship, Underwood privately described the new venture as "the new literary and anti-slavery magazine."<sup>81</sup> The first volume received much of its fire from Park Godwin, who, fresh from drafting the 1856 Republican party platform and having escaped the crash of *Putnam's*, continued to excoriate slave holders and other political enemies. But strident politics virtually disappeared from the *Atlantic* after the first volume. Lowell, chastened by the failure of both *The Pioneer* and his recent *Anti-Slavery Standard*, heeded Phillips's pleas, as Lowell put it, "to 'popularize' the magazine."<sup>82</sup> This meant, not only backing down on partisan political issues, but also taking care not to offend readers' religious views-- a pastime of which most of the *Atlantic's* contributors were masters.

Lowell took a major step toward gender rapprochement. He was committed to women authors. Half of the *Atlantic* pages were filled by women during his tenure—a characteristic of the magazine that would hold true throughout the next fifty years.<sup>83</sup> Lowell's commitment to women authors had an immense influence on the aesthetic of American sentimental literature. Lowell was an early advocate of sentimental realism. He encouraged those women authors who were transforming sentimentality by focusing on the seemingly real lives of real people. He despised didactically sentimental works for their disembodied morals. A vital supporter of Harriet Beecher Stowe's post-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* work and of the social realist Rose Terry Cooke's literary sketches, Lowell considered such writers to be pioneers of regional realism, written in the main by and

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<sup>80</sup>Scudder, *James Russell Lowell*, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 496. Expressed in terms of number of articles, over 75% of the first volume was of New England origin.

<sup>81</sup>Cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 500.

<sup>82</sup>Cited in Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 49.

<sup>83</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 36.

about New England women. But a number of the *Atlantic*'s co-conspirators did not see eye-to-eye with him. Henry David Thoreau and Charles Eliot Norton chastised him for publishing what they termed second-rate Cinderella stories. But Lowell, was no longer the editor of *The Pioneer*. He knew that both the *Atlantic*'s authors and its audience were at least half women, and that some of these women authors were among his best.<sup>84</sup>

For some years the *Atlantic* seemed to have hit on a “popularizing” formula. Its culture was republican enough for a male audience, and its politics was sentimental enough for the female reader. The magazine’s first issue of 20,000 sold out. By 1860, there were 30,000 subscribers. Having already established that it was bent, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* put it in 1857, on “the systematic defamation of everything southern,”<sup>85</sup> the magazine had no Southern audience to lose in the Civil War. Its anti-Lincoln stance at the beginning of the war was shared by many, and its switch to the president’s support by the end of the war only put it on the crest of a national wave. Within a year after the war, the *Atlantic*'s circulation reached its nineteenth-century high of 50,000.<sup>86</sup> If the contributors to the magazine continued to be mainly New Englanders, its readers were not. Unlike *Putnam*'s, the *Atlantic* found readers across the nation who, as the magazine’s historian has put it, “cared for the life of the mind, enjoyed literature, opposed slavery, were liberal and nondogmatic in religion, and wished to stay in touch with the intellectual currents of the times.”<sup>87</sup> No doubt the majority of readers were in New England, but it reached far to the West where both William Dean Howells and James Garfield read it as youths. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a cofounder of the *Atlantic*, claimed to find the magazine in small-town homes he visited in Minnesota and Iowa during a lecture tour.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Cited in Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 54-56.

<sup>85</sup>Cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 500.

<sup>86</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 506; Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 81.

<sup>87</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 40.

<sup>88</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 41. It was this rapidly growing national lecture circuit, for that matter, which was a key spur to the *Atlantic*'s circulation beyond New England (Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 40).

Much of the magazine's growth was due to James T. Fields who bought the *Atlantic* and succeeded Lowell as editor in 1861.<sup>89</sup> Fields, a poor immigrant to the city from the hinterlands, was as desirous as Phillips had been to make the magazine popular and thereby profitable.<sup>90</sup> Fields aggressively marketed the magazine across the country and was among the first magazine publishers actively to sell advertising space to outside sources.<sup>91</sup> He was especially adept at promoting his New England writers as a singular and forceful cultural movement. The fact that the *Atlantic* group was marked by sharp divergences of politics, personality, and class background mattered little for Fields's purpose. His aim was to advertise and sell culture.

Even as Fields shored up the magazine's New England reputation, he lightened the magazine's tone, actively searched out authors from beyond New England, and did much to establish magazine authorship as a profession in order to attract the best authors in the country.<sup>92</sup> Fields altered the *Atlantic*'s tone by shortening the length allowed for articles. In the nonfiction, he encouraged a new realism and discouraged argumentative essays. Popularizing for Fields meant moving away from whatever strains of the eternal verities and high culture that Lowell wove into the magazine, and then toward a more quotidian set of political and cultural problems.<sup>93</sup> This required a delicate balancing act: Fields could not afford to tarnish the *Atlantic*'s reputation as an intellectual force. Fields thus refused to take that most popularizing step of all: illustration. When Fields's partner suggested competing directly with *Harper's*, Fields declined. Pictures, he worried, "would seriously affect [the *Atlantic*'s] standing as an organ of thought and literature."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>The *Atlantic* weathered a fair amount of instability throughout its first decade. Both Moses Phillips and his partner died in 1859 before reaching the age of forty. Fields's book publishing firm, Ticknor & Fields, bought the magazine in 1859 for \$10,000, but only reluctantly due to the poor business climate of the late '50s. Judging a "hired editor" such as Lowell to be too great an expense, James T. Fields took on the editorial duties himself.

<sup>90</sup>Charvat, "Fields and Book Promotion," 75.

<sup>91</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 82; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 13, 506.

<sup>92</sup>It was he, for instance, who made paying authors upon acceptance, rather than upon publication (if at all), a standard industry practice.

<sup>93</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 83.

<sup>94</sup>Fields to Osgood, 9 August, 1869, cited in Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 82.

Men sentimentalists, it seemed, continued to fear that pictures would completely unsex them.

This refusal would have seriously limited the *Atlantic's* market on its own. But an editorial gaffe caused its circulation to plunge. While Fields traveled in Europe in the summer of 1869, his assistant, William Dean Howells, approved publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's charges that Lord Byron had committed incest with his half-sister. Although her aim had been to redeem the reputation of Byron's wife, the attempt failed.<sup>95</sup> The mere fact of suggesting incest (the word itself did not actually appear in Stowe's article) created a severe public and critical reaction.<sup>96</sup> As many as 15,000 readers canceled their subscriptions. From the 1869 high of 50,000 subscribers, circulation plummeted to 35,000 in 1870 and then to 20,000 by 1874.<sup>97</sup> In that year, Boston publisher Henry Houghton (another poor youth who had come to the city to find a livelihood) bought the magazine for \$20,000.<sup>98</sup> In 1880, the *Atlantic's* subscriber base was down to 12,000, where it stayed for the rest of the century, a noble torch bearer of American literature hobbling along on Houghton's financial crutch.

The *Atlantic* might have been able to recoup its circulation after the Stowe-Byron affair but for the appearance of a new periodical competitor from New York City. *Scribner's Monthly* appeared in 1870, just at the moment the Boston magazine's circulation began its free fall. *Scribner's* marked the establishment of the genre conventions that made the modern popular magazine of culture. Harper's had established a basic monthly format, but had eschewed American culture. *Putnam's* had printed compelling American literature, but could not achieve a gender balance. The *Atlantic*

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<sup>95</sup>On the Lady Byron episode, see Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 505; James C. Austin, *Fields of The Atlantic Monthly: Letters to an Editor, 1861-1870* (San Marino, Calif.: Henry Huntington Library, 1953), 290-95; Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 109-10; William Dean Howells to Fields, 24 August 1869, in George Arms et al., eds., *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, vol. 1: 1852-1872 (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 334.

<sup>96</sup>Howells informed Fields that "her story has been received with howls of rejection from almost every side where a critical dog is kept" (Howells to Fields, 24 August 1869, in *Selected Letters of Howells*, 334). See Mott (*American Magazines*, vol. 2, 505) for a survey of the critical reaction.

<sup>97</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 505-506.

<sup>98</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 125.

made advances toward a balance of male and female in the development of literary realism, but it, along with *Putnam's*, could not take the final, vital step for achieving popularity: the use of illustrations. *Scribner's* put all these elements together.

### **The Magazine as National Culture: *Scribner's***

The two H's despised each other. William Dean Howells, editor of the established and faltering *Atlantic*, reviled the enormous popular success and puerile books of Josiah Gilbert Holland, editor and part owner of the upstart *Scribner's Monthly*. His hatred was stoked by the fact that *Scribner's* was driving his *Atlantic* out of business. *Scribner's* was stealing all his authors away. Long-time contributors and even friends enthusiastically responded to the new magazine's offers of high pay. "I can't really get on," Henry James confided to Howells, "without extracting tribute" from *Scribner's*.<sup>99</sup> Howells confronted C.D. Warner with the rumor that he was going to submit a new story to *Scribner's*: "If it's true, it's a mean shame, and you will suffer for it."<sup>100</sup> Even Howells's best friend Mark Twain succumbed. He sheepishly admitted to the *Atlantic* editor that now, due to the high prices *Scribner's* paid for literature, "I take a vile, mercenary view of things."<sup>101</sup> By 1880, even James T. Fields, Howells's predecessor and editorial mentor at the *Atlantic*, was "loudly" praising *Scribner's*.<sup>102</sup> In early 1881, Howells threw in the towel, resigned his editorship, overcame his detestation of Holland, joined the exodus, and submitted the

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<sup>99</sup>Henry James to Howells, 9 January 1874, in *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, vol. 2: 1873-1881, 41-42n9; emphasis added. It was the beginning of a long and, for James, embarrassing dependence on popular magazines to earn a living.

<sup>100</sup>Howells to Charles Dudley Warner, 4 September 1875, *Selected Letters of Howells*, vol. 1, 103. Even Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who edited the *Atlantic's* sister publication, *Every Saturday*, began selling poems, as Howells complained to him, "out of the family." Aldrich received \$100 for poems sold to *Harper's* (Howells to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, 10 February 1875, Aldrich Papers, Houghton Library). Helen Hunt [Jackson], another author whose early career was encouraged by *Atlantic* editors, also diversified in the 1870s, selling items to *St. Nicholas*, *Scribner's*, and the *New York Independent*.

<sup>101</sup>Mark Twain to Howells, 5 July 1875, in Henry Nash Smith & William M. Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 92.

<sup>102</sup>Edmund Clarence Stedman to Richard Watson Gilder, 22 August 1880, Stedman Papers, Columbia University.

manuscript for *A Modern Instance* to Scribner's.<sup>103</sup> Emily Dickinson, a close friend of Holland's, was shocked at this turn of events. She wrote Holland: "Doctor—How did you snare Howells?" Holland's terse reply: "Emily—Money did it."<sup>104</sup>

*Scribner's* turned the magazine world upside down and to a great extent money did it. The magazine's founders quickly came to understand that cultural impact would be tightly bound to commercial success. They emulated the *Harper's* format, but made three key innovations. They melded words with high-quality illustration, incorporated advertising, and gave life to the profession of American authorship. *Scribner's* transformed national culture into an American business. By the time the magazine changed its name to the *Century* in 1881, it had established the genre of the American general magazine.

*Scribner's* rode a wave of magazine launches in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Between 1865 and 1869 four magazines valiantly took up the standard of the popular and uniquely American magazine. But none of them succeeded. The *Galaxy*, *Lippincott's*, a new *Putnam's*, and *Appleton's* each modeled themselves on the basic format of *Harper's* and on the quality and cis-Atlantic cultural boosterism of the first *Putnam's* and the *Atlantic*. Each attempted to exploit illustrations, although the *Galaxy* in particular was frequently excoriated for the wretched quality of its art.<sup>105</sup> Each also provided a striking list of American authors in counterpoint to the continued British focus of *Harper's*. None, however, threatened *Harper's* magazine's wide circulation, nor even that of the *Atlantic* at its highest point. The *Galaxy's* editors, though almost shrill in their

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<sup>103</sup>The competition of the new magazine had worn Howells out. He resigned from his editorship, writing a friend, "I have grown terribly, inexorably tired of editing. I think my nerves have given way under the fifteen years of fret and substantial unsuccess.... The praise the magazine got ceased to give me pleasure, the blame galled me worse than ever. Then to see a good thing go unwelcomed or sniffed at!" (To Scudder 8 February 1881, in *Selected Letters of Howells*, vol. 2, 274-5; and cited in Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 158).

<sup>104</sup>Martha Dickinson Bianchi, *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1924), 83. It is unclear how much Holland paid for the novel. Holland's reply is also somewhat misleading. It is most likely that Howells's relationship with assistant editor Richard Watson Gilder played a major role in his decision to submit his novel to *Scribner's*.

<sup>105</sup>Mark Twain, who at the time had a humor column, in the *Galaxy*, used that space to make savage fun of its illustrations.

advocacy of American authorship, embarrassed themselves when they could find only a handful of American authors. Over two-thirds of all the *Galaxy's* serial novels were British, and a full 7% of its *entire* page count was by a single English author, the now forgotten Annie Edwards.<sup>106</sup> *Lippincott's* was able to field a truly national coterie of authors but because it was a Philadelphia magazine in the age of New York's periodical ascendancy, *Lippincott's* was unable to attract either lucrative advertising or a circulation above a few tens of thousands. Although it carried on until after 1900, supported by the book publishing house of the same name, *Lippincott's* was never profitable.<sup>107</sup> *Appleton's* attempted to be a weekly *Harper's*, but failed.<sup>108</sup> An initial outlay of \$100,000 could not spark any interest in a revived *Putnam's*. First issued in 1868, it could not manage to attract more than 2,000 subscribers.<sup>109</sup> Putnam sold the subscriber list in November 1870 to *Scribner's*.

*Scribner's* was a hybrid venture that made it somewhat unique among American magazines. It was jointly owned by three men. The first was the successful book publisher Charles Scribner. Scribner had long dreamed of producing a monthly journal: "I want to issue a magazine," he wrote, "that is handsomely illustrated, beautifully printed, and that shall have as contributors the best authors of the day. I should like to make it different from any now published and to reach also other classes of readers."<sup>110</sup> His first attempt, the overly religious *Hours at Home* achieved none of those things. Scribner could find few able authors and discovered the high cost of handsome

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<sup>106</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 371.

<sup>107</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 396-401; John Tebbel, *The American Magazine: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn, 1969), 124-25.

<sup>108</sup>Its most notable success was the pictorial series *Picturesque America*. The series was too successful for the magazine, however, and Appleton made the series into its own serial publication sold by subscription. Later, the publisher collected the monthly installments into a two-volume book (John Tebbel, *A History of American Publishing in the United States*, vol. 2: *The Expansion of an Industry, 1865-1919* [New York: Bowker, 1975], 206). The set sold over a million copies by 1894, when a revised edition went to press. On the history of the project, see Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994).

<sup>109</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 430.

<sup>110</sup>Cited in Tebbel, *History of American Publishing*, vol. 1, 318.



illustration. Thus, when two men approached him in 1869 with the idea of starting just such a magazine as he had envisioned, Scribner took the offer. He was all the more interested because one of the men was Josiah Gilbert Holland, one of the best-selling American authors of the day, and Scribner was his publisher.

Scribner's faith in Holland's popularity was well placed. Josiah Holland had already had an immense influence in the development of American culture before 1870.<sup>111</sup> He was a publishing phenomenon. Book-length poems, novels, history, collections of secular homilies, and biography—Holland published hugely successful works in all these fields. Few authors rivaled his sales or his versatility. He was also a supremely popular lecturer, visiting over 500 towns in twenty years.<sup>112</sup> The power of the platform gave him, Boston Brahmin Thomas Wentworth Higginson marveled, “much formative power over the intellect of the nation.”<sup>113</sup> Newspapers across the country, according to Holland's biographer, praised his works “unstintingly.”<sup>114</sup> Millions of plain American people avidly read his every pronouncement.<sup>115</sup> Holland was as popular as any other cultural figure of his day.

Holland's partner in proposing a magazine to Scribner was Roswell Smith, a one-time abolitionist and officer of the American Tract Society. Smith had made a small

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<sup>111</sup>This influence has been little recognized by literary scholars. In a word, Holland was too mainstream to be of interest to scholars bent on looking for precursors to canonical twentieth-century literary figures. When critics do mention someone like Holland it seems mostly for the chance to impugn him. Lawrence Buell, for instance, is one of the few critics to seriously examine a Holland work. But he clearly disdains Holland, uncritically citing Peckham's judgment that he was “priggish and prudish to the end of his days,” a “paragon of all the copy-book virtues” (*New England Literary Culture*, 250; citing Harry Houston Peckham, *Josiah Gilbert Holland in Relation to His Times* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940], 1, 60). Jane Tompkins's seminal work *Sensational Designs* began a movement to correct the ignorance of the popular among women authors of the nineteenth century. But very little work of a similar nature has been undertaken for sentimental men authors.

<sup>112</sup>On Holland's lecturing, see Peckham, *Holland*, 51-58.

<sup>113</sup>Higginson, *Carlyle's Laugh* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1909), 378; Higginson placed Holland in the company of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, George William Curtis, and other such lions of the lecture platform.

<sup>114</sup>Peckham, *Holland*, 157.

<sup>115</sup>Peckham, *Holland*, 157-58.

fortune in Western land deals.<sup>116</sup> This fortune, according to his friend Washington Gladden, allowed him to fulfill his dream of using the printed word to do “something for the improvement of society.”<sup>117</sup> Within weeks of their initial discussions, Scribner, Holland, and Smith formed a partnership to produce a monthly magazine. Holland was to be the magazine’s editor, Smith the business manager, and Scribner the publisher.

Smith was the architect of the three-way partnership. He organized *Scribner’s Monthly* as an independent firm. He gave Holland and himself each a 30% interest, and left the remaining 40% to Scribner. At a total capitalization of \$12,000, this meant that the two outsiders invested only \$7,200 in cash.<sup>118</sup> In exchange, Scribner offered his name, the prestige of his firm, the subscription list of his faltering *Hours at Home*, and the financial and physical resources of a highly successful publishing firm.

Scribner, Holland, and Smith wanted to create an American magazine to compete with *Harper’s*. Holland’s immense popularity augured well for the new magazine. Scribner, as his publisher, knew and trusted him. Smith had faith in Holland’s cultural evangelism, and saw his role as creating a business that could forward Holland’s program. But Holland and Scribner clashed over the editorial soul of *Scribner’s*. Scribner was a devout and conservative Presbyterian with little stomach for deviation from tradition. Holland was a highly wrought evangelical and radical anti-sectarian who had been charged with heresy for his battle against doctrine. He was a poor man made

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<sup>116</sup>Cable makes the claim of Smith’s Indiana “poverty” and of being “penniless” in New Orleans after migrating there in *A Memory of Roswell Smith* (nc: np, 1892): 15. At the gates of poverty, Smith’s fortunes radically changed when he inherited land in Indiana from his father-in-law that turned out to contain an immensely rich vein of coal (Cable, *Memory*, 17).

<sup>117</sup>Gladden, “Roswell Smith,” *Century* 44 (June 1892): 311. Smith remained committed to the abolitionist social vision after the Civil War. In the 1880s, he donated over \$30,000 to Berea College, an interracial, coeducational school founded in Kentucky in 1855. Much of the money went to a new building, Lincoln Hall, although Smith also contributed much to the college’s operating expenses (P.D. Dodge, “Berea College,” *Century* 44 [June 1892]: 315-16). See also G.L. Shearer, “The American Tract Society,” *Century* 44 (June 1892): 313-14.

<sup>118</sup>Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner’s Monthly, and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 12, 21-22n18. This was cheap in comparison to Putnam’s ill-fated second attempt at a magazine. But the amount was still a far cry from the small capital stakes that started the penny press papers.

rich who carried the odd combination of determination, bluntness, and deep insecurity of the self-made man. In their first negotiations over the structure of the magazine, Scribner sought the power to veto Holland's editorial decisions. On hearing this, Holland wrote to Smith in October 1869, revealing his vision for the new venture: "I would have nothing to do with the magazine, unless I should be at liberty to say what I should feel moved to say, on any subject whatever. The magazine must be an aggressive, free speaking thing with a flavor of vitality about it.... Harper's monopolized the market for harmless and inoffensive literary pap. We have no field there-- but a magazine that would boldly lead in the denunciation of social, and political abuses from the Christian standpoint... irrespective of the prejudices and opinions of men, would at least stand a chance to live. I am afraid Mr. Scribner does not wish to have his name associated with such a magazine as this, and to trust its conduct to me without the wish to question, or the power to veto."<sup>119</sup> Holland was clamoring for an independent editorial voice, a platform for social and moral reform straight out of the ideology of sentiment. He sought a distinct and large place in the market based on Christian evangelicalism expressed in lay terms.<sup>120</sup> Smith was able to convince Scribner that Holland would not be a loose cannon, writing the publisher a few days later that "I know that he [Holland] is sound in the faith once delivered to the saints... I know that he is *not* such a terrible radical as many think him."<sup>121</sup> Simultaneously, Smith was able to mollify Holland. The general plan for the venture was settled by the end of 1869.<sup>122</sup>

As for the editorial plan of the magazine, Holland disingenuously claimed in 1880 that *Scribner's Monthly* was unique unto itself from the beginning. "Scribner's Monthly has met with a remarkable success, simply because it was conducted from the first by an

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<sup>119</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 11.

<sup>120</sup>Scribner was certainly open to the ideology of sentiment: He was the publisher of the quintessentially sentimental *Reveries of a Bachelor*. It was one of the best-selling books he ever published.

<sup>121</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 11.

<sup>122</sup>John, *Best Years*, 12.

ideal standard. There was,” he emphasized, “no popular magazine in existence which it took for a model.”<sup>123</sup> But even a quick review reveals that it was closely modeled on *Harper’s*. Henry Mills Alden, editor of *Harper’s*, charged in 1894 that *Scribner’s* had “entirely adopted the plan of *Harper’s* from beginning to end, even in its editorial departments.”<sup>124</sup> This was substantially true, as even Holland knew at the outset. In July of 1870, he considered approaching *Harper’s* to discuss ways to differentiate the two magazines. Writing to his assistant editor Richard Watson Gilder, he said, “I notice what you say about Harper publishing the same things as ourselves. If there could possibly be an understanding between us there ought to be. The fact is that we are quite likely to betray our secret to the public if we go on without a knowledge of one another’s movements, and that would be against our common interest. Have you any means of approach to the editorial ear of Harpers? Has Mr. Scribner?”<sup>125</sup> There was one key difference in Scribner’s magazines arsenal: Holland’s soapbox.

Holland provided the new magazine with an editorial voice unlike that of any preceding periodical. He addressed political issues without partisan slander. He was often righteously indignant, but always in the name of simple, sentimental principles not sectarian doctrine.

Holland was not afraid to air controversial political and religious subjects in his monthly commentaries. The early issues of the magazine took up several contentious religious topics, including early discussions of the so-called higher criticism of the Bible as well as a call for a greater freedom from sectarian control in the discussion of religious topics. (The attacked religious press charged Holland’s magazine with rank liberalism.<sup>126</sup> A Presbyterian-leaning New York newspaper even accused the magazine of being hostile

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<sup>123</sup>Holland, “Our Decennial,” *Scribner’s* 21 (November 1880): 151.

<sup>124</sup>Alden to M. Field, 18 May 1894, in Harper, *House of Harper*, 601.

<sup>125</sup>Holland to Gilder, 14 July 1870, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>126</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 463.

to Christianity.<sup>127</sup>) While not offering *Scribner's* as a forum for debate, Holland was dedicated to the frank discussion of topics that were previously thought to be anathema to a widely popular magazine. Holland strongly believed that “the two subjects in which the people of this country are most interested in are politics and religion.” He thus intended to “treat all living questions of morals and society” in a principled way, “without being partisan or dogmatic... as I would science or commerce or any other large interest of humanity.”<sup>128</sup> This bold declaration to treat of politics and religion represented, as *Scribner's* editor Robert Underwood Johnson later remembered, “an innovation in the magazines of that time [the 1870s].”<sup>129</sup> Holland was able to address these topics, while they had embroiled the earlier *Putnam's* in charges of partisanship, because the *Scribner's* editor focused on curing the ills of the self. He chose the sentimental path of self reform over bureaucratic social reform. His politics were those of the self-made man: Holland firmly believed that a “man has a right to get rich,” but he also judged “superfluous wealth” harshly.<sup>130</sup> If he denounced tramps and trade unions, he also decried speculation in stocks, condemned exploitative employers, and castigated those corporations “without souls” that abused their increasing power.<sup>131</sup> Holland's own department of commentary, “Topics of the Times,” as another *Scribner's* editor remembered, was “alive with the spirit of popular beliefs, somewhat truculent, perhaps, but truculent with the militant morality of the great body of the people of the period.”<sup>132</sup>

Holland's opinions broadened and seemed to reflect vividly the development of the aestheticized social moral. On the one hand, Edward Eggleston summed up Holland's life by quoting Herder: “My whole life has been but the interpretation of the

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<sup>127</sup>John, *Best Years*, 29.

<sup>128</sup>Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), 87; Holland, “Topics of the Time: Scribner's Monthly,” *Scribner's* 1 (1871): 106.

<sup>129</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 87.

<sup>130</sup>“Something that Wealth Can Do for Labor,” *Scribner's* 3 (March 1872): 620-21.

<sup>131</sup>“Rich and Poor,” *Scribner's* 7 (February 1874): 495. See also, John, *Best Years*, 36-37.

<sup>132</sup>L. Frank Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York: Century, 1923), 23.

oracles of my childhood.”<sup>133</sup> Yet, Holland, who once derided the theater as Satan’s minion, came to be a fervent supporter of the arts in America, including the theater.<sup>134</sup> A third *Scribner’s* editor noted the aestheticizing effect of New York City on the once poor country boy “Life in New York, where he rubbed against all kinds of people, did much to change [Holland’s] point of view, opening up the [cultural] Puritan prison-house which he had built for his soul—at any rate putting a piazza on it.”<sup>135</sup> Another influence was vital: Holland’s assistant editor Gilder provided a “sweetening influence,” and brought Holland to see that all the arts, and not just literature, were tools for moral work.<sup>136</sup> Thus, as Holland was converted to the tenets of cultural nationalism, *Scribner’s* quickly became a champion of American arts.<sup>137</sup>

#### *Envisioning the World: Illustration and Popular Success*

Roswell Smith was adamant from the first that illustration was the road to popularity. His partners were not so sure. They were uneasy with the high cost of engraving, even though they were, in principle at least, committed to a well-illustrated magazine. Holland and Scribner, in the initial planning stages of the magazine, argued for a strong visual impact chiefly in the magazine’s “externals.” That is, they wanted to create a dazzling cover, use a better grade of paper, and set print faultlessly.<sup>138</sup> Embellishments among the

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<sup>133</sup>Richard Watson Gilder, ed., *A Memorial of Josiah Gilbert Holland: Discourses and Tributes Called Forth by His Death, October 12, 1881* (“Printed, Not Published”), 16-17.

<sup>134</sup>Peckham, *Holland*, 198-99; John, *Best Years*, 87; Robert J. Scholnick, “J.G. Holland and the ‘Religion of Civilization’ in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *American Studies* 27 (Spring 1986): 73.

<sup>135</sup>William W. Ellsworth, *A Golden Age of Authors* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1919), 43-44.

<sup>136</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 43.

<sup>137</sup>See especially Holland’s early support for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (“Topics of the Time,” *Scribner’s* 8 [July 1874]: 366-67) and his contention, in the wake of Cincinnati hiring away New York’s best orchestra conductor, that “No metropolis is worthy of its name which does not draw to itself, and hold, the best men in every department of art” (“Mr. Theodore Thomas,” *Scribner’s* 17 [November 1878]: 148).

<sup>138</sup>Holland to Scribner, 26 October 1869, cited in John, *Best Years*, 16. Poe too had dreamed of emphasizing such “externals” as essential to the popularity of his own magazine projects: “We shall make the most magnificent Magazine as regards externals, ever seen. The finest paper, bold type, in single column, and superb wood engravings (in the manner of the French illustrated edition of ‘Gil Blas’ by Gigoux, or ‘Robinson Crusoe’ by Grandville)]” (*The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* [New York: Gordian, 1966], 224, 192, 232), and prospectuses for the *Penn* and *Stylus* magazines (*Essays and Reviews*, 1024-26, 1033-35).

articles, however, were quite another matter. Smith's opinion, however, was supported by others. Assistant editor Gilder was friends with numerous Philadelphia artists and believed illustration to be essential to the project. But perhaps most persuasive were the urgings of George Putnam and Charles Briggs of the recently defunct *Putnam's*. They blamed their two experiences in failure directly to the lack of illustration.<sup>139</sup>

Illustrations became the avatar of *Scribner's* cultural mission and, ultimately, its commercial success. Holland and Scribner were swayed by the legendary example of the *Penny Magazine*, which *Harper's* had used to legitimate its own monthly.<sup>140</sup> Charles Knight, editor and printer of the *Penny Magazine*, had written in his 1864 memoir that pictures were "eye-knowledge." Illustrations could "add both to the information and enjoyment of the reader." They were also "sometimes more instructive than words."<sup>141</sup> Knight's circulation of 200,000 throughout England among all classes of readers would have been powerful testimony for the pictorially squeamish. By the time the founders of Scribner & Co. began promoting their new magazine in advance of its first issue, they emphasized that it would be "profusely illustrated."<sup>142</sup> Holland emphasized the point further in the first issue of *Scribner's* when he proclaimed that the magazine would carry pictures precisely to "meet a thoroughly pronounced popular demand."<sup>143</sup> Holland and his co-magazinists wagered that pictures would entice all manner of readers, not just women: "[T]here is no person, young or old, learned or illiterate, to whom it [illustration] will be unwelcome. With this popular auxiliary [i.e., illustration] we shall try to make a

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<sup>139</sup>Holland gave primary credit for the success of the magazine to Gilder and to art director Alexander Drake in a retrospective article in 1881 (*Scribner's* 23 [June 1881]: 303); for the *Putnam's* publisher and editor, see John, *Best Years*, 16.

<sup>140</sup>See, e.g., "Culture and Progress," *Scribner's* 9 (January 1875): 383-84; and Theodore De Vinne, "The Growth of Wood-Cut Printing, II," *Scribner's* 20 (May 1880): 34-35.

<sup>141</sup>Cited in Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 70; and see her ch. 2 passim on Knight and *The Penny Paper*. A *Harper's* promotion piece of 1889 made a similar point: "Education arises not alone from what a child or a man reads, but from what they see, and the lessons, though double, supplement one another" (*The Making of Harper's Magazine* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889], 22).

<sup>142</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 16.

<sup>143</sup>"Topics of the Time: Scribner's Monthly," 106.

magazine that is intelligent on all living questions of morals and society, and to present something in every number that will interest and instruct every member of every family into which it shall have the good fortune to find its way.”<sup>144</sup> Holland, in statements such as this, was betting that the traditional formula of the female, cultural magazines (“the Mind t’improve and yet amuse”) could be turned to attract male readers.

The battle between pictures and text in the court of popular and critical opinion was not easily won, however. Americans in general had little experience with the visual arts in 1870. Pictorial art was something of a rarity (particularly in comparison with the intense visuality of our own time). New York, a city of a million people, had only two picture galleries in 1860. The country’s large public art museums would not open until the late 1870s, and these remained limited to large urban locales. Works of art sometimes traveled the country, particularly single large paintings and unique works, such as cycloramas. Currier and Ives lithographs were widely popular, but they shared the same quality of magazine fashion plates in being largely divorced from any sense of currency or moment. They might depict contemporary scenes, but they did so without direct interaction with a text. *Harper’s Weekly* had done much to change the status of the relation of picture and text in American culture during the Civil War. In a country ravenous for the latest news of battles and troop conditions, the *Weekly*’s heavy use of visual images made war news easily digestible. It countered the long-standing association of pictures with the lachrymose sentimental domain (although, to be sure, these images used a wide variety of sentimental tropes to appeal to viewers’ hearts). The *Weekly*’s Civil War coverage fused news image and text. Beyond this relatively brief episode, however, Americans’ exposure to the world beyond their personal experience in 1870 was still chiefly through the written and spoken word.

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<sup>144</sup>“Topics of the Time: Scribner’s Monthly,” 106.



By 1870, advocates of sentimental culture had begun to demonstrate the importance of combining visual and textual modes of imagination. The *Atlantic* published in June 1870 an article extolling the importance of the illustrated magazine for the family. (Oddly, the article, like the *Atlantic* in general, contained no illustrations.) “A home circle,” importuned the anonymous author, “without an illustrated magazine is torpid and poor in its sources of pleasure. It has neither eyes for art or nature, nor a liberal interest in anything beyond its routine and mechanical existence.”<sup>145</sup> Illustration gave readers a proof of reality that subjective words could not convey by themselves. Where words had come to represent spirit under the aegis of sentimentality’s aesthetic social moral, “[t]he illustration may be said to give body and reality to the written story; and words, to a mind conversant only with things, gain an additional interest, and force sluggish attention, when they are accompanied with pictures.”<sup>146</sup> Here, the magazine reached a rapprochement of male and female elements. For the magazine, according to this *Atlantic* author, was the ideal vehicle for bringing visual representation into the home. This visuality, that is the “female” element of illustration, was no longer despised as a sign of fashionable corruption. It now served as body and ground of reality. Pictures were now objective. They reproduced the thing itself.

This *Atlantic* article seems almost like a puff for *Scribner’s*, which was then in the early stages of publicizing its launch. It emphasized the very elements through which the new magazine’s proprietors hoped to become a force for culture. Where the Harpers had seen their magazine as an advertising project, they had not conceived it along the lines of the *Penny Magazine’s* project of making culture available to a great mass of readers. The proprietors of *Scribner’s* were more evangelical. They disliked separating their religious scruples from either their business or their literary practices.<sup>147</sup> This is not to say that their

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<sup>145</sup>“French and English Illustrated Magazines,” *Atlantic* 25 (June 1870): 687.

<sup>146</sup>“French and English Illustrated Magazines,” 687.

<sup>147</sup>On Smith’s detestation of such a separation, see Amory H. Bradford, “The Congregational Club,” *Century* 44 (June 1892): 314-15.

magazine was an obvious organ of Christianity. Rather, they saw their magazine in terms of the ideology of sentiment. Their creed was the aesthetic moral.

The proprietors of *Scribner's* cut against the "male" disdain for illustration by reproducing the classics of Western art. The great works of European painting and the fine art representations of American scenery had rarely been seen in American homes. The evangelical goal of *Scribner's* was to bring its readers (if not each and every American) into contact with art in order that they might create a personal relationship with Beauty. Once committed to their cultural mission, however, there remained the dilemma of how to bring pictorial beauty—whether of the American landscape, the ethically tasteful domestic scene, or the great masters of art—into the homes of all Americans who dared invite it in. The aesthetic moral required it.

Illustration had made *Harper's* into, as Alden phrased it, "a continuous world-exposition."<sup>148</sup> A world-exposition perhaps, but it was bluntly, ponderously, and harshly black and white. The wood-block cuts *Harper's* used in its first twenty years were, for the most part, poorly executed.<sup>149</sup> Into the 1870s, "wood cut" was most often a derisive term, implying poor quality of representation. Where steel and copper plates allowed for a delicacy of line, woodcuts were notoriously lacking in detail, shading, and nuance. The thick black lines on white background, unvariegated by shadings of gray, made for a flat surface which gave no sense of depth or spirit. These woodcuts were lifeless. They needed some new process of engraving the wood to make the images sumptuous, to make them look real, to make them objective.

Furthermore, the layout of *Harper's* was awkward and disjointed. In its double-column format, articles often began in only one column and title heads were not much

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<sup>148</sup>Alden, "An Anniversary Retrospect, 1900-1910," *Harper's* 121 (June 1910): 38. As late as 1889, *Harper's* still found it necessary to justify the inclusion of pictures in its monthly pages, arguing in a promotional piece that "Education arises not alone from what a child or a man reads, but from what they see, and the lessons, though double, supplement one another" (*The Making of Harper's Magazine*, 22).

<sup>149</sup>No doubt, art director Parson's English background wedded him to the old methods that other English and traditional wood cutters employed.

bigger than the body text. Text print was tiny, and many lines of the hard-to-read type were crammed into each column.<sup>150</sup> The magazine looked like a smaller version of a newspaper, with pictures tossed in. But pictures there were. In 1870, *Harper's* averaged one picture in every three pages. For its first twenty years, the magazine felt little need for graphic innovation. It was successful by dint of the fact that it carried illustration when its rivals, such as *Putnam's* and the *Atlantic* did not.

The problem for *Scribner's* was how to beat *Harper's* at its own illustration game. The magazine could not simply increase the quantity of pictures. It was after all wedded to the *Harper's* format. Moreover, too many pictures might make it resemble that licentious medium of male illustration: the police gazette. *Scribner's* option was to improve the quality of its visual impact.

*Scribner's* completely reworked the “externals” of type design and page layout. Using a far better grade of paper, *Scribner's* substituted a larger type face for the text than *Harper's*, used fewer lines per column to give a more open reading space, and set article titles across both columns. For article titles, it also used an appreciably larger type face than that of the text. As one historian has noted, *Scribner's* set “a new standard in graphic design in American periodicals which both boosted the importance of page layout and demonstrated how typography could be used to direct the reader's attention.”<sup>151</sup> *Scribner's* made the text block fluid, with text streaming around islanded images, cascading along precipitous illustrations, and tumbling past picturesque scenes.

The magazine's art department, headed by Alexander Drake, also began a rigorous search for ways to improve the quality of the illustrations themselves. The reproduction of oil paintings, and any drawing for that matter, on print blocks was an arduous process that required redrawing an image backwards on the wooden blocks. So Drake invented a

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<sup>150</sup>David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States, 1880-1960* (Toronto, Can.: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>151</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 53.

photographic process that did away with the old method, and, further, allowed for the sizing of reproductions to fit different spaces. Drake also invented a process of wood engraving (rather than cutting and gouging) that allowed *Scribner's* master wood engraver Timothy Cole, that allowed for sumptuous grays and tone impossible to achieve with the wood cut. The new tones allowed the magazine to print extremely faithful reproductions of the impressionistic work of young American painters, including James McNeill Whistler, William M. Chase, and John Henry Twachtman.<sup>152</sup> J. Alden Weir, Wyatt Eaton, Augustus St. Gaudens, and other rising American artists offered their services to the magazine in the seventies.<sup>153</sup> Before long a panoply of American artists illustrated *Scribner's Monthly* and its successor the *Century*, including, Kenyon Cox, Winslow Homer, E.W. Kemble, Howard Pyle, Maxfield Parrish, and Charles Dana Gibson.<sup>154</sup> Practitioners of older forms of wood cutting vehemently attacked the new style of engraving Drake's process unleashed.<sup>155</sup> The new style was impressionistic, it *suggested* pictorial elements and thereby achieved a greater breadth of representation. Despite the criticisms, the new processes gave *Scribner's* the power, by 1880, to provide highly detailed and shaded original pictures of American scenery and life and reproductions of European and world artworks.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>Robert Scholnick, "Scribner's Monthly and the 'Pictorial Representation of Life and Truth' in Post-Civil War America," *American Periodicals* 1 (1991): 55.

<sup>153</sup>For the close relations among these rising artists and both Richard Watson Gilder and his artist wife, Helena de Kay Gilder, see the "Minutes" of the American Art Association, later called the Society of American Artists (Gilder Collection, Lilly Library). The Gilders were the motive force behind organizing the society in June of 1877, holding the founding meetings at their 15th Street home. Members of the society soon came to include—besides Eaton and St. Gaudens—Walter Shirlaw, Olin Warner, Frederick Dielman, R. Swain Gifford, Homer Martin, Lewis Comfort Tiffany (whose daughter Comfort would later marry the Gilders' son Rodman), The society was organized as a rival to the National Academy. See also John, *Best Years*, 81.

<sup>154</sup>The new freedom provided by Drake's engraving improvement also allowed *Scribner's* and then the *Century* to reproduce and champion some of the most innovative of modern European artists, from impressionists Jean Corot and Claude Monet to realists Gustave Courbet and Jean François Millet (John, *Best Years*, 188).

<sup>155</sup>Alphaeus P. Cole and Margaret Ward Cole, *Timothy Cole: Wood-Engraver* (New York: Pioneer Associates, 1935), ch. 6 "Cole Against Linton," 21-24.

<sup>156</sup>An important project in wood engraving was Appleton's *Picturesque America*, mentioned above. While the series began in the publishers' short-lived weekly magazine, Appleton soon spun it off as a project all its own. See Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 187; Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America*.

Drake's revolution in wood engraving and Cole's remarkable ability at reproducing works of art brought *Scribner's* much critical and popular success. By 1880, a critic for the *London Graphic*, then one of the best illustrated papers in the world, felt compelled to admit, "We know of no English magazine which can in any way compete with *Scribner's Monthly* in the matter of illustrations." And the *London Saturday Review*, which an editor at *Scribner's* delighted to point out was "generally accounted the least friendly to American productions of all the English weeklies," was forced reluctantly to agree: "The impartial critic who is asked where the best wood-cuts are produced, has, we fear, but one answer possible—neither in England, Germany, nor France, but in America."<sup>157</sup> For proof, the *Review* suggested comparing "any recent number of *Scribner's Monthly* and the *Cornhill* [Magazine]."<sup>158</sup> The English engravers refused, for the most part, to adopt the new methods, and their magazines paid the price.<sup>159</sup>

*Scribner's* printed over 2,700 wood engravings in its first five years alone, at a cost approaching \$100,000.<sup>160</sup> The public responded to this avalanche of visual stimulation. The initial print run of *Scribner's* in November 1870 was 40,000. *Scribner's* widening reputation for illustration lifted circulation significantly. Reaching 47,000 in the financial depression year of 1873, circulation increased steadily until four years later when *Scribner's* had 100,000 subscribers.<sup>161</sup> By 1880, circulation was almost double that number.

Holland, in a series of editorials, boasted that illustration was the secret to the magazine's success. "No one can suppose that a magazine published without illustrations could have achieved the success [of 100,000 subscribers]. It is doubtful whether the same magazine, omitting the illustrations entirely, could have been made to pay expenses, thus

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<sup>157</sup>Cited in "The Rise and Work of a Magazine: The History of the Century Magazine (*Scribner's Monthly*)," *Century* 23 (November 1881): Supplement, 1, 11.

<sup>158</sup>Cited in Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 70-71.

<sup>159</sup>Matthews, "American Magazines," *Bookman* 49 (July 1919): 537.

<sup>160</sup>*Index to Scribner's Monthly* (New York: n.p., 1876), n.p.

<sup>161</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 467; John, *Best Years*, 17, 77, 96.

reduced to the minimum, as they would have been. It is proper, then that we place the pictorial department of the magazine at the head of the list, in recounting the elements of success.”<sup>162</sup> Holland justifiably claimed that his magazine was the international cutting edge of pictorial art: “Nowhere in the world is the art of *Scribner’s Monthly* more highly esteemed than among the homes of art in Europe. Wherever, on the other side of the Atlantic, the magazine goes, it is recognized as a leader and reformer in popular illustrative art.” This being essentially true, Holland perhaps did not feel it indecorous to make this a striking point of competition with *Harper’s*: “Not only this,” he continued, “but it is recognized as the great stimulating power, under the influence of which American engraving has become the best engraving of the world. We say with boldness, and we believe it to be strictly true, that American engraving has achieved its eminence in the world simply because *Scribner’s Monthly* has demanded, guided, and stimulated it.”<sup>163</sup>

At the first signs of *Scribner’s* onslaught of illustration, Harper and Brothers took note. The intense competition directed at *Harper’s* by the *Scribner’s* illustrations caused the *Harper’s* engravers, as J. Henry Harper later recalled, “to pull down their visors, place a lance in rest, and take notice, for they had at last met a rival worthy of their steel.”<sup>164</sup> They began to experiment with their own methods of wood engraving. They raided engravers from *Scribner’s/Century*. *Harper’s* even puffed itself, “This Magazine has reconstructed an art which was torpid and languishing, and has given it life and vigor. To-day American wood-engravers have no equals, and their choicest productions find their appropriate places in *Harper’s Magazine*.”<sup>165</sup> Gilder sounded the alarm for *Scribner’s*, writing Charles Scribner that *Harper’s* was “now competing with us [*Scribner’s*] with a prodigality of expenditure unequalled. They have taken every one of our engravers—they have learned several—though not all of our ‘tricks’ [and] they are

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<sup>162</sup>Holland, “The Magazine,” *Scribner’s* 17 (November 1878): 146.

<sup>163</sup>Holland, “Our Decennial,” *Scribner’s* 21 (November 1880): 151.

<sup>164</sup>Harper, *House of Harper*, 202.

<sup>165</sup>*The Making of Harper’s Magazine*, 3.

spending in ordinary numbers more than we have ever spent in extraordinary numbers.”<sup>166</sup> This amounted to a lot of money for a magazine like *Scribner's* that had spent as much as \$2,000 for illustrating a single article. J. Henry Harper claimed that *Harper's* spent as much as \$500 for a single engraving in their attempts to best their rival.<sup>167</sup> To pay for all this, Roswell Smith turned a little used income stream into a roaring torrent of the American magazine.

### *Advertising for American Culture*

*Scribner's* fundamentally altered the generic magazine template by making advertising an integral element. Advertising was hardly new to magazines by the time *Scribner's* made it something of a fetish in American magazines.<sup>168</sup> A few magazines had carried ads before the Civil War, although this was something of a rarity.<sup>169</sup> James T. Fields had already sold ads in the *Atlantic*, and had used his well-built network of literary friends,

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<sup>166</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 182.

<sup>167</sup>*Harper's* attracted its own artists: “Porte Crayon” (David Strother), Edwin A. Abbey, C.S. Reinhardt, Frederic Remington. Homer and Pyle had actually begun their careers with *Harper's* before finding work at *Scribner's* (John, *Best Years*, 182; Harper, *House of Harper*, 202).

<sup>168</sup>Richard Ohmann's work on the “mass market” magazines of the 1890s suffers from several inaccuracies in regard to advertising. While he later admits that some of these magazines carried advertising (*Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* [New York: Verso, 1998], 26), his introductory fantasy of the reception of these magazines is based on a single issue of *Harper's* monthly. This issue is dated in 1880, before *Harper's* began carrying outside advertising. Yet, *Scribner's* had included and actively sought paid advertising for almost a decade by 1880. The amount of *Scribner's* advertising is equivalent to if not in excess of what Ohmann claims for the later *Munsey's* (7)—as a simple comparison with Table 3 in John (*Best Years*, 100) would have revealed. Later, Ohmann does introduce more evidence of advertisements in the established cultural journals (84). But his bias is clear: He presents figures for *Harper's*, the *Atlantic* (which with a small 10,000+ circulation could attract little advertising), and the *Century*. But for the *Century*, he includes figures for only three months spaced at roughly five-year intervals: 1895, 1900, and 1904. What Ohmann misses in his own figures is that the *Century* continually over that time carried *more* advertising than any of the newer magazines. Moreover, Ohmann misses how the established cultural magazines were instrumental in setting the style of 1890s advertising. In a passage on how important design was to advertising, Ohmann cites an article by Theodore De Vinne to stress how advertising designers “thought visual form made direct claims on attention and feeling” (180). But Ohmann seems completely unaware that De Vinne was the printer responsible for the *Century's* international prominence among periodicals as a visual marvel. Because of his bias, Ohmann denies to *Scribner's*/*Century* and its competitors the status of “mass culture.” Thus, Ohmann argues that the earlier magazines, before *Munsey's*, do not “address... a group of people defined by what they might purchase,” nor do they “speak... to them as a new category of person: the consumer.” For a far broader examination of magazine advertising, see Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 22, and ch. 3.

<sup>169</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 21.

acquaintances, and indebttees to promote his monthly in the 1860s. But he did not think of ads as an income stream for supporting his magazine and thus did not go out of his way to solicit ads. *Harper's* was far more the norm: It carried ads, but only for the works of its parent company. This was something of a point of pride and deep principle. For even when the Howe Sewing Machine company offered the magazine \$18,000 a year (or \$1,500 a month, or the equivalent of 4,500 subscriptions) for the last page of each issue of the magazine in the early 1870s, the Harpers declined the proposal.<sup>170</sup>

Fields could afford his lackadaisical attitude toward advertising. He did not have to pay for illustrations. The Harpers could afford their refusal of advertising. They considered their magazine to be a self-funding and even profitable advertisement for the book firm, not for other businesses. Roswell Smith, however, was pressed to take a new attitude toward the inclusion of ads in *Scribner's*. First, the quasi-independent status of Scribner & Co. made *Scribner's* less an advertising instrument for Charles Scribner's books, and more a business that had to look after its own health. This relation was exemplified by the fact that Scribner paid for the book ads he ran in the magazine (though probably at a very favorable rate).<sup>171</sup> Second, the demands of illustration and financing a large-scale magazine almost from scratch required Smith to find a new source of income. As William Ellsworth, a long-time member of the Century Company put it, "What contributed more than anything else to the financial success of Scribner's Monthly from the first was the determination of Roswell Smith to take advertising."<sup>172</sup>

Roswell Smith more than any other magazine publisher of his day made advertising an integral element of the American magazine.<sup>173</sup> He hired the first full-time advertising agent in the magazine industry, Henry F. Taylor, in 1872. He pushed

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<sup>170</sup>George Presbury Rowell, *Forty Years an Advertising Agent, 1865-1905* (New York: Garland, 1985), 444; Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 122. This figure would be over \$200,000 in 2001 dollars.

<sup>171</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 122.

<sup>172</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 121.

<sup>173</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 121; Presbrey, *History of Advertising*, 466; John, *Best Years*, 99; Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 22.



advertising as a reputable commercial activity. Prior to the appearance of *Scribner's* advertisements mostly hawked shady products such as patent medicines. Smith classified ads to give them the appearance of being items in a directory of respectable commodities rather than the shoddy shams of hucksters. He solicited pictures of the items advertised and thus created a visual world of consumer goods at the back of every issue. He demonstrated that advertising could be profitable in itself. He also showed it to be an enticement to subscribers and a boost to greater magazine circulation; which in turn led to greater advertising revenue. Smith, from the first, proclaimed his intention to run ads, not only as a means of generating income but as a sort of self-advertising for the quality of the magazine. “[T]hey [advertisements] will add materially to the ability of the publishers,” he argued in 1870, “to render their magazine readable and attractive.” Smith understood, in the wake of the Civil War, that there was to be one national market, rather than the many fragmented markets of the antebellum era. He sought to make the magazine the prime agent in making that market visible and profitable. “It is now well understood,” he continued, “that a first-class popular magazine furnishes to all men who seek a national market the very best medium for advertising that exists.”<sup>174</sup> *Scribner's* magazine's growing prestige lent “dignity,” as Frank Presbrey remembered it, to advertising at a time “when it sorely needed it.” The *Century* was the first magazine to publish full-page advertisements and it was the venue where John Powers, the “father of modern advertising,” inserted his first national advertisements for clients such as the Murphy Varnish Company and the Vacuum Oil Company in the 1880s.<sup>175</sup> In the 1890s, George H. Hazen, advertising manager for the *Century*, was recognized as one of the key

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<sup>174</sup>Smith quoted in Presbrey, *History of Advertising*, 268. In appealing to advertisers, Smith characterized magazine differently than Holland and Gilder did in their public pronouncements. Smith assured potential advertisers that *Scribner's* was “widely distributed to the prosperous and intelligent classes of society, and carefully read and preserved” (cited in Presbrey, *History of Advertising*, 468).

<sup>175</sup>Presbrey, *History of Advertising*, 469.

innovators in advertising.<sup>176</sup> Ellsworth lived long enough to see the fruits of Smith's innovation. "In building up magazine advertising," he observed in 1919, "Roswell Smith was creating a monster of competition."<sup>177</sup>

A key component of Smith's advertising strategy rested on his magazine's ability to find a national distribution. But wide distribution was hampered by the federal post office's continued discrimination against magazines. Smith thus agitated Congress to achieve rate parity with newspapers as well as to shift the way postal fees were assessed. Fortunately for him, by the 1870s, Congress was already determined to rationalize postal regulations regarding the distribution of periodicals. In the late 1870s, it mandated that publishers, not subscribers, would henceforth be responsible for all postage. Moreover, the publisher would pay postage in advance; charges would be based on bulk weight of the entire shipment not by the piece or weight of each individual piece; there would be but one second class bulk rate; and all publishers would have to submit to registering their publications. The nation's thousands of local post masters were no longer responsible for charging periodical postage and determining a periodical's newspaperness or magazininess. Collection of postage and determination of status now devolved onto the handful of post offices where magazines *were mailed*.<sup>178</sup> By 1878, the distribution of magazines had become tightly centralized. Now, only six principle post offices accounted for over 60% of the nation's second-class postage. New York City alone processed 32% of the total.<sup>179</sup> For magazine publishers, these laws represented what one historian has called a "double victory."<sup>180</sup> First, the second class bulk rate made the cost of shipping a magazine equal to that of a newspaper for the first time in U.S. history.

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<sup>176</sup>Presbrey, *History of Advertising*, 474. *Harper's* had begun to catch up, for another of the 1890s innovators was Henry Drisler of *Harper's*.

<sup>177</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 122.

<sup>178</sup>Richard Burket Kielbowicz, *Origins of the Second-Class Mail Category and the Business of Policymaking, 1863-1879*, Journalism Monographs no. 96 (November 1985), 12; Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 19.

<sup>179</sup>Kielbowicz, *Origins*, 17; Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 19.

<sup>180</sup>Kielbowicz, *Origins*, 20.

This represented a significant change in the possibilities for disseminating periodicals and their cultural ethos. As Representative Hernando Money, Democrat of Mississippi and himself a newspaper publisher, observed, the lower prices paid by newspapers had long represented an unjust discrimination, for many magazines represented the nation's "very best class of periodical literature." They were not merely "vehicles of literature to the people," Money stressed. They were "instructors in the highest sense of the term."<sup>181</sup> Political intelligence, according to the Congressman, was now not the only form of knowledge essential to a democratic people.

Second, the monthly magazines became far more attractive as a national advertising medium than either the circulars or the newspapers. The circulars, as third class matter, became much more expensive in comparison to the magazines; not to mention that the magazines offered a far more attractive display, with their high-quality reproduction capabilities and finer paper.<sup>182</sup> Newspapers, especially the dailies, found it more lucrative to carry local advertising and so did not seriously challenge the magazines in the national advertising market. Smith's work in the cause of easing postal barriers to magazine distribution rendered deep changes in the general monthly magazine.

Advertising was a major visual component of *Scribner's* magazine from the start.<sup>183</sup> By the mid 1870s, each volume (a volume was six issues comprising 864 pages of reading matter) carried 120 pages of advertising, for an average of ten pages per issue, or 14% of the magazine's editorial matter. This grew to over 160 pages in the early 1880s, with forty-two pages of ads in the Christmas 1880 issue alone. These numbers grew to astronomical heights in the later '80s and '90s. Some volumes contained over

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<sup>181</sup>Cited in James Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 3d ed. (New York: Ronald, 1971), 94.

<sup>182</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 19.

<sup>183</sup>Ohmann is wrong in his assertion that "*Scribner's* did not in fact attract a lot of advertising for a while; this was an idea whose time had not yet come" (26). He is correct in noting that there was more advertising in the *Century*, but his source is Frank Presbrey's impressionistic memoir/history of advertising. Ohmann demonstrates no actual knowledge of *Scribner's*, little of the *Century*, and none of Arthur John's history of *Scribner's/Century*. See, regarding the amount of advertising in *Scribner's* and the *Century*, John's "Table 3. Volume of Paid Advertising in *Scribner's Monthly*, 1872-1881" (100) and "Table 5. Volume of Paid Advertising in the *Century Magazine*, 1881-1900" (133).

640 pages of ads (an average of 107 pages of ads per issue), which nearly equaled the amount of reading matter. Advertising revenue outstripped the growth of advertising volume early on. Greater circulation allowed Smith to charge higher rates, as well as attract new advertisers. The standard page rate in 1880 was \$270. This meant that *Scribner's* was making \$43,000 in ad revenue per volume, and almost \$100,000 a year. This equaled about 20% of subscription revenue. In 1885 Smith raised the standard page rate to \$300, which meant that the magazine's peak advertising volumes, those carrying over 600 pages of ads, brought in \$180,000.<sup>184</sup> This equaled about 45,000 subscriptions, or still about 20% of subscription revenue.

*Harper's* again had to play catch-up. Fletcher Harper died in 1877, and this allowed the magazine's editor and the business department to lay plans for the acceptance of ads. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, the first paying ad in *Harper's*, in its June 1881 number, was for the *New York Sun*, the newspaper that had inaugurated the penny paper craze of 1830s. *Harper's* was carrying over 300 pages of paid ads per volume by 1890. This lagged well behind the *Century*. The *Century* was able to sell 40% more ad space than its chief rival because of Smith's pricing policy: He offered lower rates to attract a greater volume.<sup>185</sup> With the two greatest magazines in the country filling their pages with advertisements, other magazines had little choice but to follow suit.

Magazines had always been commercial commodities, but their commercial nature had been somewhat disguised before the introduction of ads. That is, once a subscription was paid, there was little about the older magazines that clearly linked them to commerce. One historian has even proclaimed the monthlies of the pre-advertising era

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<sup>184</sup>John, *Best Years*, 98-99, 100 Table 3, 103, 133 Table 5, 134. John (99-101, 101 Table 4, and 134) discusses the sorts of things advertised in the 1880-81 volume, from farm journals and wagons to books, sewing machines, home furnishings and the buyers' guide to Manhattan shops.

<sup>185</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 57; John, *Best Years*, 134. John claims that the magazines had equal amounts of ad space, a contention that Reed disputes. Reed seems the better source here because he actually counted the *Harper's* pages, while John did not.

to be “anti-commercial” magazines.<sup>186</sup> With advertising, however, commerce infiltrated the very pages of the magazine. It came to rival the place of American authors who struggled to make a living by writing: “The *Century*,” insinuated the acerbic *Philistine* in 1895, “will insert a page or two of reading matter between the Italian art and the ads.”<sup>187</sup>

*American Magazine Authorship:*

*Making Professionals, Making Artists*

The first aesthetic moral project Holland took up was the reform, or rather the resuscitation, of America literature. Holland’s first aesthetic love, literature, was suffering in America. His own magazine showed the danger signs. In Holland’s early reliance on English and Scottish serial novelists, *Scribner’s* magazine risked becoming, as *Graham’s* had once declared *Harper’s*, a “foreign” magazine.

Holland’s desire to provide high quality literature was frustrated on several fronts. His personal literary standing was not high among American critics of the day. For the most part, they reviled him as the archangel of a syrupy domesticism mostly devoid of manly principle and aesthetic morality. Many of New York’s notable writers, such as the journalist/poets Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Edmund Clarence Stedman refused Holland’s entreaties to contribute. The work of New England writers flowed into the *Atlantic*, leaving nothing of note available from that section. Thus, Holland and his assistant Gilder found themselves hard pressed to discover American works of a sufficient quality to meet their standards.<sup>188</sup> The bulk of the American material in the first few volumes came from either author-refugees of *Putnam’s* and *Hours at Home* or from Holland himself.

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<sup>186</sup>John C. Nerone, *The Culture of the Press in the Early Republic: Cincinnati, 1793-1848* (New York: Garland, 1989), 225.

<sup>187</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 132.

<sup>188</sup>Herbert Smith, *Richard Watson Gilder* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 25.

The greatest problem was in the area of serial novels. *Harper's* had made the serial novel an essential component of the general magazine. Its importance was deeply impressed on the Harper brothers during the Civil War. War-time deprivations so depressed the circulation of *Harper's* that Fletcher Harper considered terminating the monthly. Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*, however, was a great hit from its first installment in December 1864 and almost single-handedly returned the magazine to its pre-war circulation.<sup>189</sup> Holland and Gilder knew that serial novels were necessary if they were to compete with *Harper's*. They were thus compelled, in the absence of able American authors, to print foreign serials. Worse, even in this strategy they were rebuffed. Charles Scribner was of little help. He had long refused to publish British novelists and thus had none in his stable of potential contributors to the magazine. *Harper's* had a virtual lock on the best British writers, Reade, Thackeray, Trollope, Meredith, Bulwer, Dickens, and Collins. George Eliot was committed to Fields & Osgood. The only foreign authors the *Scribner's* editors could round up were such as George MacDonald, Mrs. Oliphant, and Jules Verne. Mrs. Oliphant alone provided three serials in *Scribner's* magazine's first four volumes. But even these foreign sources soon dried up. Holland rectified this shortage somewhat by publishing three serials of his own between 1872 and 1877.

The solution for the dry American literary well was to pump it full of money. Roswell Smith understood the problem and made it his top business goal to land American authors who could sell magazines. Rebecca Harding Davis, "Saxe Holme" (Helen Hunt [Jackson]), Edward Everett Hale, Henry James, Bret Harte, George Washington Cable, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Frank Stockton, and Edward Eggleston, soon made *Scribner's* their literary outlet and helped to bring the magazine into an increasing number of subscribers' homes. By 1875, Holland felt confident enough in the magazine's ability to attract quality American serials that he announced

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<sup>189</sup>Harper, *House of Harper*, 233. Mott (*American Magazines*, vol. 2, 393) adds that Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* began running before *Armadale* was finished, which boosted circulation even higher.

from then on an American-only policy for novels in *Scribner's*. When Aldrich and Stedman changed their minds and began to contribute, the reason was clear. Money did it.

*Scribner's* forced *Harper's*, for the first time in its twenty-year existence, into an intense commercial competition for literary dominance. The new monthly's advancing emphasis on American literature and its growing ability to pay large sums to obtain literary product made *Harper's* reconsider its British literary strategy. *Harper's*, shamed by early adverse criticism, had already begun to pay for most of its British serial novels by the end of the 1850s. By the 1870s, when *Scribner's* appeared, the older magazine paid more for the advance sheets of these foreign works than what the new magazine paid for American novels. Furthermore, the British novelists that *Harper's* had built its name on were now either dead (Dickens died in 1870, for example) or declining rapidly.<sup>190</sup> *Harper's* had from time to time published short stories by American authors, including Caroline Chesebrough, John W. DeForest, Herman Melville, Louise Chandler Moulton, Charles Nordhoff, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Rose Terry. *Scribner's* magazine's success with American literature, however, and its emphasis on the American short story in particular, threatened to steal whatever thunder the older monthly had on this score. Fletcher Harper's 1877 death not only freed *Harper's* to sell ads, it also removed the old impediments to competing with *Scribner's* in the field of American literature. *Harper's* editor-in-chief Henry Mills Alden began interspersing British novels (now by the likes of Thomas Hardy) with American serials. Howells, James, Warner, and Constance Woolson all contributed novels to the magazine. *Harper's* also began to follow a more American policy by re-emphasizing its commitment to short stories by U.S. authors, particularly those from the states of the former Confederacy. While the magazine had long justified its English focus as a project of educating American literary talent and taste,

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<sup>190</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 16.

the magazine was “released” from these obligations, explained Alden, by “the rapid progress of the country in enterprise and culture.”<sup>191</sup> He admitted that competition with *Scribner’s/Century*, had had a significant effect on the course and development of *Harper’s*: “So far as the *Century* is concerned, it was the competition itself which affected *Harper’s* rather than any suggestion derived by *Harper’s* from its rival.... If you are driving a spirited horse and another mettlesome steed comes alongside, your horse (which would not otherwise have paid any attention to the other, nor even so but for the fact that the other is *running the same road*) naturally leaps forward, rejoicing in a good race.”<sup>192</sup> Alden here clearly showed his pique, emphasizing that the newer magazine was “running the same road” as that which the older had once run alone.

The race was more heated than Alden let on in his reminiscence. Alden had to compete with *Scribner’s* on all fronts. He angrily wrote his science advisor, S.F. Baird, an assistant secretary of the Smithsonian, when the rival magazine scooped *Harper’s* on several scientific developments: “we are beaten by *Scribner* on the very ground where your facilities for knowledge & for influence in our behalf ought to be most available....” Moreover, Alden’s letter revealed that the cultural magazines were not utterly divorced from the events of the world, as critics of these periodicals have contended. Competition drove Alden to require up-to-the-minute information about progress in the sciences: “I depend upon you,” he continued to Baird, “for *timely information* on such matters, & if I do not get it, my dependence is only a source of weakness.”<sup>193</sup> When Baird protested, Alden responded “I do not see that there is any good reason for our being anticipated at

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<sup>191</sup>Alden, “An Anniversary Retrospect,” 38. See this same theme in Alden, “Fifty Years of Harper’s Magazine,” 949-50. For decades, the magazine’s managers felt compelled to justify the initial policy of British literature, whether pirated or paid for, either by claiming that there had been no worthy American novelists before the 1870s, or by puffing “the elemental obligations it had assumed of an educational character” (*The Making of Harper’s Magazine*, 8).

<sup>192</sup>Cited in Harper, *House of Harper*, 601; see also Alden, “Fifty Years of Harper’s Magazine,” 952.

<sup>193</sup>Alden to S.F. Baird, 21 October 1873, *Harper’s Letterbooks*, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, cited also in Dowgray, *A History of Harper’s Literary Magazines* (PhD Diss.: University of Wisconsin, 1955), 88.



Washington by the enterprise of *Scribner* editors.”<sup>194</sup> Competition clearly bred a sense of urgency in Alden’s editorial efforts.

Richard Watson Gilder succeeded Holland as the editor of *Scribner’s* in 1881. Splitting from the Scribner partnership, he and Smith renamed the magazine the *Century* but they continued and even expanded the strategy of paying top dollar for good literature. In October of 1880, even before Holland had resigned from the magazine, Gilder wrote James Russell Lowell, the first editor of the *Atlantic*, to woo him as a contributor. Gilder expressed surprise that Longfellow was writing for several magazines outside the *Atlantic*, including the Century Co.’s own *St. Nicholas*, because “for years I have imagined that the old Atlantic writers— or some of them— had a feeling that would prevent them from going outside.” While not wanting to set up a direct competition with *Atlantic* editor Howells, Gilder told Lowell that if he or any other author associated with the *Atlantic* made the decision on his or her own to contribute elsewhere, then Gilder was “willing to beg hard” for their work. “All the harder,” Gilder added, holding out the temptation of mammon, “because Scribner’s has of late been extremely generous, or rather flush, with me personally making it much more of an object than ever to have its interests at heart. In view of the new order of things I feel inclined to meet new responsibilities & freedom with complimentary efforts: as witness this November number: as witness also this letter— which you will acknowledge is not an accustomed one. In a word— may we not have something from you?— Prose or verse.” To make sure that the financial reward was to be significant, Gilder reiterated his ability to pay well: “Imagine the [clanking?] publisher’s gold at your elbow....”<sup>195</sup> Gilder’s reference to his efforts as not customary reveals how the problem of competition for authors was in a state of evolution.

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<sup>194</sup>Alden to S.F. Baird, 24 October 1873, *Harper’s* Letterbook, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, cited also in Dowgray, *Harper’s Literary Magazines*, 89.

<sup>195</sup>Gilder to Lowell, 28 October 1880, Lowell Papers, Houghton Library.

Within a few years of Howells's separation from the *Atlantic*, Gilder felt comfortable explaining to him how he had used cash to raise up the quality of the *Century*'s literary culture. "During my regime," he wrote Howells, "prices have advanced beyond precedent—largely I suppose from my desire & ambition to 'get the best'."<sup>196</sup> This sounds like a rather crass statement of the power of money. But for Gilder and his fellow editors, the first part of the statement was intricately involved with the second part. "Getting the best" did not mean obtaining the best-selling authors, that is, authors who simply sold a lot of product. For these editors, the "best" was a cultural category derived directly from the interest of the 1840s in a national literature.

### **Imagining National Culture**

The form of the general magazine was set in the two decades after the Civil War through the competitive practices of new magazines that sought to emulate and surpass the *Harper's* model. With *Scribner's Monthly, An Illustrated Magazine for the People*, the American general magazine came into its own. Here for the first time was a widely popular magazine, emphasizing American literature and American society, carrying the panoply of elements we have come to expect in a magazine: first-rate literature, a wide purview, extensive illustration, advertising, professional authors, and an appeal to all sections of the country without being distinctly identified with any. *Scribner's* solved the problems of variety of topics, literary quality, and moral tone that had hamstrung the earlier magazines, from the pre-war *Putnam's* to the post-war *Appleton's*. By the 1880s, it had become a publishing phenomenon. It rivaled *Harper's* for circulation and even surpassed it, thereby forcing the older magazine to undertake significant changes to hang on to its circulation.

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<sup>196</sup>Gilder to Howells, 31 July 1884, Howells Papers, Houghton Library.

Editors such as Gilder, Holland, and Alden embraced competition as a spur to culture. Far from choosing cultural ideals *over* commercialism, these editors thought they could achieve their cultural ideals *through* commercialism. This was a preeminent tenet of antebellum sentimentality. When Alden referred to competition as the arrival of a second “mettlesome” horse, the form of rivalry he had in mind was not that of a duel to the death. Rather, both horses were in a commercial race, vying for victory in the democracy of the marketplace. The prize would not belong to the one victorious nag, but would be an improved culture for all. Cultural uplift for these editors was far from being the attempt to erect a wall of cultivation between some aristocratic elite and the hoi polloi. “Culture” was not a catchphrase meant to mask social prestige from the have nots. All of these editors came from humble backgrounds. They saw themselves as sentimental self-made men. That is, they had risen from coarse to cultured, but instead of using their position to amass ever greater personal gains, they felt it their duty to make such a cultural transition possible for any American who would read their magazines.

These editors were in the business of creating *popular* magazines.<sup>197</sup> They did not seek a select audience, just the opposite.<sup>198</sup> *Scribner’s* magazine’s subtitle proclaimed it to be “FOR THE PEOPLE.” *Harper’s* announced at its inception, “The Magazine is not intended exclusively for any class of readers....”<sup>199</sup> And later Alden, employing the now standard sentimental formula of cultural education—amusement *and* knowledge—reiterated that the magazine was “addressed to all readers of average intelligence, having for its purpose their entertainment and illumination, meeting in a general way the varied claims of their human intellect and sensibility, and in this accommodation *following* the

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<sup>197</sup>Aldrich and his *Atlantic* would be the single exception, he accepted the magazine’s place as an isolated cultural lagoon.

<sup>198</sup>This argument runs counter to that offered by most literary critics of the twentieth century, see, e.g., Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 43.

<sup>199</sup>“A Word at the Start,” 2.

lines of their aspiration.”<sup>200</sup> Because of its popular intentions, Alden noted, Harper’s “could not have published Emerson’s essays or Lowell’s critical papers” for they were too erudite for a wide public. But the magazine “could and did welcome the best short stories of its time....” These statements could certainly be seen as market strategies. But that is just the point. In such statements, the editors of these magazines felt they were bringing culture and commerce together. In a democracy, products had to have some sort of exciting appeal to consumers who were free to choose what they would purchase in the marketplace. Commerce was thus the democratic means of disseminating culture; and culture was the means of limiting commercial excess. Through the mid 1890s, with popularity acting as the public’s stamp of approval on magazine conductors, these editors saw the rising popularity of their magazines as evidence that they were tapping into a desire, latent in the American character, for the best that had been thought and said.

The irony of their magazing was that it was the culmination of both the great dream and the worst fear of the antebellum nationalists. Critical acclaim and unprecedented circulations seemed to legitimate the postbellum general magazines as that “true index of our national character” that S., complaining about the popularity of the ladies’ magazines, had so ardently yearned for in 1853.<sup>201</sup> They were hailed far and wide for their utter Americanness. Yet these magazines, as a nexus of the commercial and the sentimental, were deeply imbued with much from the Philadelphia magazines that had so disgusted S. and his or her compeers. Where antebellum editors and magazinists were embroiled in the question of whether their magazines were male or female, there was no question for the postbellum editors. The cultural system of sentimentality had prevailed over the political ideology of republicanism.

*Scribner’s* nationwide success transformed the American general magazine into a panorama of national culture. It fused image and text into a powerful medium through

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<sup>200</sup>Alden, “Fifty Years,” 950; emphasis added.

<sup>201</sup>See, above, chapter 3.

which readers could imagine themselves as members of a vast community, stretching beyond their individual homes and the urban limits of newspapers to encompass the entire nation. They could see the nation's place in the community of nations. But the question remained: How did they see themselves in these magazines? This was precisely the sort of question the editors of *Scribner's* asked themselves. For they, as much as anyone, used the magazines to conceive of themselves as Americans.

## Chapter 5

### **The Evolution of Magazine Culture: Sentimentality, Class, and the Editors of *Scribner's*:**

In July 1878, the nation's leading magazine of culture did an odd thing. *Scribner's Monthly* condemned culture and its own readers as more dangerous to American life than gambling, more dangerous than prostitution, more dangerous than any other human depravity. "There is no occupation in the world," the magazine warned, "that so belittles and degrades men and women as that which is based upon, or which engages, the fine arts."<sup>1</sup> *Scribner's* lambasted the culture of its readers. Culture and art/ "have not saved most of you from becoming petty and selfish men and women.... [T]here is nothing in your art that enlarges or liberalizes you, that restrains you from drunkenness and vices that shall not be named, that gives you sobriety and solidity of character, that enlarges your social sympathies, that naturally leads you into organizations for helping others outside of your own circle.... [Y]ou are not the men and women who are relied on for performing the duties of society." Culture, the magazine scoffed, "talks divinely of progress, but when it starts to walk it goes lame."

This odd editorial was a salvo in a quiet battle raging in the offices of *Scribner's*. It was written by the magazine's editor-in-chief, Josiah Gilbert Holland. He was responding to

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<sup>1</sup>"Culture and Christianity," *Scribner's* 16 (July 1878): 433. Holland's enmity ran surprisingly deep in this editorial. He went so far as to proclaim that "there is no occupation in the world that so belittles and degrades men and women as that which is based upon, or which engages, the different fine arts" (433).

one of the nation's rising culturists, his young chief assistant, Richard Watson Gilder. Gilder had written a paean to culture in the magazine's previous issue. Attempting to increase Americans' respect for the graphic arts, Gilder had called for a new school of critics dedicated to painting, music, architecture, and sculpture. He sounded like a reincarnation of W.A. Jones and the democratic critics of the 1840s. Calling for the development of new canons of American taste, Gilder suggested that "there is no such thing as a difference in taste. The difference is in the presence of taste, or the absence of it."<sup>2</sup> Holland could not hear Gilder's democratic assertion that "there is such a thing as growth in taste." Such talk was unbearable to the thin-skinned evangelist Holland. He hated critics. They had long savaged his works, even though immense numbers of Americans bought them. Moreover, Holland adamantly disputed the culturists' assertion that aesthetic criticism could lead to a higher life. Culture was only important, he proclaimed, to the extent that it furthered the cause of Christian evangelism. His frustration at confronting a culturist on his own staff was not doubt intensified by the fact that the other young editor on the staff, Robert Underwood Johnson, was also a committed culturist. The generations, in the *Scribner's* offices were at loggerheads.

The conflict between Holland and his too young assistant editors was more than personal. It reflected a larger transformation of American culture. The nature of that culture was changing along with the development of new class formations. Holland, Gilder, and Johnson were all rural immigrants to New York City. In their respective youths, they endured destitution, downward mobility, and the "island community" of the Western frontier.

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<sup>2</sup>Gilder, "The Old Cabinet," *Scribner's* 16 (June 1878): 289-90. Holland's published response to Gilder strained their usually warm relationship. Gilder complained to his journal in unusually pointed language about a conversation with Holland in which he tried to defend his belief in culture. When Holland belittled Gilder's interest in the arts merely because he was "in the movement," Gilder was frustrated because he felt it would be useless to tell Holland that he "was interested in the literary side [for deeper reasons] and that most of our good writers had come to the magazine through me, as well as nearly all the artists. Nor did I care to boast that I had suggested 'Home and Society' [a monthly column] and a hundred other practical or public things." Holland apparently derided Gilder's literary interests from time to time by claiming, as Gilder put it, "that the public did not care for these questions—and the this was a magazine chiefly for women" (Gilder, *The Letters of Richard Watson Gilder*, ed. Rosamund Gilder [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916], 85).

Pulled to the city by its increasing concentration of capital and cultural production, they discovered a fluid class structure. Identifying with neither the city's economic elites nor its impoverished orders, they sought to formulate a common national culture built on the principles of sentimentality. But this task was made difficult by a series of problems. First, Holland tangled with his assistants over the very nature of the world. Second, the concentration of capital had not created in New York a corresponding cultural infrastructure that could be adapted to the development of a national culture. Third, the *Scribner's* editors could find no solace in a firm class identity. An "elusive" middle class was only beginning to cohere as a class.<sup>3</sup> Unawares, Holland, Gilder, and Johnson were arguing over the nature of that emerging class.

This chapter will examine the lives of Holland, Gilder, and Johnson as a way to understand the cultural and class formations *Scribner's* and its successor, the *Century*, came to represent. These biographies are not meant to capture the editors' lives in full.<sup>4</sup> The aim here is to trace some of the lines of transformation of sentimental culture during the course of their lives. In the case of the two younger editors, the biographies focus on their early lives to show the influences that led up to their careers with *Scribner's*.

These three editors make ideal cultural informants because they were in the business of producing and transforming culture. Each spent long hours trying to explain American culture to themselves, to their colleagues at other magazines, to their contributors, and to their readers. They were, in a sense, managers of culture, middlemen between life as lived and life as Americans aspired to live it. These managers came to wield an immense (but by no means despotic) power in the production of American culture. But in a world of rampant

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<sup>3</sup>See Blumin's assertion that "a middle class was *not* fully formed before the [Civil] war" (*The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989], ch. 1, esp. p. 5, 13).

<sup>4</sup>None of them has received a competent biography. Only Holland has received book-length attention in two works, and these are quite old: Mrs. H.M. Plunkett, *Josiah Gilbert Holland* (New York, 1894); and Harry Houston Peckham, *Josiah Gilbert Holland in Relation to His Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940). The first was a noncritical biography by a family friend, the other focused on Holland's literary oeuvre.



bankruptcy, spectacular failures, and boom-and-bust economic cycles, such positions of power did not necessarily translate into a personal sense of stability. Moreover, because they were thoroughly imbued with the culture of sentimentality, they knew well one of its psychological ironies: The pitier needs someone to pity, and in a downturn economy those who once offered sympathy might become its recipients.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the stories that men such as Holland, Gilder, and Johnson told in memoirs and letters about their own lives are often at odds with their social status. The considerable mobility of their lives made them, sometimes, poor judges of their own lives. They numbered themselves with the great democratic swath of “the people” long after they had moved into the seat of culture. This is not to say that they were deluded. Rather, it is to begin to understand the sorts of stories they wanted to include in their magazine—sentimental stories they hoped would stimulate individual Americans to sympathize with one another, stories they hoped would create a universal American community. These stories made so much sense to them because these were sorts of story they had heard in childhood and in times of youthful crisis.

*Scribner's* had largely shaped the American magazine's role as the medium of national culture in the early 1870s. But the magazine's own vision of culture was blurred by the generational conflict among the editors. The great question concerned the ultimate source of sentimental culture's moral authority. Josiah Holland long wrestled with the devils in the desert of his soul before discovering God as the nurturing protector of hearth and home.

### **Josiah Gilbert Holland: The Accidental Culturist**

Josiah Holland was a desperate man in the summer of 1847. He was far from his new bride, uncomfortable as a Yankee teaching at a business school in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>6</sup> The Richmond job was the only paying work he could find, without resorting to the menial,

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<sup>5</sup>This irony produced a particular kind of character that revealed in the “exquisite” sensation of pain and other forms of victimhood. See, e.g., Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* 100 (April 1995): 315.

<sup>6</sup>Peckham could not find a record of the school's existence (*Holland*, 23).

factory labor he had worked at since childhood. Holland had failed numerous times, just like his father, at trying to find a way out of poverty. Short stints as a daguerreotypist, teacher of penmanship, grade school teacher, and medical doctor had all ended before they had hardly begun. The great mansions of the Virginia capital mocked Holland's poverty. His distance from home increased his guilt at having turned his back on his parents' God and his mother's long-held desire that he become a minister. Despair almost strangled what little resolve he had left. Far from his New England home, isolated and haggard, Holland resolved his crisis in the classic Puritan fashion: He experienced conversion. "I wept and prayed," he later recalled, "day and night, in the school and in the fields; prayed as I never prayed before—prayer which God heard, for then his peace came upon me."<sup>7</sup> This "subtle, silent, sweet revolution" brought on "a fructifying flood from the great source of light."<sup>8</sup> Immediately on his return to home and wife in Springfield at the end of the school year, Holland instituted daily family prayers, a practice he would continue the rest of his life.

Holland's struggle to master himself was complicated by the poverty of his childhood. Born in 1819 in rural western Massachusetts, Holland grew up in poverty. His father, Harrison, had once owned a carding machine for weaving homespun, but by the 1820s this was no match for the new factory production of cloth.<sup>9</sup> By 1834, Harrison could find no better work than farm labor. Josiah's three sisters braided palm-leaf hats for income, while he and his two brothers labored in textile factories until their hands were blistered and raw from dye chemicals.<sup>10</sup> Ever in search of work, Harrison often moved his family around western Massachusetts: six different cities, and at least nine different houses in fifteen years.<sup>11</sup> The family owned no books and subscribed to no newspapers. The few books he read in

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<sup>7</sup>Cited in Henry De Vries, in *A Memorial of Josiah Gilbert Holland* ("Printed, Not Published"), 45. Underhill corroborated this event, see Plunkett, *Holland*, 106ff.

<sup>8</sup>Quotations are from Holland's description of the conversion experience in his novel *Arthur Bonnicastle*, cited in Plunkett, *Holland*, 125.

<sup>9</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 3-4. On Holland's youth, see Theodora Van Wagenen Ward, "Introduction," *Emily Dickinson's Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951); Plunkett, *Holland*; Eggleston, "Josiah Gilbert Holland," *Century* 23 (December 1881), 161-67.

<sup>10</sup>Eggleston, "Holland," 162.

<sup>11</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 5.

youth were the standard works of divinity by the likes of Emmons, Griffin, Hopkins, Edwards.<sup>12</sup> The three Holland boys attended school where and when they could. Josiah parted from his family at the age of seventeen after their last move to Northampton in 1836.

The move to Northampton marked the beginning of a decade-long “season of darkness.”<sup>13</sup> The country as a whole was inundated by the depression of the late 1830s. His parents being unable to support him, Josiah boarded with the family of Judge Dewey, working off his expenses by doing chores.<sup>14</sup> His three sisters died one after the other in the course of a year.<sup>15</sup> Illness, fatigue, and perhaps psychological depression cut short his brief attempt at what then passed for a high school education. He tried and gave up a string of jobs, including a brief career as a medical doctor.<sup>16</sup> Nothing suited him. Holland had inherited his father’s tendency to drift.

By the mid 1840s, Holland seemed to have only two possible futures open to him: either as a teacher or a magazinist.<sup>17</sup> He lost his medical practice largely because he spent his time writing poems which he submitted to the *Knickerbocker* and other magazines.<sup>18</sup> (It is unclear when he first developed his interest in poetry, but most likely it was during his years living with Judge Dewey’s family.) He lost most of his capital in attempting to publish a weekly family newspaper, determined, as the prospectus proclaimed, “to elevate the standard of literary taste.” All he elevated was his personal debt: The paper failed within a few months.<sup>19</sup> Even his marriage to the practical and ambitious Elizabeth Chapin in 1845 did not seem to spur him to fight for success.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 11.

<sup>13</sup>This is what Eggleston called it (“Holland,” 163); see also, Noah Porter, in *Memorial*, 86.

<sup>14</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 13.

<sup>15</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Eggleston, “Holland,” 162.

<sup>17</sup>Porter, *Memorial*, 82-82.

<sup>18</sup>Eggleston, “Holland,” 163; Plunkett, *Holland*, 2

<sup>19</sup>Eggleston, “Holland,” 163; Plunkett, *Holland*, 22.

<sup>20</sup>On Chapin see, Josephine Pollitt, *Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry* (New York: Harper, 1930), 83; Ward, *Holland-Dickinson Letters*, 15.

New England offered no prospects, but neither did the South. The Richmond school job came to nothing, as did another similar position in Vicksburg, Mississippi. But Holland's prospects miraculously turned around. During his March, 1850 visit home to Springfield, Massachusetts, Holland accepted Samuel Bowles's unexpected offer to become assistant editor of the Springfield *Republican* newspaper.<sup>21</sup>

Professional writing gave Holland the sense of place and security he had craved for so long. And it gave him much more. Within a decade, he became one of America's most popular figures and one of the country's wealthiest literary men. His fortunes quickly rose at the newspaper. His first year's salary at the *Republican* was \$480 (about \$10,560 in year 2000 dollars), roughly equivalent to the average workers annual wages.<sup>22</sup> Bowles increased this the second year to \$700 (\$15,400; still in the range of a skilled worker's annual wages). His value to the paper (Holland and Bowles were the only two men on the staff) increased precipitously. Bowles had envisioned Holland's mission to be something that had never quite been done in an American newspaper: discuss in a secular paper the social, moral, religious, and philanthropic issues vital to the people at large.<sup>23</sup> Holland was stunningly adept at this mission. Not only did he report on "cattle-shows, public meetings, primary caucuses, [and] runaway horses," he wrote reviews of books and art and editorials about morals and manners. Contemporaries admired his ability to write on sentimental themes in a robust style and to speak *to* plain people, not *at* them.<sup>24</sup> Bowles now offered Holland a quarter interest in

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<sup>21</sup>The circumstances of Samuel Bowles's hiring of Holland are unclear (Eggleston, "Holland," 163-64; George Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles* [New York: Century, 1885], 58).

<sup>22</sup>Lee Soltow reports that the average worker's annual income in 1850 was \$500 (*Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975], 24). Saxton notes that journeyman printers made about the same amount (*The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* [New York: Verso, 1990], 95). According to *Historical Statistics of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present*, the average annual income of all nonfarm employees in 1860 was \$363. For wages and salaries for a slightly later period, see Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 272-75. For the formula for calculating dollar equivalencies, see John McCusker, *How Much Is That in Real Money?* 2d ed. (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 2001), 31, and appendix A-1. Hereafter amounts will be given in the text without reference.

<sup>23</sup>Eggleston, "Holland," 164.

<sup>24</sup>Holland, *Timothy Titcomb's Letters to Young People, Single and Married* (New York: Scribner, 1858): vii. He later told Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "I would crawl on my hands and knees till I sank, if I could write a book that the plain people would read and love" (cited in Plunkett, *Holland*, 43). John described Holland's editorial

the paper for \$3500 (\$77,000). Holland borrowed some of the amount and gave Bowles notes for the rest.<sup>25</sup> The sense of proprietorship seems to have given Holland the drive and focus he had earlier lacked. He wrote a series of articles on the history of western Massachusetts (which earned him a membership in the prestigious Massachusetts Historical Society<sup>26</sup>) and a serial novel. His editorials, published under the nom de plume “Timothy Titcomb,” proved to be tremendously popular. Holland now felt the newspaper to be too small for his talents. He resigned his daily editorial duties and he set out to find a publisher for his Titcomb essays.<sup>27</sup> His proposal met rejection after rejection.

But Charles Scribner saw something in Holland’s work that other publishers missed. When Scribner published *Timothy Titcomb’s Letters to Young People, Single and Married* in the wake of the economic crisis of 1857, the simple homilies on everyday topics (such as the importance of manners, how to dress, and social evils to avoid) seemed to be just what readers wanted to hear: They eagerly bought *Titcomb*, making it the best selling book of 1858.<sup>28</sup> Holland then took Titcomb on the lecture circuit where he was a sensation. Titcomb provided a social road map for navigating a world made strange by industrialism, geographic dislocation, and urbanization. The letters spoke to all those who, like the young Holland bewildered by what path in life to take, sought to better themselves in the face of rapidly changing circumstances.

The success of *Titcomb* transformed Josiah Holland into the nation’s leading lay preacher of the “Religion of the American Civilization.”<sup>29</sup> Speaking from his secular pulpits

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style: “There was no hint of charm or humor in his direct prose style, unadorned by illustration or metaphor, and his tone at times became downright truculent as he warmed to his preaching. He was one-sided in argument, but he was cogent and effective, for he always spoke out of conviction” (26).

<sup>25</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 28; Eggleston, “Holland,” 164.

<sup>26</sup>Eggleston, “Holland,” 165; Plunkett, *Holland*, 32-33, Merriam, *Bowles*, 100; Peckham, *Holland*, 43.

<sup>27</sup>Holland retained his quarter interest in the *Republican*. When he sold it in 1867, the price was \$50,000—a fourteen-fold increase over his initial investment of \$3500 (Eggleston, “Holland,” 164; Plunkett, *Holland*, 74).

<sup>28</sup>Holland’s book-length poem *Bitter-Sweet* was the second best-selling book of the year. Third place went to that Brahmin of Boston Brahmins, Oliver Wendell Holmes for his *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. See Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 320.

<sup>29</sup>Robert J. Scholnick, “J.G. Holland and the ‘Religion of Civilization’ in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *American Studies* 27 (Spring 1986): 57, 78n3. Scholnick points out that Samuel Harris coined this term in 1874

(books, lectures, and then *Scribner's* magazine), Holland sought to make Americans aware of their world historical mission to glorify the Protestant God and to realize His kingdom here on earth. More popular than even Henry Ward Beecher, to whom he dedicated *Titcomb*, Holland spoke in Christian terms but never with reference to Biblical texts.<sup>30</sup> His theology extended little beyond the existence of God and the divinity of Christ. Holland's was hardly a tradition-bound Protestantism. It was very much in flux, discarding old practices, dogma, and institutions to grapple with new conditions.

Holland was a vocal advocate for a usable Christianity based on a "simple Gospel."<sup>31</sup> He had little patience for either the tortured arguments of theological metaphysics or the retention of moral strictures for their own sake. He ridiculed the fundamentalist belief in Biblical inerrancy as "irrational," for it made the Scriptures "half-talisman, half-fetich."<sup>32</sup> For Holland old forms, habits, ideas, and creeds were "stumbling-blocks in the way of the world."<sup>33</sup> The "worn out creed," Holland growled, "ought to go into the rag-bag...."<sup>34</sup> Creeds, he argued, inevitably accreted into confining, conservative institutions. They robbed the individual of the independence that flowed from one's personal relationship with God. When members of his church in Springfield accused him of heresy for such ideas in the mid 1850s, Holland responded by leading like-thinking members out to form a new nondenominational church.<sup>35</sup>

Holland's Christianity was thoroughly sentimental. He condemned the old, dour, Puritan obsession with sin. He favored instead the emerging aesthetic moral of

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to characterize the belief that God had chosen America as the site where his kingdom would be realized. See Harris, *The Kingdom of Christ on Earth* (Andover, Mass., 1874), 175; and also Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America*, 2d ed. (New York, 1984), 82-100.

<sup>30</sup>Scholnick, "J.G. Holland and the 'Religion of Civilization,'" 57, 62.

<sup>31</sup>"A New Departure," *Scribner's* 12 (June 1876): 269.

<sup>32</sup>"A Time to Speak," *Scribner's* 8 (October 1874): 746. See also Peckham, *Holland*, 92; Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder*, *Scribner's Monthly and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 30-31. Holland repeated the "fetich" charge in "Speaking Disrespectfully of the Equator," *Scribner's* 10 (May 1875): 109.

<sup>33</sup>"Speaking Disrespectfully of the Equator," 109; also cited in Plunkett, *Holland*, 145.

<sup>34</sup>"Speaking Disrespectfully of the Equator," 109; also cited in Plunkett, *Holland*, 145.

<sup>35</sup>See Eggleston, "Holland," 165; Plunkett, *Holland*, 142; Peckham, *Holland*, 49; Samuel Chew, *Fruit Among the Leaves* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), 68.

sentimentality: “That is an irrational reverence which always looks up and never around—which is always in awe and never in delight—which exceedingly fears and quakes, and has no tender raptures—which places God at a distance and fails to recognize Him in the thousand forms that appeal to our sense of Beauty, and the thousand small voices that speak of His immediate presence.”<sup>36</sup> God was “the tender, loving, sympathetic, Fatherly Being, whom the Master [Jesus] has revealed to us.”<sup>37</sup> Holland’s approach to religion was emotional and intuitive. “Formulas mean nothing to me,” he once remarked, “I receive Christianity through my feelings.”<sup>38</sup> His sentimental formula: “Orthodoxy saves nobody; Christian love and Christian character save anybody.”<sup>39</sup> There was little talk of salvation in his works.<sup>40</sup> The point of religion, for Holland, was to enable individuals to live well in this world.

The family, according to Holland, was the school where Americans learned the social moral of sentimental love. It was there, he proclaimed, that men learned the essence of loving manliness. As a eulogist put this sentimental formula, “How tenderly did he [Holland] love his family—and he was manly enough to show it.”<sup>41</sup> Parents, he admonished, ought to teach love in the home. Holland rebuked stern parents who did not raise nurture children through prayer *and* play. Avoid “fresh and fashionable clothes” for children, he urged. “What childhood needs [instead] is perfect freedom among the things of nature—freedom to romp, to make mud-pies, to leap fences, to row, to fish, to clime trees....”<sup>42</sup> Holland’s own home was infused with a mix of piety and gaiety. His youngest daughter, for example, perpetually slid down the banister to attend morning prayers. Prayer in the Holland parlor

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<sup>36</sup>“Speaking Disrespectfully of the Equator,” 110; also cited in Plunkett, *Holland*, 145. This statement contains virtually the full panoply of sentimental Christianity: warm emotions, a worldly orientation, aesthetic pleasure, and an God immanent in all things rather than storming in a supernatural ether.

<sup>37</sup>“Speaking Disrespectfully of the Equator,” 110.

<sup>38</sup>Eggleston, “Holland,” 165. See also, Buckingham, in *Memorial*, 12.

<sup>39</sup>“Professor Swing,” *Scribner's* 8 (August 1874): 495.

<sup>40</sup>John, *Best Years*, 26. Salvation for Holland, when he did discuss it, was concerned less with saving one’s immortal soul than with saving oneself from one’s own selfishness. See, e.g., “Hepworth and Heterodoxy,” *Scribner's* 3 (April 1872): 745; “Dandyism,” *Scribner's* 20 (September 1880): 788-89; and “Character, and What Comes of It,” *Scribner's* 21 (January 1881): 469-70.

<sup>41</sup>De Vries, in *Memorial*, 46.

<sup>42</sup>Holland, “Summer Play,” *Scribner's* 6 (July 1873): 367.

was balanced by talk of secular books, singing of popular songs, and the three children's unrestricted play and broad education.<sup>43</sup> Emily Dickinson, a close friend of the family's, found visits to the Holland household to be stimulating, for she could talk freely, join in the laughter and joking, and even enjoy the family prayers to a "friendly God."<sup>44</sup>

Holland had little interest in thinking of the world outside the family. In the midst of the Civil War, he was preoccupied with chastising neighborhood squabblers, recluses, and flits.<sup>45</sup> He celebrated the 1876 centennial not as a great achievement of American government, but as a moment to realize that "[o]ur nation has become a family, our world a neighborhood, through the ministry of steam and lightning."<sup>46</sup> Holland could not see the nation as a reality in its own right. To conceive it, he had to reduce it to the intimate terms of the family.

Holland's incapacity to imagine the nation as a real community made politics anathema to him. Politicians were "low-toned men" and "notorious demagogues."<sup>47</sup> They could not solve the depression of the 1870s: "Let us leave nothing," he intoned, "to the political doctors."<sup>48</sup> Holland took few political stands, and he gave up the one position in government he attained after only a few months.<sup>49</sup> He was present at one early meeting of the

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<sup>43</sup>Plunkett, *Holland*, 38; Ward, *Holland-Dickinson Letters*, 15, 19.

<sup>44</sup>The phrase is from Dickinson's biographer, Josephine Pollitt, *Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry* (New York: Harper's, 1930), 83. See also, Ward, *Holland-Dickinson Letters*.

<sup>45</sup>See his 1863 collection of essays *Letters to the Joneses* (New York: Scribner's, 1863).

<sup>46</sup>"The Centennial," *Scribner's* 12 (July 1876): 429. There is some possibility that this editorial was written, or at least amended, by another *Scribner's* editor. Although the piece closes with a call for moral regeneration, the last paragraph does not mention God or Christ. It sounds suspiciously like the cultural program Gilder and Johnson would institute after Holland's death, hoping that the succeeding century would be "as notable [as the preceding one] for its political integrity, and its moral beauty, as the last has been for its progress in a thousand newly discovered channels of material good" (429).

<sup>47</sup>"The Remedy Is with the People," *Scribner's* 12 (May 1876): 120; and Holland, "The Terrible Congress," *Scribner's* 16 (September 1878): 741.

<sup>48</sup>"The Slow Times," *Scribner's* 10 (October 1875): 781.

<sup>49</sup>A reorganization of the New York City Board of Public Instruction did away with his position as chairman of that board, a position he held for the three months from January to April 1873. He made no attempt to remain on the reorganized board (Peckham, *Holland*, 192-92). George Merriam recalled that, during Holland's days with the *Springfield Republican*, Holland showed no interest whatsoever in politics (Merriam, *Bowles*, vol. 1, 61-64).



Mugwump political movement, but gave no further evidence of involvement in organized politics.<sup>50</sup>

Social and political problems could only be solved, according to Holland's sentimental lights, through individual reform. Jesus Christ, Holland argued, was history's only genuinely radical reformer. Jesus ignored social and political institutions. He ministered solely to the individual. Jesus' kingdom was "with men, and [was] not in any way complicated with civil organization and administration."<sup>51</sup> The reform that would *truly* allay the evils of this world, Holland proclaimed, was carried on by evangelists such as Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey. "To them," Holland approvingly wrote, "politics are nothing, denominations are nothing, organizations are nothing, or entirely subordinate. Individual reform is everything."<sup>52</sup> Only when masses of individuals, acting *as* free individuals, realized their heartfelt desire to live a better life for self and family would the cares of this world pass away. "No nation," he declared from the lecture platform during the Civil War, "can be destroyed while it possesses a good home-life."<sup>53</sup>

Holland's narrow social vision in great measure accounts for his extremely ambivalent attitude toward culture. On the one hand, he blasted culture as the devil's sword. Culture, if "pursued for its own sake," he fumed in 1872, "makes a god of self...."<sup>54</sup> This form of culture was locked in a death embrace with Christianity: "Christianity must kill it," he continued, "or Christianity must die."<sup>55</sup> But art and culture were also the vital media through which Christianity could rejuvenate itself and shout its good news far and wide: "Culture thoroughly Christianized—culture pursued for ends of benevolence—strengthens faith."<sup>56</sup> And art was "not a master, but a minister."<sup>57</sup> It was precisely in these uneasy terms,

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<sup>50</sup>Merriam, *Bowles*, vol. 1, 61-64, vol. 2, 254.

<sup>51</sup>"Temporal and Spiritual," *Scribner's* 9 (February 1875): 502.

<sup>52</sup>"Philosophy of Reform," *Scribner's* 11 (February 1876): 581.

<sup>53</sup>"The National Heart," in *Plain Talks on Familiar Subjects: A Series of Popular Lectures* (New York: Scribner, 1866), 204.

<sup>54</sup>"The Faults of Culture," *Scribner's* 3 (January 1872): 370.

<sup>55</sup>"The Faults of Culture," 371.

<sup>56</sup>"The Faults of Culture," 370.

of art and culture, of illustration and literature, that Holland envisioned the evangelical project of *Scribner's Monthly*.

Holland's originally viewed his move to New York City to edit *Scribner's* as an errand into the urban wilderness. Conceiving the city as an evil place—as so many other rural folk did—he saw himself as an evangel come to revive the fallen metropolis. But virtually unaware, Holland had surrendered to culture. Ironically, the more Holland beat his Christian drum, and the more sales his own books achieved, and the more subscriptions his magazine won—the further he drifted from the older ecclesiastical media of pulpit and holy writ. To be sure, he never lost the sense that his was a religious mission. He never tired of applauding an author with the adjective “Christian”: one was a “Christian genius,” another “a Christian leader of art,” and yet another’s “heart was the dwelling-place of an all-controlling, all subordinating Christian purpose.”<sup>58</sup> Holland's increasing faith in such secular forms of expression as the novel and the magazine implicitly shunned the pulpit. In seeking to forge a balance between cultural forms and Christian faith, Holland unintentionally loosed the institutional authority of that faith to a great degree. After *Scribner's*, no magazine that did not make evangelism its express point of being would attempt to infuse its editorial policy with a blatant Christianity.

Holland seemed ideally suited to the task of founding a popular magazine in 1870. He was an antidogmatic Christian. In the very first number of his new magazine, he published a frontal assault on the orthodox: Reverend W.C. Wilkinson's “The Bondage of the Pulpit.”<sup>59</sup> He attacked the orthodox because he sensed that most immigrants to the city had little interest in sectarian squabbles. He took the Emersonian ideal of self-culture as the very essence of the plain American. All Americans, he assumed, wanted to better themselves, to

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<sup>57</sup>“A Heresy of Art,” *Scribner's* 3 (April 1872): 744. Holland attacked art in this editorial much as he attacked culture in the earlier one, seething that art that had “its end in itself or in its author is a monstrosity” (145). He did not relent in this attitude, maintaining it until the end of his *Scribner's* tenure. See, e.g., “Character, and What Comes of It,” 469-70.

<sup>58</sup>Cited in Peckham, *Holland*, 76-77.

<sup>59</sup>*Scribner's* 1 (November 1870): 69-78.

educate themselves, to bring their lives in line with the highest of ideals. The duty of literature and periodicals was to offer frank yet heartening evaluations of the world so that Americans might see clearly and act independently on their innate morals. Individual self-reform, according to Holland, was the only way to save the nation from its political demons. Self-reform began in the home. It was there, Holland fervently hoped, that the love and nurture represented in magazines like *Scribner's* would lay the groundwork for a Christian millennium.

Holland founded *Scribner's* as a guide for men and women lost in the mazes of an industrializing, urbanizing society. It was to be a map to a new home and individual reform. Holland spoke to all those individuals who left their island communities to cross into the broad American culture. He did so not because he comprehended the nation's breadth, but precisely because he could conceive of it only in individual terms, or at most in terms of intimate and loving family relations in a small community. He was believable to multitudes of Americans because he himself had toiled so long, lost in the woods of poverty and despair.

Josiah Holland was a key transitional figure in the evolution of the magazine. His evangelicalism, ironically, gave him the means for achieving the antebellum magazinists' project of creating a national culture. He spoke as an evangel of a broad, almost secular Christianity, rather than from a politically or religiously or regionally sectarian bias. But Holland's social vision ultimately rested on a fatal contradiction. For him, individual freedom was the glue that held the nation together. This contradiction rendered Holland incapable of envisioning the social webs suggested by the growing national audience of his own magazine.

### **The Balm of Culture: The Early Lives of Gilder and Johnson**

Josiah Holland died only a few weeks after turning over his magazine to his assistant editors in 1881. His last feelings about *Scribner's* must have been ambivalent. On the one hand, Gilder and Johnson were unrepentant culturists. They could give Holland no assurances that

they would retain even vestiges his militant evangelism. The best Holland could hope for was the continuing influence on the magazine of his co-evangelical, Roswell Smith. On the other hand, Holland had a genuine affection for Gilder and Johnson. He wrote Gilder, for instance, “I have great faith in you. I trust you as I would trust no other man of my acquaintance.”<sup>60</sup> The two younger men warmly returned Holland’s affections. They prominently placed his portrait in the magazine’s offices, and annually decked it with sprigs of bittersweet to commemorate his death.<sup>61</sup>

But Gilder and Johnson took the magazine (rechristened in 1881 as the *Century*) in directions that Holland could hardly have countenanced. Most significantly perhaps they espoused faith in Darwin’s theory of evolution. Before Holland was a year dead, a *Century* editorial lauded the theory in terms that closely echoed Darwin’s American champion, Asa Gray.<sup>62</sup> A few months later they published a long, loving eulogy of Darwin by a leading evolutionist, Alfred Wallace.<sup>63</sup> The new editors signaled their admiration for Darwin by setting his portrait as the frontispiece, a place reserved for only the most revered cultural figures.

Holland made *Scribner’s* popular, but Gilder and Johnson made it even more popular by turning the *Century* into an avatar of American *culture* shorn of Holland’s truculent Christianity. They did so neither out of spite for Holland nor due to any antagonism to Christianity. Rather, they came of age in a different culture that had already begun to question the need for a transcendent, personal God. Unlike Holland, Gilder and Johnson grew up enmeshed in the imaginary social world of print in antebellum newspapers and magazines. While Holland viewed his move to New York as a chance to confront urban

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<sup>60</sup>Holland to Gilder, 24 December 1870, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>61</sup>“Bittersweet” was the title of Holland’s best-selling narrative poem.

<sup>62</sup>“Darwin’s Attitude Toward Religion,” *Century* 2 (September 1882): 792. Tomsich misrepresents the editorial as characterizing God as capricious, when in fact, it refers to a “coherent and logical” God (*A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press], 172). Moreover, Tomsich claims the editorial was written by Gilder, which is almost certainly not correct. Gilder wrote few of these editorials, relying instead on experts in various fields to contribute opinions. The editorial does not appear in the list of Gilder manuscripts in his collection of papers at the New York Public Library.

<sup>63</sup>“The Debt of Science to Darwin,” *Century* 25 (January 1883): 430-32.

wickedness, Gilder and Johnson experienced their relocations to New York as cultural pilgrimage. They immersed themselves in the arts and sought to transform that the city's culture into a national spirit in the pages of their magazine. Their story is all the more significant as they came from virtually opposite ends of Eastern "civilization": the one from a small town in New Jersey and the other from distant Indiana.

*Richard Watson Gilder: Economic Decline, Cultural Salvation*

The most momentous personal event of Richard Watson Gilder's youth was the death of his minister father. His response says much about his faith in culture. The seventeen-year-old did not grieve through prayer. On his father's final breath, Gilder fled the family home to find solace in nature. There he experienced, as he later recalled it in a poem, a "mysterious mingling of the soul/ with the still beauty of the infinite whole." Beauty overpowered grief, and his "heart was melted, and grew strangely wise."<sup>64</sup> Gilder's grief was perhaps compounded by his father's long, frustrating decline down the scales of fortune and status.

Gilder was born in his mother's family home in Bordentown, New Jersey, on the banks of the Delaware River on 8 February 1844. This home had special significance to Gilder's mother, Jane Nutt. It had long served as a bulwark against destitution since her father had died when she was a mere child, leaving her to grow up in the precarious economic circumstances of a female-headed household which included her sister and mother.<sup>65</sup> Later the house would gain in significance, when near the end of the life of Gilder's father, William Henry Gilder, it was the last remaining piece of property the family commanded. Though well educated for the ministry, William Gilder's adulthood was a litany of economic decline that ran counter to the experience of most antebellum American men.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>"Solace of the Skies," *The Poems of Richard Watson Gilder* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1908), 454-55.

<sup>65</sup>Gilder states that this house was given to his grandmother in 1806, but does not specify from whom or for what reason. It is possible it was a wedding gift from his grandmother's parents (Gilder, *Letters*, 11).

<sup>66</sup>Declension is the understated theme of the lightly fictionalized autobiographical memoir of Richard Watson Gilder's sister, Jeannette. *The Autobiography of a Tomboy* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1901) is by far the

William Henry Gilder, according to his oldest daughter, was “no business man.”<sup>67</sup> His early life had seemed full of possibility. He was ordained a Methodist minister in the early 1830s, at a time when that denomination was just beginning unprecedented growth.<sup>68</sup> Yet, Reverend Gilder soon threw over the ministry for two of the era’s least predictable occupations: magazine publishing and education. He founded two periodicals in Philadelphia (in the shadow of *Graham’s* and *Godey’s*) in the early 1840s. Neither survived for more than a year.<sup>69</sup> He then turned to education, founding one girls’ boarding school in Bordentown in 1842 and then another in Flushing, New York, in 1848. Both struggled before collapsing under Reverend Gilder’s lack of business acumen.<sup>70</sup> In the wake of the Panic of 1857, Gilder was forced to sell the Flushing school, auction off its furnishings, and rethink his future.<sup>71</sup> He retreated to the ministry, but was now too old to gain a plum pulpit.<sup>72</sup> The family moved to two temporary positions in Connecticut. Reverend Gilder then attempted a third school, in Yonkers, New York, in 1860.<sup>73</sup> But this bid, already veering toward failure in its first year, was cut short by the Civil War.<sup>74</sup> Facing a string of unsuccessful enterprises, William Gilder

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richest source of information regarding Richard’s early life. It is corroborated by other sources, particularly a comparison of the 1850 and 1860 Census reports of the Gilder family.

<sup>67</sup>*Tomboy*, 159.

<sup>68</sup>The Methodist denomination quintupled its number of churches between 1830 and 1860. Its membership grew from 65,000 in 1800 to 1 million by 1850 (Edwin Gausted, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* [New York: Harper & Row, 1976], 79-80; Bret E. Carroll, *The Routledge Historical Atlas of Religion in America* [New York: Routledge, 2000], 64).

<sup>69</sup>The *Philadelphia* [Monthly] *Repository* was most likely an eclectic, with items taken from other periodicals. Albert H. Smyth (*The Philadelphia Magazines and Their Contributors, 1741-1850* [Philadelphia: Robert M. Lindsay, 1892; reprint: Detroit: Gale, 1970], 229-30) reports that Gilder began the magazine and edited it for about a year. William Henry Gilder’s biography in the *History of the (Mozart) Regiment* claims that Gilder discontinued the magazine. But Smyth suggests that the magazine continued for more than a decade, though Gilder’s participation was ended by 1841. While Smyth mentioned Gilder’s quarterly (*The Literary Register and Record of New Books*), neither the *Repository* nor the quarterly are mentioned in Orville Roorbach’s *Catalogue of American Publications, 1820-1852* (New York: Peter Smith, 1939); nor are they mentioned in Mott’s *A History of American Magazines*. There seem to be no extant files of either publication.

<sup>70</sup>For a time the school in Flushing appeared to be a success. In 1850, the school had thirty-three female students between the ages of eleven and nineteen. He was able to attract students by pointing to his authorship of a book on rhetoric that had received a review, albeit brief, in *Harper’s* magazine (“Literary Notices,” *Harper’s* 5 [September 1852]: 566).

<sup>71</sup>J. Gilder describes the auction in *Tomboy*, 159-63.

<sup>72</sup>The difficulty of his return is highlighted by the fact that, even as the Methodist church was rapidly expanding, William Henry Gilder could succeed in finding only temporary positions.

<sup>73</sup>J. Gilder, *Tomboy*, 186-87.

<sup>74</sup>*Tomboy*, 187.

joined the 40th New York Regiment as its chaplain on 14 July 1861.<sup>75</sup> Leaving his family at the Nutt home in Bordentown, he rode off to a war he would not survive. He died of small pox in April 1864 while ministering to afflicted soldiers at Brandy Station, Virginia.<sup>76</sup>

“We were poor,” Richard Watson Gilder’s sister recalled of their youth in the 1850s.<sup>77</sup> “[M]oney,” she explained, “was an unknown quantity in our house.”<sup>78</sup> Yet, simultaneously, the Gilders were somewhat wealthy. The Flushing school had a paper value of \$25,000 (\$550,000) in 1850.<sup>79</sup> At a time when almost 60% of adult men owned no real estate, this property might have placed Reverend Gilder among the top 2% of American property owners.<sup>80</sup> Yet, most likely, the \$25,000 was deeply entangled in debt. By 1860, Gilder’s wealth in real estate had dropped to \$2000 (\$42,000; most likely the value of the Nutt home in Bordentown). This amount placed the Gilders, in terms of real estate value, in the middle range of real estate owners, at about the level of a middling farmer.<sup>81</sup> Reverend Gilder’s personal property, too—valued at only \$200 (\$4,200)—put him in the company of most American men.<sup>82</sup> Reverend Gilder’s annual income as a minister in 1859 was only \$500 (\$10,500)—equivalent to the average skilled worker’s annual wages, and not far above Henry Mills Alden’s \$7.00 (\$147) per week salary as a school teacher.<sup>83</sup> He was humiliated by the

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<sup>75</sup>R.W. Gilder’s older brother, William Henry Gilder [Jr.], also served in the Mozart regiment as well as the regular army throughout the Civil War (Fred C. Floyd, *History of the Fortieth [Mozart] Regiment, New York Volunteers....* [Boston: F.H. Gilson, 1909], 340). His other older brother, John Francis Gilder, was living at Philadelphia where he taught music (U.S. Census, Connecticut, New Haven City reel, p. 844).

<sup>76</sup>The best source for information regarding William Henry Gilder [Sr.] is Floyd, *History of the Fortieth (Mozart) Regiment*, 54.

<sup>77</sup>*Tomboy*, 172. Later she claims that “money was an unknown quantity in our house” (220).

<sup>78</sup>*Tomboy*, 220.

<sup>79</sup>United States Census for 1850.

<sup>80</sup>The arithmetic mean for all owners of real estate in 1860 was \$1,492 (\$31,500). The mean for farmers was \$2,035 (\$43,000). Historical Statistics, 165, series D, column 728 (\$1.62 in daily wages multiplied by a six-day work week, or \$534); Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 22, 178.

<sup>81</sup>Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 76, Table 3.3. Soltow also points out that the average amount of wealth (real estate and personal property combined) owned by free adult males in 1860 was \$2,500. The Gilders were clearly falling through the middle ranks.

<sup>82</sup>U.S. Census, Connecticut, New Haven City reel, p. 844; Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 23.

<sup>83</sup>Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 24; Alden, in Harper, *House of Harper*. Gilder’s salary would have been above what the average minister in the West received, according to Lebergott (*Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964], 331-33). But it was below the level of urban ministers in the East. Lebergott (331) reports that \$600 was the likely urban minister’s average salary. Although the parsonage was rent free, this income did not meet the large Gilder family’s expenses. During these

necessity of “donation parties,” in which congregants supplemented the pastor’s income with alms of food.<sup>84</sup> The children could not afford to be “disturbed by the demands of fashion,” for they wore hand-me-downs until they were threadbare.<sup>85</sup> The family, unable to afford anything better, ate only basic foods.<sup>86</sup>

Reverend Gilder’s falling economic fortunes would have been all the more apparent in an era of consistent national and individual economic growth. The national economy experienced an unprecedented 2.5% annual increase in per capita income through the 1850s.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, as the average American worker grew older, he stood to accumulate increasing amounts of wealth at a rate of about 6% per year.<sup>88</sup> In relative terms, then, the Gilders were poor during Richard’s youth, or at least they were distinctly conscious of their declining fortunes.<sup>89</sup> This awareness infected the Gilder parents’ attempts to inculcate the social mores of sentimental culture in their children.

Diverging tenets of sentimentality and class ideology clashed in Gilder’s upbringing. On the one hand, his parents instilled in him some of the basic values of sentimentality, sympathy for the downtrodden and a nurturing home life. On the other hand, his parents struggled to maintain social distinctions between their children and their servants and school help staff. This contradiction was endemic to middle-class versions of sentimentality, but it was exacerbated for the Gilders as their economic status declined toward the level of the average worker, if not their own servants.

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two years the family consisted of the two parents, eight children ranging in ages from two to twenty-three, a middle-aged Gilder aunt, and the servant Dinah Pew (1860 U.S. Census). It seems likely, though, that during this period the eldest child left the family fold, for Jeannette Gilder recalls there being only seven children at home (*Tomboy*, 172).

<sup>84</sup>*Tomboy*, 173.

<sup>85</sup>*Tomboy*, 173-74.

<sup>86</sup>*Tomboy*, 177.

<sup>87</sup>Robert Gallman, “Gross National Product of the United States, 1834-1909,” *Studies in Income and Wealth* 30 (1966).

<sup>88</sup>Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 180. For Soltow, such “handsome rates of accumulation” explain why the vast majority of American men accepted the great disparity of wealth in the country (with the top 5% of property owners holding 50%-60% of the nation’s wealth) throughout the mid century decades (180, 183).

<sup>89</sup>Soltow claims that the differential of constantly accumulating wealth with advancing age “must have been observable and easily apparent in spite of the very wide scatter, or inequality, from the average wealth for a specific year of age” (*Men and Wealth*, 180).



Gilder learned the repertoire of sentimental culture from his parents. Reverend Gilder sought to impress on his son the need for social reform by taking him to witness life in the notorious Five Points slum of New York City.<sup>90</sup> The twelve-year-old boy was deeply affected by the experience. In one house, “I saw in the half-darkness a huddle of human creatures. A woman with a blackened eye came to the door and begged the missionary [accompanying the Gilders] to save her. She said, ‘They are trying to kill me here.’ We climbed down into a dreadful subcellar, and I saw a man apparently dying on a litter of straw.”<sup>91</sup> Sentimental lessons such as this would have been re-enforced at home. As a Northern Methodist and Republican, Reverend Gilder successfully instilled in his son opposition to slavery and sympathy for the plight of Southern chattel.<sup>92</sup>

Gilder’s parents provided a sentimental home life. Jane Gilder encouraged her children to play. In an era when many Methodists and other Protestants reviled dancing as the devil’s doing, dancing was one of the Gilder family’s “favorite amusements.”<sup>93</sup> Their homes, furnished simply, encouraged rambunctious activity with none of the “parlor restraint” that would bridle children’s play later in the century. Music was common in the Gilder home. Reverend Gilder made secular music an integral part of his female seminaries, particularly the commencement exercises.<sup>94</sup> He encouraged his eldest son to learn to play the piano at the Flushing school. And then no doubt felt a deep sense of disappointment when the piano was auctioned off along with all the other Flushing furnishings.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>For a history of the area, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York: Free Press, 2001). Gilder’s trip to the neighborhood is mentioned at page 348.

<sup>91</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 17.

<sup>92</sup>*Tomboy*, 158; “R.W. Gilder Dies of Heart Disease,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1910, 1:4. It is unlikely that Richard was virulently anti-slavery. He supported the middle path of the Constitutional Union party in the 1860 presidential election. There is no direct evidence that William Henry Gilder was a Republican. The best piece of evidence is Jeanneatte Gilder’s statement that he was “neither an Episcopalian nor a Democrat...” (*Tomboy*, 158).

<sup>93</sup>*Tomboy*, 275.

<sup>94</sup>He also fought conservative deacons to introduce the melodeon (a small reed organ) into his Connecticut churches (*Tomboy*, 167-8).

<sup>95</sup>*Tomboy*, 275.

Simultaneously, Gilder's parents hewed to the dictates of class distinction. Jane Gilder disliked the circus, for it brought to town a "very rough class of people."<sup>96</sup> The Gilder children were discouraged from mixing with Reverend Gilder's school laborers and particularly the family servants.<sup>97</sup> But in the close quarters of the Gilder household, distance was difficult to maintain. The Gilder children intermixed with the servants in various ways and discovered much about the lower orders. These workers were of varied backgrounds, including native-born whites and blacks as well as English and Irish immigrants.<sup>98</sup> One servant made African American culture a consistent aspect of the Gilder household. "Diana Piro" was a legacy of New Jersey's slave past, having once been owned by the Nutt family.<sup>99</sup> She lived with the Gilder family, or his maiden aunt, throughout Gilder's youth.

Piro was apparently illiterate. But Gilder would have witnessed the strong desire of other servants to read and write. One black servant, for instance, wrote poetry and was familiar with the works and sordid reputation of Byron.<sup>100</sup> At least one white servant was devoted to reading novels.<sup>101</sup>

The Gilders' relations to their servants exacerbated their class consciousness. While they had servants, they strove to create a social distance between them and the children. But

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<sup>96</sup>*Tomboy*, 290.

<sup>97</sup>The distance the parents demanded between their children and these servants was evident in the breach. Richard's older brother William feared severe punishment should his parents discover that he frequently joined in the kitchen dances of the Flushing Seminary cooks. *Tomboy*, 64. The Gilders also apparently enforced a distinction with their family as well. It seems that the younger children were not allowed to take dinner with the parents and older children until they reached the age of ten or so (*Tomboy*, 157).

<sup>98</sup>While Reverend Gilder ran his schools, the family lived among as many as eight servants, cooks, and other staff. This included a carpenter and a gardener (U.S. Census, 1850).

<sup>99</sup>*Tomboy*, 82. "Diana Piro" was the fictional name Jeannette Gilder gave her. Her real name appears to have been Dinah Pew (1860 U.S. Census). She lived either with Richard Gilder's maiden aunt, Maria Nutt at the Bordentown house, or with the Gilders. She is listed as living with the Gilders in Connecticut in the 1860 census, and her presence in the Gilder family can be traced in Jeannette Gilder's *Tomboy*.

<sup>100</sup>In fact, her sense of decorum was severely bruised when Jeannette asked her if she were "a colored Byron. She replied, "I did feel highly insulted when you asked me if I was like Byrum.... I write a different poetry from Byrum" (*Tomboy*, 127-39).

<sup>101</sup>*Tomboy*, 225, 229. Jane Gilder apparently let this servant go because her addiction to novel reading purportedly rendered her useless as a cook. Jeannette Gilder remembered that her mother then hired a new, younger maid from Ireland "who could neither read nor write." She added, in middle class fashion, "This change was distinctly for the better" (229). This statement, ironically, confirmed the fear of the black poetess, who had complained that "some folks [i.e., employers] has an idea that if you read books an' write poetry, you ain't no good for work" (129).

as their social and economic status declined, the fact that they lost servants would have been a stark symbol of their predicament. By the time Reverend Gilder returned to the ministry, the family could hire no servants (aside from the ever-present Piro).

Reverend Gilder once hoped to send Richard to college. But unable to afford any other schools he put his son in his own female seminary classes. There Gilder obtained a smattering of Greek, Hebrew, and some English literature.<sup>102</sup> Richard mastered no subject by the time his formal (and irregular) schooling ended at age fourteen. He never attended college or even high school. Books, however, were ever present throughout his youth. William Henry Gilder's chief store of cultural value—and to some degree real property value—was his large collection of books.<sup>103</sup> The bookshelves of his study in Flushing ran from floor to ceiling. Busts of the great poets looked down from the upper shelves.<sup>104</sup> Among these books, young Gilder developed his own aptitude for self-culture. He began to write poetry and dream of the literary life.<sup>105</sup>

The downward turn of his family fortunes meant that Richard Watson Gilder entered adulthood with a tattered genteel upbringing. At age 18, he had learned no trade and had no capital. At the time of William Henry Gilder's death, his family clung to an estate worth only about \$2000 (\$28,000 in 2001 dollars). The visions of destitution and slavery his father had given him at Five Points now seemed like Gilder's own fate, rather than the plight of others.

William Henry Gilder's death thrust Richard into adulthood. He spent the Civil War years, for the most part, working to support his mother, seven younger siblings, a maiden aunt, and their African American servant Diana Piro. His first job as a Philadelphia law clerk netted him wages of about sixty cents a day (about \$156 per year [\$1,700]).<sup>106</sup> He served in

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<sup>102</sup>Gilder to T.W. Higginson, 11 April 1890, Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>103</sup>*Tomboy*, 34, 168. Books were then relatively expensive goods (Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 11-12).

<sup>104</sup>*Tomboy*, 34.

<sup>105</sup>Gilder's siblings were all dedicated to the humanities. Four of his seven siblings became journalists and writers. Three of these went on to edit magazines. One became a pianist and composer, while another became an explorer, and another an archaeologist.

<sup>106</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 21, 35. At the time, he briefly attempted to read for the law, but quickly gave up.

the Army of the Potomac for five weeks during Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania. He took part in no battles, but saw enough of military destruction and personal deprivation to declare solemnly: "I have learned enough of the cruelties of war in the past few weeks to make the subject appear in its true light."<sup>107</sup> He then briefly served as a paymaster for the Camden & Amboy Railroad, walking up and down the line with thousands of dollars in cash distributing workers' wages.<sup>108</sup>

Toward the end of the Civil War, Gilder became a reporter for the Newark, New Jersey, *Daily Advertiser*. Gilder's experience in this line had been scant. At about age twelve, he issued a few copies of his own literary paper, dedicated (in *Atlantic Monthly* fashion) to "the Promotion of Literature, Morality, Religion, and Science."<sup>109</sup> He wrote most of the articles himself, as well as setting all the type. In the 1860 presidential campaign, the sixteen-year-old Gilder, working with a friend, founded a partisan newspaper supporting Bell and Everett, the Whiggish candidates of the Constitutional Union party.<sup>110</sup> The paper, funded by the party, lasted only a few months (as did Bell and Everett's fame).

Gilder was the *Advertiser's* legislative reporter. He used his place to advance several sentimental reform causes. He convinced the state legislature to charter a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals (and became the state society's chairman). He worked against capital punishment and spearheaded legislative efforts at prison reform. In 1868, Gilder accepted the offer of R. Newton Crane (Stephen Crane's uncle) to buy into a new newspaper, the Newark *Morning Register*. Here, Gilder gained experience in all facets of newspaper production. He wrote editorials and news stories, solicited advertisements, set type, made up the forms, and "superintended" the paper's sale by newsboys.<sup>111</sup> The

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<sup>107</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 34.

<sup>108</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 36-37.

<sup>109</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 18.

<sup>110</sup>Politics is the least studied aspect of Gilder's life. See Martha Ann Fitzpatrick, *Richard Watson Gilder: Genteel Reformer* (PhD Diss., Catholic University, 1967); Michael G. Kammen, "Richard Watson Gilder and the New York Tenement House Commission of 1894," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 66 (June 1962): 364-82; and Roy Lubove, *Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1907* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 81-115.

<sup>111</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 50; Bolton, *Famous American Authors* (New York : Crowell, 1887), 313-15.

newspaper venture was not profitable.<sup>112</sup> Even in the midst of this whirl of journalizing, Gilder took on the editorship of Charles Scribner's floundering magazine, *Hours at Home*. This new position was full of portent. Although the magazine soon folded (just as the *Morning Register* failed), Scribner tapped Gilder to become Josiah Holland's assistant editor with the recently organized *Scribner's* magazine. Gilder moved to New York City.

Gilder's move signaled a break with the modicum of political work he had done while a Newark newspaperman. He had never been much interested in partisan politics. He mentioned nothing in his autobiographical writings of participation in party activities while a child or young adult. His one reference to Republican party partisanship in a later letter is guarded. He claimed to have been "brought up in the strictest Republican partisanship." But this very experience taught Gilder to suspect the wild-eyed partisan. Gilder recalled that he had "shouted with the boys so much that I know both how much sincerity and how much fraud there is in the shout."<sup>113</sup>

The *Scribner's* position allowed Gilder to turn all his attention to culture. But in the early 1870s, Gilder had little interest in American culture. He dedicated himself to the study of European arts and literature. So immersed was he that he characterized himself in 1874 as bewitched by a "frank unworldliness."<sup>114</sup> Before the mid 1870s, Gilder had little experience with the literature and culture of his own country.<sup>115</sup> In 1871, a "mental photograph" revealed that, of his twelve favorite poets and novelists, only Hawthorne, Edmund Clarence

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<sup>112</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 42.

<sup>113</sup>Gilder to Brigham, 12 June 1890, Century Papers, Huntington Library. Although Gilder claims here to have been deeply involved in partisan activity in his youth, one looks in vain in his brief memoir (included in the *Life and Letters*) or in his sister's lightly fictionalized *Autobiography of a Tomboy* for evidence of it. Moreover, his poetry after the 1880s is studded with criticisms of partisan politics.

<sup>114</sup>See Holland response to Gilder's self-description, Holland to Gilder, 25 December 1874, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>115</sup>The same is true for several of his fellow editors. Howells, in 1865 just before becoming an *Atlantic* assistant editor, admitted to a friend that he knew little about "my own country and language" (in George Arms et al., eds., *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, vol. 1: 1852-1872 [Boston: Twayne, 1979], 226). And Alden had spent his college years studying the religion of ancient Greece. There is no evidence that he either read widely as a child. Nor does it seem that he traveled at all. He seems to have spent his youth in the small area between Mt Tabor, Vermont, Troy, New York, and Amherst, Massachusetts. He apparently did not break out of this small area until his relocation to New York in 1861.

Stedman, and Julia Ward Howe were American.<sup>116</sup> And two of these he chose chiefly because they were personal acquaintances from Newark (Stedman and Howe).<sup>117</sup> The others, including Carlyle, Dickens, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Rossetti, and E.B. Browning, demonstrate an Anglophilic taste. What is more, Gilder set down Jane Eyre as his favorite fictional character. His list of favorite painters was weighted in favor of Europe: “Moran, Turner, Vedder, Gerome, and the old boys.”<sup>118</sup> Gilder’s subsequent correspondence with Stedman is littered with references to European poets, particularly Tennyson, Keats, Rossetti, Shakespeare, Dante.<sup>119</sup> In art matters through the 1870s, according to a fellow *Scribner’s* editor, he was “a bit dilettante,” and “absorbed in the English Preraphaelite School both in art and poetry....”<sup>120</sup>

Gilder’s mental photograph also revealed that religion was of little importance to the young immigrant to New York City. Gilder had briefly considered becoming a minister in his teen years (as had fellow editors Holland, Alden, and Walter Hines Page). But he seems to have inherited his father’s ambivalent attitude toward the church. When the nation-wide 1858 revival hit Flushing, the fifteen-year-old Gilder was swept up in its non-sectarian nature. He attended prayer meetings and lectures at Methodist, Episcopal, Dutch Reformed, and even Catholic churches.<sup>121</sup> But during the 1860s and ’70s, Gilder seems to have paid

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<sup>116</sup>A “mental photograph” was a series of questions administered by his friend, poet and critic Edmund Clarence Stedman, then a fresh face in New York’s bohemian literary crowd. Laura Stedman, “Confessions of an Album,” *Bookman* 37 (April 1913): 131. Stedman himself later praised Gilder’s poems of the 1870s by noting their affinity for their models, “the most ideal English verse, the Italian sonnets and canzoni, which ever deeply impress a poet of exquisite feeling” (in Bolton, *Famous American Authors*, 323).

<sup>117</sup>Gilder emphasized his personal allegiance to Stedman by spelling his name in the mental photograph with all capital letters.

<sup>118</sup>Gilder included Edward Moran, most likely, due to a personal acquaintance. Moran was born in England, and immigrated to America at the age of 15 in 1844. He was, during his years in Philadelphia from 1862 to 1869, a central figure among the “Bohemian Council,” a group of actors, literary men, and musicians (*National Cyclopaedia of Biography*, vol. 11, 302; *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 7, 151-52). Elihu Vedder was born in the U.S., though he spent all but about five of his adult years working in Europe, which showed in the themes of most of his canvases.

<sup>119</sup>Moreover, Stedman praised Gilder by comparing him to “your masters: Petrarch, Mrs. Browning, Rosetti, etc.” (Gilder, *Letters* 59). Gilder would later write two of his rare works of literary criticism on Keats and on Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

<sup>120</sup>Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), 89, 95–96.

<sup>121</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 16-17.

little attention to religious matters. By the 1880s, doubt about Protestant Christianity won out in his soul. In the last decade of his life, responding to a critic who wanted to read an orthodox Christian message into his poetry, Gilder corrected him: “[I]f put on the rack of categorical questioning,” he admitted, “I fear I would prove a sad enough ‘agnostic.’”<sup>122</sup> Moreover, he could become indignant at Howells’s discovery of “orthodoxy” in his 1905 volume of poems, *In Palestine*. His intention in those poems, he wrote Howells, had been to throw away all the “supernatural ‘facts’” to leave only “the central ethics and aspirations...” related in the Bible.<sup>123</sup> But Gilder was ambivalent about his agnosticism. He could not completely rid himself of the religious forms in which he had been raised. In another letter, he conceded that “the old leaven of my fathers is deep in my mind and heart; and the symbols of Christianity—I cannot help thinking in and with them....”<sup>124</sup> Gilder no longer had any faith in religion as a means for legitimating moral action, even as he continued to use its symbols to think with. Christ, rather than the assurance of salvation, became a role model for human action. He was for Gilder little more than a sentimental parent, “a father, bending near.”<sup>125</sup> Holland’s holy God became Gilder’s secular “Spirit Eternal” and later “fire divine.”<sup>126</sup> The

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<sup>122</sup>Letter of 31 August 1905, to David G. Downey, in Gilder, *Letters*, 424–25. Downey treated Gilder in his book *Modern Poets and Christian Teaching: Richard Watson Gilder, Edwin Markham, Edward Rowland Still* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1906). Herbert Smith calls Downey’s volume “A typical misreading of Gilder’s poetry by a contemporary” (*Richard Watson Gilder* [New York: Twayne, 1970], 170). Tomsich, in his discussion of Gilder’s religious beliefs, largely misconstrues his poetic references to Christ, albeit in a different manner from Downey. Where Downey saw Gilder as within Christian orthodoxy, Tomsich is clear that Gilder did not consider himself to be orthodox. But, although Tomsich recognized that Gilder wrestled with such religious issues as immortality, he has little doubt that Gilder believed in the existence of a benevolent God (*Genteel Endeavor*, 172). Tomsich’s reading is skewed somewhat by giving too much weight to *Century* editorials, which he attributes to Gilder, although it is highly unlikely that the editor actually wrote these (172, 173, 215n39, 215n45).

<sup>123</sup>Letter to W.D. Howells, 10 February 1904, in Gilder, *Letters*, 424.

<sup>124</sup>Letter of 31 August 1905, in Gilder, *Letters*, 424–25.

<sup>125</sup>“The Passing of Christ,” *Gilder’s Complete Poems*, 178. In this poem, Christ is no longer the source of human love, but a symbol of its expression. The original poem was written in the late 1880s. Gilder added the line quoted here and another in 1908 in the proofs for his collected poems. He wrote to his editor, “The two lines I now send are the result of going to church! and hearing a mighty good sermon. The thought helps to round out the subject with greater explicitness” (to Ferris Greenslet, 17 April 1908, Gilder, *Letters*, 469). Gilder was surprised that this poem had been used in church services over the years since he had written it in the 1880s. “Is n’t it strange?” he asked Greenslet, “This unorthodox poem seems to be often used in the orthodox pulpit; along with other [of Gilder’s] unorthodox sentiments...” (Gilder, *Letters*, 469).

<sup>126</sup>Gilder, “The Old Cabinet,” *Scribner’s* 4 (May 1872): 109; idem, *Collected Poems*, 367.

forms had been emptied of their supernatural force. They now worked to channel the force of culture.

Gilder's accession to the editorship of *Scribner's* and then the *Century* between 1878 and 1881 shocked him into a deep sense of public responsibility. His father's sentimental lessons finally blossomed. Mugwump political reform and civic service soon became signature themes of Gilder's poetry. He decried "the base partizan's ignoble greed," he exalted Henry George as a "martyred hero," and praised "human service" as "true life."<sup>127</sup> He increasingly put his sentimentality to practical reform use. He advocated free public kindergartens, civil service reform, settlement houses, and public parks and playgrounds throughout the city. He led in the fight to open the Metropolitan Museum on Sundays. He was "a veritable whirlwind in Albany," according to historian Michael Kammen, lobbying state legislators to improve the safety, sanitation, and construction of New York City's tenements as chairman of the 1894 Tenement House Committee.<sup>128</sup> In short, Gilder was an early and outspoken advocate of the social reforms and methods that later become known as Progressivism.<sup>129</sup> The critic George Woodberry aptly summed up Gilder's life. It was divided, he wrote, "between the twin-homage of duty and beauty."<sup>130</sup>

*Robert Underwood Johnson: Immigrant to Culture*

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<sup>127</sup>Quotes here are taken from *Gilder's Complete Poems*, "The President" (118), "Of Henry George, Who Died Fighting Against Political Tyranny and Corruption" (269), "On a Certain 'Agnostic'" (398).

<sup>128</sup>Kammen, "Gilder," 377. Not satisfied with merely taking testimony, Gilder inspected tenements personally—perhaps in memory of his boyhood trip to Five Points with his father. Moreover, he made himself available at any hour outside of his working day to investigate tenement fires. Donning rubber coat and protective gear, Gilder entered still-smoldering buildings to see for himself the causes and effects of the murderous fires. He exposed the heinous condition of several tenements owned by the seemingly august Trinity Church.

<sup>129</sup>Kammen, "Gilder," 364. Kammen calls Gilder a "man of transition" and argues that he was "a precursor of the Progressives in social affairs...." John argues that Gilder was little sympathetic to the Progressive movement. Noting that "the moral tone of Progressivism should have appealed to Gilder," John claims that the movement conflicted with Gilder's idealism. But John's evidence on this point is limited to one editorial (John, *Best Years*, 252-53)

<sup>130</sup>Woodberry, "Mr. Gilder's Public Activities: As a Poet," *Century* 29 (February 1910): 626.



Robert Underwood Johnson was a complicated man. His deep love for the performing arts rivaled his passion for “the beauty of nature in its wildest aspects.”<sup>131</sup> A resident of New York City his entire adult life, he was such an ardent conservationist that the Sierra Club made him an honorary vice president in 1889.<sup>132</sup> He played office baseball games and considered the outdoorsy, “robust young woman” to be “the hope of America.”<sup>133</sup> His aversion to Victorian high fashion sat uneasily with an almost overweening attention to personal appearance. He grew up on the Indiana frontier in a literary household. His intense commitment to various formalisms was balanced by a fervent belief in the dynamicism of social and material progress. In poetry, he was a staunch advocate for form, but nonetheless deeply appreciated Walt Whitman’s work.<sup>134</sup> An early advocate of impressionist art when conservatives were aghast at it, he detested the post-impressionist developments of cubism and futurism. Thoroughly committed to high culture, he frequented moving picture theaters.<sup>135</sup> Hamlin Garland was not alone in remembering Johnson with mixed feelings. “I disliked his supercilious manner when dealing with me [at first],” Garland recalled. “He was in truth kindly and appreciative but he had an insufferable air of authority, an attitude which Gilder never assumed. Later we became very good friends. He was [a] reformer who never lost [his] zeal.”<sup>136</sup>

Johnson inherited his contrarian balance between the formal and the dynamic from his parents. Johnson was born in Washington, D.C., on 12 July 1853 in his mother’s family

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<sup>131</sup>Johnson, “The Care of Yosemite Valley,” *Century* 39 (1890): 478, cited in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 132.

<sup>132</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 289-91; “Robert U. Johnson, Poet, Is Dead at 84,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1937, 23:2. Johnson originated the idea for the Yosemite National Park and worked assiduously and effectively to protect the Grand Canyon, the Appalachians, and the Adirondacks. Johnson had the honor of introducing the nation’s two most prominent naturalists, John Burroughs and John Muir. On Johnson and Muir, and Johnson’s role in the conservation movement, see Nash, *Wilderness*, 130-39, 158-59, 163-65, and 170-81 passim.

<sup>133</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*.

<sup>134</sup>Gilder, too, deeply admired Whitman. He published Whitman’s work in the *Century* and religiously carried a volume of Whitman’s poems that he would often read to himself and to others.

<sup>135</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 431.

<sup>136</sup>*Hamlin Garland’s Diaries*, 161, entry for 14 October 1937, just after Johnson died.

home.<sup>137</sup> Catherine Underwood Johnson's family were "austere" Calvinist Presbyterians, and she inherited their tendencies toward both "great generosity" and "exact justice."<sup>138</sup> Johnson's mother mixed her conservative piety with a love of popular music. She led the drive to build a Presbyterian church in her adopted Indiana hometown. But she also played guitar and sang to her children, particularly the lyrics of Irish poet Tom Moore, Scottish poet Robert Burns, and uniquely American songs such as "Massa Coon He Am a Genmen."<sup>139</sup> She often recited from memory long passages from Milton and Bailey's "Festus."<sup>140</sup>

Nimrod Hoge Johnson's religion was the polar opposite of his wife's Calvinism. A Unitarian Quaker, he was born in Ohio and grew up in Indiana after his family joined the Quaker exodus from Virginia and the horrors of slave society.<sup>141</sup> Nimrod was as much a lover of song and story as his wife. He often sang "Oh! Susanna" and told stories to his two sons about Daniel Boone, Red Jacket, and fabled Scotch heroes. These stories were highly influential on Johnson's later literary sensibility. "[W]ithout any *moralité* on his part," Johnson later recalled appreciatively, "we would get the appropriate lesson through the human touch."<sup>142</sup> Nimrod loved literature.<sup>143</sup> While a lawyer and then a judge in burgeoning Centerville, Indiana, he engaged in lengthy literary discussions with other lawyers during court breaks.<sup>144</sup> Talk with his friends at home also swirled around classic and controversial European books and authors, from Thackeray to Byron to Scott, from *Gil Blas* to *Don*

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<sup>137</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 3.

<sup>138</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 5-6. The church in which Catherine's father played cello was the Four-and-a-Half Street Church, attended by such Washington notables as President Franklin Pierce and senators Thomas Hart Benton and Henry Clay.

<sup>139</sup>See list of others, Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 8.

<sup>140</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 32. Johnson had a half sister, Clarissa, through his father's first marriage (14).

<sup>141</sup>Jacquelyn S. Nelson, *Indiana Quakers Confront the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>142</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 23. Johnson related two of his father's stories at pages 323-24, one about a rural farmer besting some "New York blacklegs" in a poker game and another about an "absent-minded father" who forgets to unload his family from a Mississippi steamboat. Johnson thought these to be reminiscent of Mark Twain's humor.

<sup>143</sup>His obituary in the Indianapolis *Journal* reported that "His literary acquirements were surpassed by those of but few men. His reading extended through the whole domain of English literature" (cited in Andrew W. Young, *History of Wayne County, Indiana...* [Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1872], 269).

<sup>144</sup>The county seat was later moved to Richmond, Indiana.

*Quixote* to *Tom Jones*.<sup>145</sup> At home, Nimrod often read aloud the work of James Russell Lowell: from the political commentary in Yankee dialect of *The Biglow Papers* to the sentimental depiction of “My Love.”<sup>146</sup> As a boy, often spending time with his father at court, Robert received a liberal education quite unlike that of most American boys of his era.<sup>147</sup> While many Americans, particularly outside the handful of large cities, still considered literature to be superfluous if not downright evil, literature for Robert Underwood Johnson was the stuff of public life and it was the bond of private life.

Robert did his own reading, too, in the secular and divine, the literary and the political. Grandfather Underwood gave him three of his earliest volumes: *Robinson Crusoe*, the “priggish” *Sandford and Merton*, and Watts’s *Divine Hymns*.<sup>148</sup> He also read two of the era’s most trenchant critiques of slavery: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Hinton Helper’s *The Impending Crisis*.<sup>149</sup> Books were surprisingly available to Robert in a day and place where few families owned more than the Bible, Shakespeare, or Burns. Nimrod had a large library of history and literature, comprised mostly of Scottish fiction and poetry.<sup>150</sup> Robert took advantage of Indiana’s early drive to create public libraries, visiting the various craftsmen in town who housed Centerville’s small library on a rotating basis.<sup>151</sup> Robert also read children’s periodicals: *The Little Corporal* and *Our Young Folks*.<sup>152</sup> *The Atlantic* was usually

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<sup>145</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 3, 26-27.

<sup>146</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 327. Johnson stated that Lowell’s early work became one of the leading influences in his early years, but gave no specifics. We are left to imagine that both dialect and classical, colloquial and ideal, became key elements of his mature aesthetic. Johnson later proclaimed Emerson to be “our greatest man of letters, our foremost poet and one of the most imaginative in English literature” (325). It would seem that, latter in life, Emerson’s formalism won out over Lowell’s early lyricism.

<sup>147</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 25.

<sup>148</sup>The adjective “priggish” was Johnson’s own (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 5). Thomas Bailey Aldrich, editor of the *Atlantic* in the 1880s, also found *Sandford and Merton* to be “priggish” (*The Writings of Thomas Bailey Aldrich*, vol. 9: *Ponkapog Papers* [Boston, Houghton, Mifflin, 1909], 12).

<sup>149</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 15.

<sup>150</sup>It is unclear how much of the Scottish common sense philosophy filtered through these works to the Indiana frontier of Johnson’s youth.

<sup>151</sup>During one trip to the library, Robert heard a number of men in the shoemaker’s shop discoursing over Abbot’s life of Napoleon, which had made a tremendous sensation when it was serialized in the then new *Harper’s* monthly magazine. The tailor, another patriarch of the town library, was Ambrose Burnside who rose to fame as a commander of the Union Army (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 26).

<sup>152</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 29. Johnson seems to be the only editor among his later colleagues to have experience of reading periodical children’s literature. *The Little Corporal* was edited by the popular author

near at hand as well.<sup>153</sup> He read newspapers, too. During the war, Robert's primary daily chore was to buy the Cincinnati *Gazette* and read it to his father in the evening.<sup>154</sup> Robert also read all manner of cheap, popular books: the "Rollo" series, *Mayne Reid*, and Beadle "yellow-backs" of Indian and Western adventures.<sup>155</sup> And he saw plays. Robert and his brother would trudge five miles to the theater in Richmond, returning at midnight. Captivated by the live action on stage, the boy often considered the theater to be "the 'real' world."<sup>156</sup>

Robert's most significant cultural experience was reading Dickens. He best remembered the lessons "of pity and sympathy" which inspired the "whole movement of social reformation" in the second half of the nineteenth century. Dickens's lessons also helped Robert appreciate the philanthropy of his father. Nimrod Johnson, much to the consternation of his Presbyterian in-laws, frequently "gave away his money in charity beyond the limits of prudence."<sup>157</sup>

Robert's boyhood loyalty to the Union was little shaken by the Civil War, even though his father's uncle was Confederate general Bushrod Johnson and a distant cousin was the Rev. Dr. Moses Hoge, who became famous as the "Chaplain of the Confederacy."<sup>158</sup> Nimrod Johnson, for his part, had no sympathy for the South.<sup>159</sup> His own father, Nathan Johnson (Bushrod's brother), was a Hicksite Quaker. Strictly adhering to the sect's

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Grace Greenwood. *Our Young Folks* was edited by Atlantic contributors John T. Trowbridge, Lucy Larcom, and Gail Hamilton (Mrs. Dodge) (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 29).

<sup>153</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 52.

<sup>154</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 52. Johnson may well have read there some of the journalism of William Dean Howells and his father, William Cooper Howells, for both were political correspondents for the *Gazette* during these years.

<sup>155</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 30. The Rollo books were Jacob Abbott's thin narratives intended to teach children about distant lands, history, science, and morals (Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 98).

<sup>156</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 155.

<sup>157</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 29.

<sup>158</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 12, 14. Moreover, various Virginia cousins studied under Albert Taylor Bledsoe at the University of Virginia. He was, after the war, the unreconstructed editor of *The Southern Review*. His daughter, Sophia Bledsoe Herrick, was later a key assistant at *Scribner's/Century* for many of Johnson's years there.

<sup>159</sup>Nimrod Johnson was, according to his son, too weak to join the army, and so paid for a substitute (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 52). Robert himself, of course, was too young to join.

commitment to social reform, Nathan Johnson was a strident abolitionist follower of Benjamin Lundy.<sup>160</sup> He ferried slaves on the Underground Railroad in Ohio and Indiana and was an associate of Frederick Douglass. (Young Robert met the great orator at his grandfather's home.<sup>161</sup>) Nimrod himself was avidly antislavery. When Catherine Johnson could find no teacher for the Negro Sunday school in her Presbyterian church, Nimrod, his liberal Quakerism notwithstanding, enthusiastically took on the responsibility. Robert had no qualms about playing with the children of local blacks, for "in those days in the West there was no prejudice against a negro as a companion in any sport of boys in which he excelled."<sup>162</sup>

Robert assisted with the family's budget during the Civil War by going to work at age 11 as a telegraph operator for the Indiana Central Railway. (One of his colleagues was a young Thomas Edison.<sup>163</sup>) Johnson, at his telegraph, was the first person in town to receive the news of Lincoln's assassination.<sup>164</sup> He then followed Lincoln's funeral train (which Gilder had seen a few days earlier) as it passed through Centerville, traveling all the way to Indianapolis where he viewed the stilled president's face.<sup>165</sup>

Johnson's college experience was marked by extremes of education for his day. He matriculated at Earlham College in 1867 at age 14. The small Richmond, Indiana, college was unusual. Not only was it Quaker, it was also coeducational. Another oddity: while the college enforced much quiet religious contemplation, it also stressed physical education and athletic contests.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, school president Joseph Moore, who had studied at Harvard with Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray, emphasized evolution in the college's science

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<sup>160</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 12. Young, *History of Wayne County, Indiana*, 268. Grandmother Johnson was raised a Quaker, but forfeited her membership in the Society of Friends on marrying her unorthodox fiancé. She continued, however, to wear the strict Quaker dress and retained the Quaker speech of "thee" and "thou" (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 13).

<sup>161</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 15.

<sup>162</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 42.

<sup>163</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 15.

<sup>164</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 60.

<sup>165</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 60.

<sup>166</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 64.

curriculum.<sup>167</sup> Culturally, however, Earlham’s administration considered the visual and performing arts “to be inventions of the Busy One.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, the arts and board games such as checkers were forbidden. Johnson’s college covered most of the standard subjects of the day. This meant that he studied no English literature—and certainly no American literature or history—as these were virtually unheard of in the college curriculum of the mid-nineteenth-century U.S.

Between 1869 and 1873, Johnson’s life underwent tremendous changes. His father accidentally killed himself in 1869.<sup>169</sup> Johnson graduated from Earlham in 1871. An old Quaker friend of his father’s found the recent graduate a clerkship in Chicago at Scribner’s Educational Books. Two years later, this same friend immeasurably changed the course of Johnson’s life: He recommended Johnson to the New York office of the recently launched *Scribner’s* magazine as an assistant editor.<sup>170</sup>

Johnson arrived in New York City in May 1873.<sup>171</sup> He immediately began to make himself over. As a boy, Johnson had refused to look into shop windows in Richmond, Indiana, fearful he would be taken for a “country jake.” Now, he crashed into the great swarming cultural democracy of New York City. He quickly struck up friendships with two

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<sup>167</sup>Joseph Moore spent much time on collecting mastodon bones and other zoological and botanical specimens for the museum he organized at Earlham. He was dedicated to the idea that the material world was the expression of God and that “[s]ince Omniscience is one of His attributes, *the man who knows the most is in this respect most like his Maker.*” Moore tempered the materialist bent by adding, “[b]ut what would our great Sovereign Ruler be without the higher attributes of love, mercy, and purity? So we in order to be in His *image and likeness* may grow in grace as well as in intellect” (cited in Opal Thornburg, *Earlham: The Story of the College, 1847-1962* [Richmond, Ind.: Earlham College Press, 1963], 98.)

<sup>168</sup> Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 67. Plays were not allowed until 1899 (Thornburg, *Earlham*, 159).

<sup>169</sup>Nimrod poisoned himself by taking tincture of aconite, a powerful poison, when he meant to take tincture of gentian, an aid to digestion (Young, *Wayne County*, 269). As a deeply literary man, he would have perhaps appreciated the literary association of aconite: It was supposedly the poison with which Medea attempted to murder Theseus (Mrs. M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931], 9).

<sup>170</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 71-75. Johnson took the place of editor and humorist Frank Stockton, who had moved over to assist in editing *St. Nicholas*.

<sup>171</sup>Ironically, Johnson already had a connection to the business manager of *Scribner’s*, Roswell Smith—although it appears they were unaware of the connection until Johnson arrived in New York. Johnson’s mother and Smith’s wife had grown up together in Washington. Both women had been present in May 1844 when Samuel Morse made the first public test of his long-distance telegraph. It was Miss Ellsworth (as Catherine’s friend was known before she married Smith) who gave Morse the fabled first message, “What hath God wrought?” (Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 81).

co-workers and fellow Indianans, Frank Scott and William Fayal Clarke.<sup>172</sup> With his new friends, Johnson took in all the music, art, and society New York had to offer in the 1870s. They saw works by Winslow Homer, John Sargent, John LaFarge, Wyatt Eaton, and Albert Bierstadt at the National Academy of Design.<sup>173</sup> They scrounged for cheap seats in the top gallery of the Academy of Music.<sup>174</sup> These young immigrants to the city frequented the city's theaters, taking in plays and minstrel shows.<sup>175</sup> Johnson quickly became acquainted with the city's literati, as well as the nation's, at regular salons held at the homes of Century Co. associates such as Josiah Holland, the Gilders, Mary Mapes Dodge, and Edmund Clarence Stedman, as well as the famous hostess Mrs. Vincenzo Botta, Mary Booth (editor of Harper's *Bazar*), and Laurence Hutton (literary critic for Harper's *Monthly*).<sup>176</sup> Johnson and his bachelor friends balanced their urban acculturation by feeding their "insatiate appetite for nature" with weekend outings to distant, rural historical and literary sites.<sup>177</sup>

New York was Johnson's school of culture, as it was for all his *Scribner's/Century* colleagues. All the members of the magazine's staff, Johnson claimed, had had to learn taste. Taste, for Johnson as it was for Gilder, was the product of that most cherished social product of American democracy: education, whether self-education or a proper schooling. Taste, Johnson proudly declared, "is one of the things that is made and not inherited."<sup>178</sup> None of

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<sup>172</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 82, 326. Scott, who later became president of the Century Company, was a native of Richmond, Indiana, where Johnson had lived during his four years of college. Johnson already knew Clarke because they had attended Earlham together. Clarke had followed Johnson in the Scribner's Educational Books clerkship in Chicago. At Johnson's suggestion, Clarke was hired as Mary Mapes Dodge's assistant editor. He later succeeded her to that position (153). Clarke accompanied Johnson on his first trip to New England to celebrate the Concord Centennial in 1875. There they saw Emerson, Lowell, Curtis, and President Grant, as well as such landmarks as Louisa May and Bronson Alcott's home, Thoreau's Walden Pond "hut," and Hawthorne's grave (326-27).

<sup>173</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 167.

<sup>174</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 160.

<sup>175</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 154-61.

<sup>176</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 90-91. Mrs. Botta had was famous as the Anne Lynch who had been associated with the Knickerbocker group and had made Edgar Allen Poe a regular at her salons of the 1840s. At these various salons, Johnson met all manner of authors, actors, artists, and musicians, including John Hay, Bret Harte, Charles Dudley Warner, Richard Henry Stoddard, Helen Hunt, Kate Field, Fannie Hodgson (Burnett), Edith M. Thomas, Edwin Booth, Clara Louise Kellogg, Joseph Jefferson, Tomaso Salvini, Eleonora Duse, Helena Modjeska, and Ignace Paderewski.

<sup>177</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 153.

<sup>178</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 130.

their parents, Johnson said, “had artistic knowledge or judgment.” They had no experience of paintings or sculpture, only of Currier and Ives chromolithographs. Yet, “their sons grew into a love of art that gave a cachet to the magazines and the books of the [Century Company] and made it an esthetic influence.” In New York City, Johnson and his associates “fed on good art.”<sup>179</sup> They then disseminated this art for what they thought to be popular, democratic consumption.

New York confirmed Johnson as a culturist opponent of politics.<sup>180</sup> He considered the average politician to be little more than a “seed-distributor, a pension agent and an office-broker.”<sup>181</sup> Johnson joined the civil service reform movement to counter the cynicism and selfishness of the political system. When he supported politicians, he always chose reform-minded ones—Theodore Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia for mayor of New York in 1886 and 1933 respectively, and Cleveland, Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency.<sup>182</sup>

The *Century*'s popularity gave Johnson the courage to abandon the supernatural divine in favor of culture. Admitting in his 1923 memoir that his “opinions on religious subjects ha[d] undergone radical changes,” Johnson traveled far from the religion of his parents.<sup>183</sup> His early life drifted between the distant poles of his mother's strict Presbyterianism and his father's casual Quakerism. Neither gained a lasting hold on him. In New York, the divinity of Christ seemed an increasingly impossible creed to Johnson. He adopted Unitarianism—a move that would have been totally anathema to Josiah Holland, not to mention Johnson's mother. Johnson found wonder in the world, but it was a material world. He was as devoted to the beauty of nature as he was enamored of the wonders of

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<sup>179</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 130.

<sup>180</sup>*National Cyclopaedia*, vol. 46, 79.

<sup>181</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 407. His opinion was somewhat moderated by the fact that his brother was elected to the U.S. House in 1891 and served for four terms.

<sup>182</sup>Civil service support, 407; support for Cleveland, 386; support for Roosevelt, 386; and support for Wilson, 412. His early and continuing support for Woodrow Wilson won him the ambassadorship to Italy in 1919. He praised Franklin Roosevelt as “the conqueror of delay” (“Robert Underwood Johnson,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1937, 19:6).

<sup>183</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 68.



electricity. He counted among his closest friends the naturalist John Burroughs and the Serbian-born wizard of electrical research Nikola Tesla. Spending weeks at a time camping with Muir in the high Sierras of Yosemite, Johnson identified with the naturalist's sentimental homily "that going to the mountains is going home and that Christ's Sermon on the Mount is on every mount."<sup>184</sup> Spending hours at a time in Tesla's Manhattan laboratory, he felt the power of electricity, literally, as Tesla used him in experiments, running a million volts through him to set brilliant lights aglow.<sup>185</sup> Similar discoveries of American nature and technological progress, Johnson recalled, took hold of all the New York editors of his day. Discovery and progress were "a tide [that] carried us into unfamiliar territory."<sup>186</sup>

### **Class and Culture**

Stuart Blumin has argued that the nineteenth-century middle class was "elusive." Although the purported rise of the new class was associated with urbanization, contemporary popular writers on the American city had trouble locating it. They tended to paint the city, New York in particular, as a world of economic extremes. On the eve of the founding of *Scribner's*, for example, James Dabney McCabe wrote of New York, "there are but two classes in the city—the poor and the rich." If there was a middle, Dabney conjectured, it had fled to the suburbs. Although the term "middle class" was common after the Civil War, the social group and economic and cultural interests to which it referred were difficult to pinpoint.

Blumin thus built his study of the nineteenth-century middle class around Anthony Giddens's distinction between class consciousness and class "awareness."<sup>187</sup> Class consciousness, according to Giddens, is characterized by two social recognitions: that one's "attitudes and beliefs signify a particular class affiliation" and that other classes are

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<sup>184</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 286.

<sup>185</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 401.

<sup>186</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 86.

<sup>187</sup>Cited in Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 10.

“characterized by different attitudes, beliefs, and styles of life.” Class awareness also recognizes that there are competing interests and differing beliefs in society. But it does not associate these interests and beliefs in a structural fashion with particular groups. Rather, it situates them in individual practices and capacities and often denies the actual existence of classes. Giddens’s work leads Blumin to conclude that the middle class is the class “most likely to express awareness of its common attitudes and beliefs as a denial of the significance of class.”<sup>188</sup>

Blumin’s argument offers an initial insight into the world view of the three editors of *Scribner’s* and its successor the *Century*. Although Holland, Gilder, and Johnson steadily rose in economic status during their New York years, it is unclear just what *social* status they attained. They themselves did not conceptualize their relations to other New Yorkers or to Americans in general in class terms. They were aware of the existence of different classes in society. They tended to see themselves as arbiters, through the medium of culture, between rich and poor, capitalist and worker. But they referred to themselves in the universal terms of Scottish common sense. They were classless, they suggested, because they represented the arrival of a common culture. When the *Century* and its competitors sought to appeal to “the best minds” of a “highly cultivated people,” the appeal was not to a social elite.<sup>189</sup> Rather, it proclaimed the belief in a democratic culture, long effaced by the country’s divisive politics, awaiting an education in taste to spring forth from all corners of the nation. So long as the magazine’s circulation continued to swell, Holland, Gilder, and Johnson could ignore the class boundaries the emerging middle class culture was fostering.

The *Scribner’s/Century* editors denied the structural realities of class through the 1880s because they clung to a rhetoric of democracy. Having come from the ranks of the poor, the downwardly mobile, and the frontier island community, all three had a dynamic

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<sup>188</sup>Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, ch.1, esp. 10, 14, 16.

<sup>189</sup>“The Rise and Work of a Magazine: The History of the Century Magazine (*Scribner’s Monthly*),” *Century* 23 (November 1881): Supplement, 1, 3.

sense that life was a personal progression from lower to higher orders of society. Holland in particular conceived his own rise, after three decades of poverty and frustration, as a miracle. Lacking the confidence to explain his great success as the product of his own will and unable or unwilling to conceive his rise in terms of social class, he could only understand it as the reward of a merciful God. Moreover, as the middle class remained elusive as a coherent social structure, the dynamicism of the editors' fortunes masked the sedimenting of class formations at the end of the nineteenth century that would become far more apparent in historical hindsight.

Further contributing to the lack of class consciousness of the *Scribner's* editors was the fact that New York City was itself a chaotic congeries of immigrants, capital accumulation, and cultural ferment. The dynamic changes in New York City obscured any apparent coalescing of a class below the haut bourgeoisie or the above the lowest order of society. Suburbanization, moreover, siphoned off would be members of the city's middle class, and thus left the city itself appearing to be, as McCabe had written, a city of rich and poor. Through the postbellum decades, the city underwent an intense process of centralizing both the nation's culture and its capital. But these two centralizing processes were far from identical.

Two historians of New York, Sven Beckert and David Hammack, have offered differing accounts of the development of class and cultural elites in the city in the late nineteenth century. The *Scribner's* editors do not fit easily in either scheme. Beckert claims that a coherent and all-powerful American bourgeoisie coalesced in New York City by 1900. His concern is chiefly with delineating the class consciousness of a bourgeois elite that came to rule not only the city, but American society.<sup>190</sup> Beckert's definition of the bourgeoisie,

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<sup>190</sup>Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 265.

however, is fuzzy.<sup>191</sup> On the one hand, the class refers to an economic elite of inordinately wealthy capitalists. On the other, Beckert suggests that anyone who employed servants could be considered bourgeois.<sup>192</sup> In general, he hews close to the former definition, focusing mostly on the *haut bourgeoisie*.

Holland, Gilder, and Johnson do not meet Beckert's criteria for membership in the *haut bourgeoisie*.<sup>193</sup> They were not business people. They owned no appreciable business assets and even saw themselves as cultural antagonists of much of the commercial class.<sup>194</sup> Their income and wealth fall well below the levels of Beckert's cohort. Gilder's years at the *Century*, for example, had made him financially comfortable, though by no means did he approach the wealthy classes with their incomes exceeding \$50,000 (\$970,000) and above.<sup>195</sup> By the early 1890s, his annual salary certainly exceeded \$5,000 (\$97,000). This rate placed him on the cusp between what contemporary economist Charles Spahr called the "middle classes" (those making \$500 to \$5000) and the "well-to-do classes" (those making \$5000 to \$50,000).<sup>196</sup> This was at a time when most skilled workers had annual incomes between about \$450 and \$750 (\$8730 to \$14,550), white collar workers in finance and real estate made around \$1,040 (\$20,176) annually, bank cashiers had salaries ranging between \$2,000 (\$38,800) and \$15,000 (\$291,000), Macy's department store guaranteed its buyers an income of around \$4,000 (\$77,600), and some military officers and beginning college professors

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<sup>191</sup>Beckert seems to have sensed this, for in a chapter in *The Middling Sorts* (ed. Bledstein, New York : Routledge, 2001) he attempts to distinguish between a *haut bourgeoisie* of powerful capitalists and a lower *bourgeoisie* of shop keepers.

<sup>192</sup>Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 7.

<sup>193</sup>For Beckert's criteria see, *Monied Metropolis*, ch. 8, "The Culture of Capital."

<sup>194</sup>Holland was a part owner of the *Century Company*. But there is no record that he made other investments. The two younger editors were part owners of the *Century Company* after Holland sold off his partnership to Roswell Smith. Gilder, toward the end of his life, was an investor in the *City & Suburban Homes Co.*

<sup>195</sup>Nell Irvin Painter, "Introduction," *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: Norton, 1987), xix (table), based on Charles B. Spahr, *An Essay on the Present Distribution of Wealth in the United States* (1896), 69.

<sup>196</sup>Cited in Painter, "Introduction," xix. For comparison: Of the 12,500,000 families in the U.S. in 1890, the poorer classes numbered 5,500,000 families, the middle classes numbered 5,500,000 families, the well-to-do classes numbered 1,375,000 families, and the wealthy classes numbered 125,000 families (xix).

made as much as \$2,000 (\$38,800) per year.<sup>197</sup> When Gilder died, his estate, after accounting for debts, was worth about \$14,000 (\$265,000).<sup>198</sup> By comparison, Alma Vanderbilt's New York City mansion, completed in 1883, had cost \$3 million to build. Financially, then, Gilder was not among the wealthy of New York City. He was upper middle class, at best. Johnson would not have been very far behind him. His salary was certainly lower than Gilder's. He made at least \$2,500 annually by 1880, enough to afford the salaries of two Irish-born domestic servants.<sup>199</sup>

Holland, Gilder, and Johnson do not fit Beckert's cultural criteria either. They were involved in few if any of the cultural institutions Beckert points to as key components of haut bourgeois society. Beckert's bourgeoisie turned to European aristocratic arts as a confirmation of their taste.<sup>200</sup> While Gilder and Johnson certainly appreciated classic European work, they were also instrumental in popularizing newer and homegrown styles of art. Holland and Gilder had summer homes, but they were far from being "elaborate country seats."<sup>201</sup> Johnson had no such home. The New York City homes of Gilder and Johnson had parlors, but they displayed few of the stiff airs or studied fullness of the homes Beckert discusses.<sup>202</sup> Gilder had some affinity for what later became known as "high" society, but

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<sup>197</sup>Edward Bok guessed in 1890 that Gilder and Alden both made about \$10,000 in annual income ("The Costs of a Magazine," *Author* 2 [1890]: 6-7). Harper's accounting books show, however, that Alden made only about \$5,000. And even though Gilder was a part owner of the Century Company (as were most of the upper editorial and art staffs), it is unlikely that he made twice the salary of his rival editor. Blumin reports the incomes for bank cashiers and Macy's buyers (*Middle Class*, 274, and see, for other rates of income, 270-75 passim). Bliss Perry notes that he was hired at Williams College in 1888 with a salary of \$2,000 (*And Gladly Teach*, 115). Military officers received an average of \$2,101 yearly in 1898 (*Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, 166). For annual income levels in this era, see *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, 165-68.

<sup>198</sup>"Gilder's Estate," *New York Times*, 7 July 1910, 6:7. The value of the Bordentown property, however, was not included in this amount.

<sup>199</sup>U.S. Census, 1880, National Archive Film Number T9-0888, page 551B; Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable* (1956, reprint; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 116. Johnson wrote Cable, who was considering moving his family to New York, about his annual living expenses in early 1880.

<sup>200</sup>Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 258.

<sup>201</sup>Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 258.

<sup>202</sup>I have been unable to find a description of Holland's New York home, although, given his relative wealth by the 1880s, it was almost certainly well-appointed. Beckert incorrectly uses an article from *Scribner's Monthly* to claim that parlors were merely spaces for the conspicuous display of wealth. "[N]o merely useful thing is permitted [in the parlor]," he quotes, "[it] is always overcrowded... everything bought for show goes there" (cited in *Monied Metropolis*, 260). But Beckert misreads the quotation. It is from Clarence Cook's series on

neither he nor Johnson took part in haut bourgeois events such as Mrs. Astor's balls or visited such bourgeois retreats as Newport or Saratoga.<sup>203</sup> Nor did these editors support the exclusivity of such prominent cultural institutions of the haut bourgeoisie as the Metropolitan Museum, the Metropolitan Opera, and the New York Philharmonic.<sup>204</sup> The *Century* magazine's campaign to open the Metropolitan Museum on Sunday ran counter to the wishes of its haut bourgeois board members.<sup>205</sup> Johnson deplored the class pretensions of the wealthy founders of the Opera.<sup>206</sup> Neither he nor Gilder served on the boards of directors of these cultural institutions—such positions were reserved for the likes of J.P. Morgan.<sup>207</sup> Gilder and Johnson, as editors of a popular magazine, were interested in a wider purview of culture. As such, they gave at best ambivalent support to the institutions and figures of the bourgeoisie's highbrow culture through the 1890s.<sup>208</sup>

Where Beckert depicts a tightly knit bourgeois class, David Hammack has argued that New York society was deeply fragmented, with social and political power distributed among five often competing economic, ethnic, and religious elites. Three of these elites were Protestant "Anglo"-American and two German-American.<sup>209</sup> The Anglo elites prized either wealth, ancestry, or cultivation. One German elite was comprised of Christians, the other of

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*The House Beautiful*, and Cook's point is a *criticism* of the average parlor. The *Scribner's* series was aimed at the practical home, not the house as museum.

<sup>203</sup>Gilder was a sponsor of the first edition of *The Season*, a record of parties and events for the social season of 1882-1883. But he is noticeably absent from the events recorded. I have not been able to discover that either Gilder or Johnson sought to introduce their children into such "society."

<sup>204</sup>Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 267-69. Beckert's reading of the Philharmonic as a haut bourgeois institution rests on a narrow focus on its board of directors. The Philharmonic, if examined from the point of view of its workers, might offer a different conception of the workings of class. For H.E. Krehbiel, in his history of the Philharmonic, described it as "a democratic, or rather a communistic, body" (*The Philharmonic Society of New York* [New York: Novello, Ewer, 1892], 11). The musicians themselves were not members of the haut bourgeoisie, but professionals who organized themselves for the purpose of making music.

<sup>205</sup>Gilder also tangled with the museum's board over the botched restoration of a series of statues. Regarding the "Cesnola affair," see Gilder, *Letters*, 108-12.

<sup>206</sup>*Remembered Yesterdays*, 160.

<sup>207</sup>Morgan assumed the presidency of the Metropolitan Museum's board in 1904.

<sup>208</sup>They thus complicate such either-or cultural arguments as Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1988).

<sup>209</sup>I have put "Anglo" in quotes because these elites were hardly pure-bred English stock. As with Gilder, there was much admixture of other national heritages.

Jews.<sup>210</sup> Members of the culture elite were most identifiable by the clubs they joined, the Century, University, Aldine, Lotos, Fellowcraft, and Nineteenth Century clubs. There was very little overlap between the memberships of these clubs and the memberships of other elites.<sup>211</sup> The Anglo culture elite was distinguished from the others by its greater willingness to cultivate the arts, pursue knowledge, and engage in a variety of social and political reforms. The directors of the Charity Organization Society, for example, headed by Josephine Shaw Lowell (subject of a Gilder poem), were also members of numerous other culture clubs.

Both Gilder and Johnson were members of several of the culture clubs, especially those dedicated to the arts. They belonged to the Century Club, which had been formed originally as an arts club, although by the 1890s it had become a fairly prestigious institution. But Gilder and Johnson were more likely to spend time at the Authors Club (founded by Gilder and others), which was something of a craft guild for authors.<sup>212</sup> As for reform, Gilder and Johnson of course devoted themselves to numerous reform activities, from Gilder's Tenement House Committee to Johnson's advocacy for nature conservation. Gilder and Johnson were later instrumental in founding the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1904 as an institution dedicated to promoting the arts in American society and inculcating standards and traditions for the nation's arts and literature. Johnson was the Academy's permanent secretary.

Gilder and Johnson were clearly members of Hammack's culture elite. To list the *Scribner's/Century* editors among the culture elite, however, is not to identify them as the defenders of aristocratic culture as numerous literary historians have done throughout the

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<sup>210</sup>David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982), 65.

<sup>211</sup>The Knickerbocker Club, for instance, was a meeting place for the "ancestral" elite, and it required that members could prove descent from a colonial ancestor (Hammack, *Power and Society*, 73). The Metropolitan Club was one of a handful of clubs dedicated to men of wealth, such as J.P. Morgan, and was quite out of the reach of Gilder and Johnson.

<sup>212</sup>As the Authors Club's "club house" was only a few blocks from the *Century* offices, Gilder and Johnson often lunched there.

twentieth century. The culture elite was hardly a coherent group, much less the tip of a hierarchical pyramid of cultural power along the economic lines of Beckert's haut bourgeoisie. Through the 1870s and 1880s, there was little "cultural infrastructure" to allow the concentration of cultural power. The *Scribner's/Century* editors had little interest in fostering such an infrastructure for the city. They were immigrants to the city with few ties to entrenched New York social circles and family lineages. Their interests were national in focus. To a great extent, they created their own society of artists and writers that had little organic social connection to New York City. As such, they were committed to the development of a widely shared culture, albeit along different lines than those of the rough and rowdy culture of the earlier nineteenth century or the immigrant worlds of their own day or the haut bourgeois culture of Beckert's business people.

This openness further distinguished Gilder and Johnson from both the haut bourgeoisie and the culture elite in a significant way. They displayed strikingly little of the ethnic and religious exclusiveness and intolerance of those two groups.<sup>213</sup> Gilder, for instance, made no prejudicial distinctions regarding the foreign-born immigrants living in the tenements. Urban reformer Jacob Riis recalled that "[t]he Italian, Greek, Hungarian, and the refugee were all Americans to him [Gilder]."<sup>214</sup> On the Tenement Reform Commission, Gilder worked with a panoply of New York figures, including the Jewish reformer Felix

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<sup>213</sup>Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 265; Hammack, *Power and Society*, 77-78. Holland nourished an anti-Catholic prejudice along the lines of the antebellum Know Nothings. His antipathy, that is, was religious and not social.

<sup>214</sup>From Gilder's memorial service, as reported in *Outlook* (5 March 1910): 514. Gilder was particularly interested in Italian immigrants, however. See his letter to the *Times* in support of the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants (26 March 1903, 8:5). Gilder conceived of these immigrants as "an important constituency of our future population..." He framed the need for assisting Italian immigrants in the terms of sentimental culture. Americans should consider themselves in the debt of these Italians: "There is something that keenly appeals to many in the care of these children of Italy, seeking a 'new life' in a land discovered by one Italian and named after another; children of a country to which we owe so much for our share in the inheritance of its art, literature, and history; in the never-failing beauty and inspiration of its landscape and associations." Gilder was thus diametrically opposed to the anti-immigrant stand expressed in the infamous poem, "Unguarded Gates," written by his friend, Thomas Bailey Aldrich. This cuts against Bender's claim that Gilder (and by extension Johnson) was among those who "fail[ed] to recognize the cultural implications of immigration." If, as Bender claims, Howells's recognition and sympathy for immigrant culture made him "a traitor to the Brownstone class," then the same must be true for Gilder and Johnson as well (Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect* [New York: Knopf, 1987], 215).



Adler (a member of the Century Club) and the labor leader Samuel Gompers. Gilder adopted the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus (writer of the poem on the Statue of Liberty) as a protégée. Gilder and Johnson also published a poem, “The Jew to Jesus,” that decried antisemitism: “In every land is our Gethsemane,” it concluded, “A thousand times have we been crucified.”<sup>215</sup> He invited visiting Asian artists and dignitaries to his summer retreat in Marion, Massachusetts. Both Gilder and Johnson were Italophiles. Gilder advocated the fair treatment of immigrants, Italians in particular, and joined the Society of Italian Immigrants.<sup>216</sup> Johnson’s devotion to Italy led to his appointment as ambassador to Italy from 1920 to 1921.<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, Johnson took the somewhat radical stand of supporting Irish home rule in the mid 1880s—perhaps because he had married the daughter of Irish immigrants.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, Gilder and Johnson opened the pages of the *Century* to Jews, Irish Catholics, and African Americans.<sup>219</sup> As immigrants to the city, the two editors sympathized with the experience of the uprooted.

The cultural formation of the *Scribner’s/Century* editors was closer to the rising middle class than to any social sector with pretensions to aristocratic elitism. This can be seen especially clearly in the effect marriage had on the two younger *Scribner’s* editors. Gilder and Johnson both married in the middle 1870s. For each, marriage completed the circle of sentimentality they had been drawing around themselves since youth. Johnson’s

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<sup>215</sup>Florence Kiper, “The Jew to Jesus,” *Century* 73 (December 1906): 228.

<sup>216</sup>Letter, *New York Times*, 26 March 1903, 8:5; Gilder, *Letters*, 345.

<sup>217</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 425-26.

<sup>218</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 331. It is unclear whether Johnson’s wife, Katherine McMahon, was a practicing Catholic.

<sup>219</sup>Gilder proudly noted in a letter that the *Century* published works by Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and “nothings.” Regarding Jews and Catholics in the *Century*, see John, *Best Years*, 213-15. The magazine did at times publish articles critical of immigrants, but these were motivated by the magazine’s goal of presenting multiple viewpoints rather than any editorial agreement with the negative stand. John notes that the “bitterest denunciation” of the foreign-born was written by Theodore Munger, a preacher, generally liberal, and a long-time contributor to the *Century* (*Best Years*, 212). The opinion appeared in 1888. Gilder and Johnson did not adhere to Munger’s claims that immigration was responsible for virtually every social ill facing the nation. Three years after Munger’s diatribe, Gilder and Johnson published Julian Ralph’s exploration of the Bowery, in which Ralph declared that the new immigrants were just as hard-working and decent as their predecessors (“The Bowery,” December 1891). The one limit the magazine supported editorially was a requirement that immigrants must live in the U.S. for one year before becoming eligible for citizenship. On the *Century*’s generally favorable attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, see John, *Best Years*, 211-16.

marriage, in August 1876, greatly curtailed his evenings out at the same time it turned his self-culturing toward home.<sup>220</sup> He and his wife often entertained artistic friends in their Lexington Avenue brownstone, bringing together a profusion of authors, singers, pianists, actors, and scientists—the likes of Mark Twain, Helen Modjeska, Tommaso Salvini, Nikola Tesla, and Edward Elgar—out of the glare of public posing. In a clear display of middle class awareness, Johnson fondly recalled the domestication of married life as a shelter from the allure of wealth: “In those first years, fortunately, we knew no rich people, and all our friends were occupied with making little homes in which were gradually accumulated those possessions of beauty which give character and atmosphere to the life of a household.”<sup>221</sup> Marriage allowed Johnson to expand his boyhood experience of literature at the family table to encompass all the performing and plastic arts in his parlor. The home, for Johnson, was the prime site for producing and consuming culture.

Gilder’s marriage to Helena de Kay in 1874 significantly altered not only his life, but that of New York culture. Helena brought to their marriage numerous connections to the art world that would go far in turning Gilder’s aesthetic interests toward his native land. Gilder, in turn, was instrumental in furthering the career of many of his wife’s family friends. The granddaughter of the celebrated early American poet Joseph Rodman Drake, de Kay introduced her new husband to Henry James, Helen Hunt (Jackson), Mary Hallock (Foote), Winslow Homer, and Augustus St. Gaudens.<sup>222</sup> The Gilders entertained a ceaseless flow of visitors throughout the week and late into the night.<sup>223</sup> Their Friday evening open house became a vital nexus for American and European writers, artists, actors, and musicians, including Mark Twain, William Vaughan Moody, William Dean Howells, Charles Dudley Warner, James Whitcomb Riley, John Burroughs, explorer George Kennan, editors Bliss

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<sup>220</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 161.

<sup>221</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 589. This is the middle-class world Bender anathematized as “the culture of Brownstone New York” (*New York Intellect*, 207).

<sup>222</sup>Homer painted a portrait of de Kay in 1871-1872, and may have been her suitor before her marriage to Gilder (Nicolai Cikovsky et al., *Winslow Homer* [Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1995], 122-23).

<sup>223</sup>Cecilia Beaux, *Background with Figures* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1930), 209-10.

Perry and E.L. Godkin, the pianist Paderewski, actors Joseph Jefferson, Eleanora Duse, Helena Modjeska, artists John La Farge, Cecilia Beaux, Will Low, Augustus St. Gaudens, architect Stanford White, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, tourist Matthew Arnold, and even Walt Whitman.<sup>224</sup> Whitman amply testified to the Gilders' open minds and gracious hospitality: "You must never forget this of the Gilders, that at a time when most everybody else in their set threw me down they were nobly and unhesitatingly hospitable. The Gilders were without shame—they just asked me along in a natural way. It was beautiful—beautiful. You know how at one time the church was an asylum for fugitives—the Church, God's right arm fending the innocent. I was such an innocent and the Gilders took me in."<sup>225</sup>

Blumin argues that flight to the suburbs was an essential component of the emerging middle class. Yet, the Gilders and Johnsons were committed to urban housekeeping. Both families made their homes in Manhattan. The Johnsons resided in their Lexington Avenue brownstone almost their entire married life. The Gilders' first home was at 103 East 15th Street in what Gilder called "the very center of the city," a block from Union Square. Nearby were three concert halls, the new department stores, and "the most noted and noisy street in America" (i.e., Broadway)—not to mention a house of prostitution just across Fifth Avenue.<sup>226</sup> The Gilders' second city home was on East 8th Street. Here the full panoply of

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<sup>224</sup>Holt, *Garrulities of an Octogenarian Editor* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1923), 214; Gilder, *Letters*, 65-67; Lucy Leffingwell Cable Biklé, *George Washington Cable: His Life and Letters* (New York: Scribner, 1928), 104; Bliss Perry, *And Gladly Teach* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1935), 141-42; Beaux, *Background*, 209; White, ed., *Whitman's Daybooks and Notebooks*, vol. 1, *Daybooks, 1876-November 1881* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 102n374, 103n374a;

<sup>225</sup>Horace Traubel, *With Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1906), 119. Gilder considered Whitman to be "a genius" and perpetually carrying in his jacket a copy of Whitman's collected poems and reading it aloud to friends and acquaintances (Gilder to Traubel, 17 October 1906, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library; cited in Robert Berkelman, "Mrs. Grundy and Richard Watson Gilder," *American Quarterly* 4 [Spring 1952]: 71). Gilder and his sister Jeannette were, as Edwin Haviland Miller pointed out, "active partisans" for Whitman (Miller, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, v. 4: *1886-1889* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 1). Justin Kaplin echoes this evaluation in his biography, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 26. Gilder was instrumental in establishing Whitman's poetic reputation. It was he who, against Josiah Holland's ardent disagreement, published Edmund Clarence Stedman's balanced critical essay on Whitman in *Scribner's* magazine in 1880. This essay represented a crucial turning point in the public appreciation of Whitman beyond his band of poetic disciples.

<sup>226</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 63. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros* (New York: Norton, 1992), 199. I do not mean to suggest that Gilder visited this house, only to note the breadth of urban existence within a stone's throw of the Gilder home. Gilder's home was redecorated by the young Stanford White.

New York life met them at their door. Their block was filled with Irish, Germans, Russians, and Swedes who worked as clerks, glove makers, corset makers, waitresses, lawyers, teachers, and composers. A few doors on either side of this home were two lodging houses, home to about thirty temporary residents. Next door was a German fur manufacturer. The Gilders lived in this urban home until the last month of Richard's life.

Gilder and Johnson modeled their offices on the sentimental family air of their homes. The *Century* staff, Johnson recalled, was "like a united and helpful family in which every member is the ally of every other."<sup>227</sup> Numerous women worked for the Century Company. Mary Mapes Dodge, for instance, was long the editor of the Century Company's magazine *St. Nicholas* and shared the *Century*'s offices.<sup>228</sup> Sophie Bledsoe Herrick was an assistant editor at *Scribner's /Century* for almost thirty years.<sup>229</sup> Roswell Smith was an early advocate of women clerks, hiring many in the early 1870s before the practice was generally acceptable.<sup>230</sup> The sentimental principles that reigned in the *Century*'s offices prevented the sort of rigid and regimented office structure found in larger corporations that later hired large numbers of women.<sup>231</sup> Most of the men and women all sat together "scattered about the large central room."<sup>232</sup> Nor did the *Century*'s managers shy away from hiring married women.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>227</sup>Johnson *Remembered Yesterdays* 89.

<sup>228</sup>William W. Ellsworth, *A Golden Age of Authors* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1919), 25. Her staff felt itself to be almost a family; the editorial rooms of her magazine had a home-like atmosphere. Gannon and Thompson, *Mary Mapes Dodge* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 110. So much was her staff like a family that her assistant editor, William Fayal Clarke, lived as a member of her household for many years.

<sup>229</sup>Holland to Stedman, 23 October 1880, Stedman Papers, Columbia University; Herrick to Gilder, February 1909, New York Public Library; Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 121. Women were also essential to the editorial operations at the *Atlantic*. Susan Francis served for decades on the magazine's editorial staff, reading, proofreading, and editing manuscripts. As in other sectors of the American economy, women's editorial labor seems to have been undervalued. Ellery Sedgwick (*The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994], 206) notes that Susan Francis's annual salary of \$1075 in the 1880s was far below that of editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who made \$4000 per year. Although she had worked for the *Atlantic* since the era of James T. Fields back in the 1860s, she was still paid only at the same rate as "editorial recruits."

<sup>230</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 121; L. Frank Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York: Century, 1923), ch. 5, esp. 93-94; Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 25.

<sup>231</sup>See Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 116-21, regarding the rigidification that ensued at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company after the introduction of female staff workers.

<sup>232</sup>Ellsworth, *Golden Age*, 25.

Nonetheless, by the mid 1890s, Gilder and Johnson's seemed uncomfortably aware that they had developed a class consciousness that irreparably separated them from the democratic mass they had so long believed themselves a part of. The circulation of the *Century* and competition from a new class of cultural magazines forcefully revealed to the editors the limitations of their rhetoric of democratic culture. Having rejected Holland's God, and with their hopes in the democracy of the marketplace dashed, Gilder and Johnson found themselves living the increasingly atomized lives of the middle class. Each responded by taking a different sentimental path.

Through the 1890s, Gilder engaged in a series of intense social reform activities and a campaign for "civic patriotism." But by the end of the decade, he began to search for a greater communion with beauty. After 1900, civic themes virtually dropped out of his poetry, replaced by longing for the years of his youth and ruminations on the afterlife. He had gained one of the highest positions of culture in the nation, but the stories he told himself harked back to the deprivations of youth. "My life has been a struggle for existence," he wrote a correspondent in 1887.<sup>234</sup> He suffered throughout adulthood from a recurring nightmare. In it, he is back working for a newspaper. "[I]t is some time," he described the dream to his children, "since a news letter was sent in by me, and if I don't hurry along some 'copy,' I shall be left high and dry without pay."<sup>235</sup> This fear of poverty and belief that his life was a constant struggle prevented Gilder from sustaining his social sympathy. Gilder's personal commitment to social reform withered after 1900. He turned his sympathies inward. Following the aesthetic moral, he increasingly sought what he called in a poem, "the solace of the skies"—the same solace he once sought at the death of his father—until his own death in 1909.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup>They hired Hattie McClure, knowing her to be married, to work in house on the *Century Dictionary* in 1883 (Lyon, *Success Story*, 47).

<sup>234</sup>Gilder to Brigham, 15 June 1887, Century Papers, Huntington Library, see also same letter, but without Brigham's name attached, in *Letters*, 17-73.

<sup>235</sup>Gilder, *Letters*, 42.

<sup>236</sup>Gilder, *Collected Poems*, 454-55.

Where Gilder retreated into himself, Johnson retreated into the ideal of home. Johnson became editor-in-chief of the *Century* on Gilder's death. But the magazine was moribund, and Johnson was hardly the man to breathe life into it. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Johnson seemed increasingly inhabited by a ghost of the old Underwood Calvinism. He became increasingly doctrinaire, developing after 1900 a formalism that set him against either publishing Edith Wharton in the *Century* (to Gilder's regret) or admitting Carl Sandburg to the American Academy (to the regret of young modernists such as Van Wyck Brooks).<sup>237</sup> To the end, Johnson retained his faith in sympathy, if little else. But all that was left for him were the forms. He closed his 1923 memoir with a paean to the brownstone house he had shared with his wife for almost thirty-five years. Johnson's quest for beauty, even as he fought for the preservation of vast tracts of American wilderness, increasingly became bound up in things. Home, Johnson admonished, must be the repository of the "gradually accumulated... possessions of beauty which give character and atmosphere." For Johnson, "[a] home of this sort in a city is a harbor of refuge in the shiftings and emergencies of life—and its stability is something to be maintained at all sacrifices."<sup>238</sup> Johnson, who had joined Gilder in a project to help Americans see one another in the pages of their magazine, now, with the dawning of a middle-class consciousness, could not see past his own door.

In much younger days, Gilder and Johnson had inherited *Scribner's* from Josiah Holland. The country then was in the throes of industrializing, with the concomitant rise of industrial capitalists. But the two editors had not seen themselves as fellow travelers with these capitalists. With sympathy for the less fortunate as their watchword, they deemed capitalists too materialistic. In the *Century* editors' eyes, capitalists' acquisitive nature

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<sup>237</sup>Regarding the Sandburg incident, see Van Wyck Brooks to Lewis Mumford, November 1933, in Robert E. Spiller, ed., *The Van Wyck Brooks–Lewis Mumford Letters: The Record of a Literary Friendship, 1921-1963* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 97-98.

<sup>238</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 596; interpellation is from 589.

blinded them to the aesthetic moral in the works of art they collected.<sup>239</sup> But neither did Gilder and Johnson man the barricades for the laboring classes.

Through the 1870s and '80s, Gilder and Johnson saw their magazine as a third force in American life. The solution they sought to the class problem, however, had little to do with class. Unable to see themselves as members of a distinct class and believing that they addressed a plethora of American audiences, they used their magazine to invent a shared national culture. They themselves had been tantalized by the possibilities of national culture early in life. They saw their magazine as a project for making over the world according to the aesthetic moral of sentimentality. They had discovered its first glimmers in the magazines of their youth.

Having been raised in island communities, they experienced New York City as a miracle of culture. This urban culture was not a surprise to them. They had already become deeply aware of the benefits of city life while still youths living in small towns. The nation's cultural periodicals transmitted the city to them, and they in turn headed for the city as young adults to work for magazines. As magazine editors, they sought to extend the national vision that had linked them in their distant homes to New York. Through the 1870s and '80s, Gilder and Johnson inaugurated a project of Cultural Reconstruction to make all the nation's regional cultures visible to magazine readers.

For a few years in the early 1880s, they seemed to be achieving success. They understood that the older modes of literary expression represented by their predecessor, Josiah Holland, were not up to the task of making the nation's regions speak to one another. They realized they needed to transform American writing to make it speak to a new generation. To that end, they published path-breaking realist novels, in serial form, by Howells and James (including *A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *The Bostonians*). They made the short story into a distinct American art form. They rose up a

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<sup>239</sup>One of the few exceptions to this generalization was Andrew Carnegie, who, after he became an art patron and library builder, became a friend of Gilder's.

multitude of American authors to counter the old fears that the nation lacked the materials for a native literature. At the height of the project, they published excerpts from perhaps the most important American novel of the nineteenth century, Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*. Through it all, Gilder and Johnson were searching for an American idiom and the scenes of uniquely and identifiably American cultures. They believed they found it in sketches and novels narrated in regional dialect. They believed they were inaugurating a democratic culture. But through the 1880s and into the '90s, they would discover that the task of reconstructing culture was far more complicated than they could have imagined. The very tools they were making available to magazine readers for imagining the nation at large were become weapons of cultural division. It slowly dawned on them that, in fact, the dialect of regionalism was a conduit for the racism of the middle class then cohering around magazines such as theirs.



## Chapter 6

### **The Genre of Sentimental Realism: The Thematics, Stylistics, and Form of the Postbellum Magazine**

Very soon after the Civil War, American magazinists began to search for ways to transform the magazine on the basis of a new model. Older conceptions of the magazine as a critical review charged with channeling the taste of the democratic mass gave way to the magazine as a literary parallel to democratic representation. The antebellum magazines had paid lip-service to regional inclusiveness, but had been unable to discover and include many writers or points of view from beyond Boston or New York. The destructiveness of the Civil War impressed on magazinists the need to reach beyond their city walls. They were now painfully aware of the need to create national representation in a cultural legislature. To do this, they had to create new modes of literary representation. If they were to suture the nation's sections back together, they had to transform the way they way their magazines spoke and conceived the nation.

American writing was transformed in the years surrounding the Civil War. In the dawning of the cultural magazine, neither Poe nor Willis had been able to find authors who wrote in the style they thought a monthly periodical required. Poe's dream of a "light artillery of the intellect" and Willis's search for "the light yet condensed—the fragmented, yet finished" were equally frustrated. Through the mid 1860s, magazinists were concerned that

magazine writing was either too male or too female. The writing in the review-oriented male magazines was too ponderous and prolix (Mott counted 521 words in the opening sentence of one *Democratic Review* article). The writing in the Ladies' magazines were too effeminate and light. Editors wanted something in the middle. *Nation* editor Edwin Godkin, for example, complained that “it is very difficult to get men of education in America to handle any subject with a light touch.” The *Independent* agreed, “Probably, there are not enough first-class magazinists in all America to fill the *Atlantic* alone, even if they did nothing but write for it.” But through such complaints, magazinists were transforming American magazine writing.

By the early 1870s, a new, lighter, identifiably magazine style of writing had emerged.<sup>1</sup> The “old Johnsonian style,” as Mott called it, disappeared from popular magazines. The *Literary World* in 1872 observed that “compactness of structure and crispness of style [had become] the most characteristic features of the model magazine article.”<sup>2</sup> The change in magazine writing flowed from the increasing coherence of the magazine as a literary genre. The aesthetic lens that cohered the once diffuse rays of the magazine was realism.

The literary theory of realism has been the subject of intense debate since Howells first gave it theoretical coherence in *Harper's* in the mid 1880s. It has been notoriously difficult to define accurately, partly because much of the discussion has reflected later political controversies rather than the nature of late nineteenth-century American writing.<sup>3</sup> The twentieth-century modernists saw realism as an embarrassingly prudish Victorian literature. More recently, some literary scholars have characterized realism as a means of

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<sup>1</sup>John Tebbel & Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61; Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 3: 1865–1885 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 17–18.

<sup>2</sup>All quotes cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 17.

<sup>3</sup>Pizer, “Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Literary Realism and Naturalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

objectifying nonmiddle-class figures as exotic “others.”<sup>4</sup> Critics of a different school have reviled it as a means of social control and middle-class normativity.<sup>5</sup> But if, instead, one looks at realism as the product of the cultural events and concerns, such as the changing conceptions of nature and aesthetics, that preceded it, then a different picture emerges. Realism, rather than being a straw man for modernism or a literary means of social control, becomes the streamlined form of sentimental literature. It becomes a bridge between the lachrymose and sensational literatures of the early nineteenth century and the modernism of the twentieth.

Realism was the confluence of a newspaperly, “male” inflected telegraphic style; the turn to nature as a source of religious and then cultural revelation; and sentimentality’s common sense moral inheritance. Dialect writing was essential to the aesthetic because it seemed to magazinists to represent the way real people actually talked. Local color was essential because it rooted events in actual places. William Dean Howells defined realism as “the truthful treatment of reality.”<sup>6</sup> But this reality was deeply conditioned by the sentimental aesthetic moral. Howells characterized the realist aesthetic as “simplicity, naturalness, and honesty [applied] to the appreciation of the beautiful.”<sup>7</sup> The fiction author, argued the former newspaper correspondent Howells, should refuse the romantic ideal of the impassioned artist. Rather, the novelist or short story writer was to be the “historian of feeling and character.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This sort of criticism is derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, though the French theorist is often left unattributed. See, e.g., Helen Taylor (*Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989], 17-18) and other scholars of local color.

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Eric Sundquist, “Realism and Regionalism,” in Emory Elliott, ed., *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 504; Pizer, “Introduction,” 7; Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>Cited in Pizer, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>7</sup>“Editor’s Study” [December 1887], in William Dean Howells, *Editor’s Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson, 1983), 111b. Simpson’s edition collected all of the “Study” columns Howells wrote for *Harper’s*. Hereafter, references will provide both the month in which individual columns appeared and the page number to Simpson’s edition. The “a” and “b” refer to the left and right columns of each page in the Simpson edition.

<sup>8</sup>“Editor’s Study” [June 1889], 199a.

Realism was not a response to the culture of sentimentality. This is how the standard critical histories of realism at least since Parrington represent it. Some critics sweep explanation under the carpet and proclaim, as Everett Carter did, that “[i]t is fruitless to hope to find out ‘why’” realism came into being.<sup>9</sup> Others suggest that it originated in European novelists such as Flaubert, Balzac, and Tolstoy and arrived in the U.S. to subdue the excesses of sentimental emotionality.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, these influences played an instrumental role in the evolution of Howellsian realism after 1870. But many of the progenitors of American realism, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and even Howells himself were receptive to European realism when it arrived in America because they had already turned down the realist path. American realism refined the objective elements already at work with sentimentality before the vogue of its European advocates.

Sentimentality had manifested a variety of nascent realisms before the Civil War. The literary sketch, with its emphasis on first person observation, imputed actual experience. The penny dailies made sensational realism their stock in trade. Even the lachrymose novel eschewed miracle and supernatural intervention to focus instead on individual character development.<sup>11</sup> In the antebellum decades, these realisms did not constitute a fully developed aesthetic. But in the years around the Civil War, a realist aesthetic began to cohere out of these various strands. This aesthetic in turn greatly determined the ways magazines represented national culture to their myriad readers.

The transformation of sentimentality toward a greater realism provided magazinists with a comprehensive understanding of how their magazines could become media of national

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<sup>9</sup>Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954), 89.

<sup>10</sup>See e.g. Eric Sundquist, “Realism and Regionalism,” 502; and Pizer, “Introduction,” 4. See also Pizer’s genealogy of critical approaches to realism, 6-16. Pizer notes that there are two essential “wings” of criticism, one that see realism as a distinct break with earlier American literature and another that sees it as “firmly Victorian” (6). Both wings, however, place the birth of realism in the post-Civil War decades.

<sup>11</sup>Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 22. Baym stresses that this fiction did not cover in a “pretty and tender realm of experience,” but confronted “poverty, coarseness, brutality, exploitation, treachery, pettiness, illness, exhaustion, degradation, and suffering” (24).

culture. The telegraphic style of writing in particular suffused the very structure of the magazine. It led magazinists to believe that the fragmented, disjointed nature of their medium was ideally suited to representing a unified American culture. Magazine editors increasingly concluded that the novel alone could not be the literary genre of democratic culture. There could be no “great American novel” because American life was too various, too local, too segmented along multiple vectors to allow for a single, novelistic narrative. Postbellum editors, taken by new ideas about the relations between land and culture, conceptualized America as the land of many stories. They valorized the short story and made it *the* form of American literary expression. Magazinists cut up the novel into serialized parts to reflect that same fragmented nature. Moreover, magazinists realized that fiction alone could not adequately express the American national spirit. Realism dictated that literary expression be interspersed with visions of the “real” worlds of science, travel, history, and social theory.

### **Sentimentality: The Nature of Realism**

#### *Telegraphic Style*

The telegraph changed the way American writers wrote. Its effects were first felt in the newspapers. It was an expensive and narrow channel of communication. Newspapers, tied into the telegraphic network by the late 1840s, could no longer afford the floods of words favored by old-fashioned newspaper writers.<sup>12</sup> The high cost of telegraph transmission forced reporters to strip their language of the colloquial, florid, and extraneous. Reporters usually submitted notes, rather than finished articles, to their home papers via telegraph. They thus had to strip away all unnecessary words, and write concisely (“telegraphically”) to avoid any

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<sup>12</sup>The ideal of a stripped-down writing style was not new. Bennett’s prospectus had called for a style “stripped of verbiage and coloring” (cited in Dan Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts: Proprietors of the New York Herald* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928], 39). But the demands of filling all four sheets of a daily made this goal honored more in the breach. Indeed, as noted above, one of the central tenets of sensationalism was coloring. The trick was to add enough color while constructing a tight sentence. This was the lesson of the telegraph.

ambiguities that might be magnified at the receiver's end. Reporters had to use the simplest syntax.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1848, a writer for the *United States Magazine* (of New York) divined the changes in writing style the telegraph was forging: "Now the certain effect of the Telegraph, as far as it has any influence upon the language... will be to introduce a style of writing which shall be, *first of all brief*.... The Telegraphic style, as we shall denominate it... is also terse, condensed, expressive, sparing of expletives and utterly ignorant of synonyms."<sup>14</sup> Twenty-five years later, *Harper's* magazine reported that such predictions had come to pass: Of all the momentous changes wrought by the telegraph, its "most extended and important influence" was its reworking of American writing. As telegraphic messages passed among diverse American regions and between various countries and different languages, "the peculiar and local idioms of each language are to a large extent discarded. The process sifts out, as it were, the characteristic peculiarities of each language...." The author then noted that the telegraphic style was a fundamental feature of newspaper journalism, for "it may be confidently said that nowhere in literature will be found a more remarkable parallelism of structure, and even of word forms, combined with equal purity and strength in each language than in the telegraphic columns of the leading dailies of the capitals of Europe and America."<sup>15</sup>

Antebellum magazine editors were enamored of the new style. But they had little respect for its newspaper forms. Magaziners criticized the telegraphic style in newspapers precisely because it suggested and represented speed. Arriving daily, it inundated readers with a mad, jumbled rush of news. It was, in magaziners' eyes, the agent of a crass, demoralized sensationalism. Magaziners charged that the overuse of sensationalism had addicted newspaper readers to a numbing repetition of shocks and thrills. The sensationalism

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<sup>13</sup>Adverbial phrases at the beginning or end of sentences were especially problematic. In the transmission process, they could easily be detached from their intended sentence and radically alter an adjacent thought (Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983], 115).

<sup>14</sup>"Influence of the Telegraph upon Literature," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 22 (May 1848): 412.

<sup>15</sup>"The Telegraph" *Harper's Monthly* 47 (1873): 359-60.

that once carried the promise of moral reform, now seemed but a compulsion to wallow in the vice and viciousness of an urban hell. To stoke the addiction, the critique continued, newspapers had to create new forms of stimulation with larger headlines and more shocking sensations.<sup>16</sup> Such newspaper writing, the magazine critics charged, might provide facts, but it produced no positive world view. It produced neither Truth nor Beauty. If the newspaper was immediate, it was also unthinking. It was only half real, for it constantly mucked about in the sordid without taking time to look beyond to solutions or respite. Yet, as even the critics realized, the newspapers were highly successful commercial ventures. To compete for readers, the magazines had to differentiate themselves from the newspapers while simultaneously building on their successful style.

The first problem in adapting the telegraphic style to the magazines was to turn it to a different relationship to time. Magazinists realized that they could not compete with newspapers on a daily basis. They needed to separate magazines from what Poe had called “the *rush* of the age.” If daily newspapers were unthinking, then monthly magazines would represent the nation’s self-reflection. Where newspaper publishers attempted to characterize themselves as print analogs of the telegraph’s rapid communication, magazines turned to a different analog: that of the railroad journey. The magazines claimed to be a modern medium that retained vestiges of the older forms of communication, those that traveled in human hands, in human time. The magazine was “travel by reading,” enabling the discovery “not of new worlds for mankind, but of new worlds for each individual mind.”<sup>17</sup> The monthlies allowed readers to watch events and social and technological developments as if from a passing train in order to gain both imagined experience of distant objects and perspective on

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<sup>16</sup>By the 1880s, two words entered the American vocabulary that directly expressed the problem newspapers had become: “scarehead” referred to the screaming, sensational, alarming, large-type, and multi-columned headlines that newspapers began to splash across their front pages. “JERKED TO JESUS” read one such infamously telegraphed summation of a murderer’s hanging. And the “scaremonger” was a newspaper entrepreneur heedlessly and needlessly intent on raising or exciting alarm, with no other end than profit.

<sup>17</sup>*The Making of Harper’s Magazine* (New York: Harper, 1889), 36.

the rush of passing events. The monthly magazine was an excursion into the cultural system of sentimentality.

*Putnam's* was instrumental in blending the penny papers' telegraphic style into the slower periodicity of the magazines. Two of its editors, Godwin and Briggs, had begun their literary careers in newspaper journalism.<sup>18</sup> As editors, they assiduously sought out male and female writers experienced in newspaper writing.<sup>19</sup> They were especially interested in travel writers. *Putnam's* engaged some of the finest American travel writers of the day, including Bayard Taylor, Caroline Kirkland, Charles Dudley Warner, Richard Kimball, Henry Thoreau, and George Calvert. These "saunterers" were travel authors who were combining the new styles of newspaper writing with the sentimental sketch to create what might be called the journalistic sketch. Their sketches, notes George Putnam's biographer, "combined sharp reportage on the strange and familiar [with] wit... and entertainment...."<sup>20</sup> This "sharp reportage" gained its power from the telegraphic style.

The telegraphic style lay the groundwork for magazine writing after the Civil War. But the style, by itself, was incomplete as an aesthetic. To become complete it had to be grafted onto a more assertively moral mode of meaning than the penny press afforded. For magazinists of the day, that meant, of course, sentimentality. But the early telegraphic style and sentimentality were largely incompatible. Sentimentality retained its female character and the telegraphic style was closely associated with the male world of politics and the newspaper. The two came together by the 1870s, however, through the evolution of American ideas about nature and its relationship to American nationalism.

### *American Nature, American Nation: Populating*

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<sup>18</sup>Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam: Representative American Publisher* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 287, 289. Godwin, after *Putnam's* demise, contributed to both newspapers and magazines.

<sup>19</sup>Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 2: 1850-1865 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 425; Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 295.

<sup>20</sup>Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam*, 299.



*the Picturesque Landscape*

By the 1870s, American nature was in turmoil. American artists, intellectuals, and religionists had long been attempting to appropriate it as a means for making sense of national experience, but a series of aesthetic dead ends, religious conflicts, and scientific discoveries had complicated the ways they could think through nature. In great measure, realism, and the corresponding turn to regional cultural representation, achieved much of its postwar legitimacy by appropriating the antebellum attempts to situate American nationalism in specific scenes of American nature. To understand the relationship between realism and American nature, it is necessary briefly to examine what nature had come to mean for American postbellum culture.

In great measure, Emerson's lament that "man is disunited in himself" was a cry against the division between American nature and American moral culture.<sup>21</sup> He sought unity by calling on Americans to recognize that "The aspect of Nature is devout."<sup>22</sup> There was a similar sense developing among American Christians who turned away from the idea of nature as Satan's lair and toward a belief that American nature was a source of revelation. This idea was especially strong in the nation's colleges, where professors, from Earlham's Joseph Moore to Williams's Mark Hopkins, had begun to look to nature to discover revelations of God's design of both the material and the moral universe.<sup>23</sup> American artists,

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<sup>21</sup>Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1836, reprint; New York: Modern Library, 1968), 41.

<sup>22</sup>Emerson, *Nature*, 34. It should be recalled, too, that Finney experienced conversion while out in the woods.

<sup>23</sup>Profoundly influenced by the realism of the Scots, Williams professors urged students to study "the thing itself" and not its representation in books. The most important thing to be studied, according to these professors, was nature as the "expression of the greatness and goodness of God" (John Bascom [1853], cited in Frederick Rudolph, *Mark Hopkins and the Log: Williams College, 1836-1872* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956], 137). A Williams professor built one of the country's first observatories on the belief that "nature is to be studied rather than books" (cited in Rudolph, *Hopkins*, 137). An annual rite of summer was the climbing of nearby Mt. Greylock the better to wonder at the power of God's work (Perry, *And Gladly Teach* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1935], 16; Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield*, vol. 1: *1831-1877* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1925], 102; Rudolph, *Hopkins*, 143). Perry noted that there were few social enjoyments in Williamstown, but "at least in the faculty circle of a dozen families, a keen and cultivated enjoyment of the natural beauty of that northern Berkshire region. Professor Albert Hopkins [Mark Hopkins's brother], a depressing preacher at times but a mighty trumper, guided his Alpine club of young men and women to every picturesque spot within a dozen miles of Williamstown. Professors Bascom, Dodd, and Perry knew every mountain peak and all the back roads and trails" (*And Gladly Teach*, 16).

too, turned to nature. Their attempts to transform scenes of American nature into representations of American culture would flow directly into the formation of American literary realism.

The project of landscape artists such as Frederic Church and Asher Durand was, as Angela Miller has observed, “to root nationalism in the physical body of the republic.”<sup>24</sup> Believing as did most culturists that literature was too derivative of European models, painters held out the hope that the vast differences of American landscape from European vistas would provide an iconography on which a unique national character could be constructed. Instrumental to their project was the aesthetic theory of the picturesque. Eschewing other aesthetic modes, such as the sublime (which focused on natural phenomena that overwhelmed the senses, causing deep emotional responses of horror and awe) and the beautiful (which was characterized by scenes of order, balance, and harmony), the picturesque valorized the unruliness of natural processes: irregular forms, broken lines, rough textures, and contrasting values of light and shadow.<sup>25</sup> The picturesque concerned that which arrested one’s attention, that which stood out in contrast to its context. Artists of the picturesque pursued distinguishing features that allowed a landscape or a face to be read for deeper meanings. To antebellum American artists, the rough hewn aesthetics of the picturesque seemed ideally suited to the American experience of nature. The sublime and the beautiful were rare. Unlike singularly sublime features of the landscape as Niagara Falls or beautifully ordered gardens such as Versailles, the picturesque was associated with the local. Unique “character” could conceivably be discovered anywhere.

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<sup>24</sup>Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 7. American genre painters, such as George Bingham, also developed American nature as a backdrop for displaying the character of Yankee citizens or Western frontiersmen. But these uses of nature failed to create for Americans a sense of cohesive culture. Bingham’s concerted attempt to create a national character out of the Mississippi boatmen and other laborers met with a withering critical barrage from urban critics who denied his paintings the status of art (Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991], 89-90). A key aspect of the painters' problem in using art to forge national character was the dearth of gallery spaces and lack of illustrated magazines in which to display their work.

<sup>25</sup>Uvedal Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London, Eng.: J. Robson, 1794).

The painterly project foundered, however, on two serious limitations. First, it could not embrace a key aspect of the picturesque aesthetic: the depiction of the passage of time. The picturesque prized images in the landscape that were molded over with the patina of age: the ruins of ancient temples, outmoded forms of pastoral labor such as shepherds, and hints of long abandoned human effects on the landscape.<sup>26</sup> But these signs of time passing were crippling absent from the American landscape. Second, the picturesque could not link the American people to American landscape because the aesthetic itself forbade the prominent depiction of human figures.<sup>27</sup> The picturesque American landscape lacked, as George William Curtis complained in *Putnam's* in 1855, “any essential spirit of society.”<sup>28</sup> In this respect, the picturesque was resolutely anti-sentimental. Human figures, women in particular, were too alien to the painters' American nature.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the work of these artists merged with the Emersonian faith in nature to leave a powerful legacy for postbellum culturists.<sup>30</sup> The problem they faced was how directly to link American nature with American culture. What, in other words, was it in American nature that produced the American people? For a while, John Ruskin's aesthetic notions of nature as religious revelation seemed to offer a solution. But his evangelicalism and anti-modernism did not fit with the culturists' increasing adherence to Darwinian evolution. Evolutionary science, for its part however, did not explain so much that it could posit a satisfactorily all-encompassing, moral worldview.<sup>31</sup> The seemingly irresolvable dichotomy offered by Ruskin and Darwin was resolved for the culturists through their postbellum discovery of the positivist French historian and literary critic, Hippolyte Taine.

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<sup>26</sup>Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), ch. 4: “The Look of Age” (125-82).

<sup>27</sup>It would seem that the antebellum proliferation of paintings depicting “pic-nic” outings along forest-lined rivers was an attempt to put American figures into the landscape.

<sup>28</sup>George William Curtis, “American Travelers,” *Putnam's* 5 (1855): 563-64.

<sup>29</sup>Women were increasingly present in American genre painting in the 1850s, but they were largely confined to the domestic scenes popular in the ladies' magazines, such as *Godey's* and *Graham's*. See Johns, *Genre Painting*, ch. 5, 137-175, esp. 149.

<sup>30</sup>On “Nature” as both the form and the standard for antebellum American aesthetic values, see John Conron, *American Picturesque* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), xix.

<sup>31</sup>Witness Darwin's own attempts to resolve the amoral implications of evolution.

Taine wrote in the tradition of the European cultural nationalists such as Madame de Staël and the Schlegel brothers. But where they thought of culture in spiritual terms, Taine saw culture as the product of evolutionary and material forces. For Taine, cultures derived from three sorts of intertwining history: physical environment, race, and moment (or the contingent results of events). The best, and perhaps the only, source for examining these three aspects of culture was a nation's literature. Here, the historical scientist could observe, analyze, and classify the characteristics of a nation. Taine conceived of art deterministically as little more than the effect of material conditions. This determinism, which restricted cultural production to his three sources, ultimately did not sit well with American editors and authors. They were too imbued with the rhetoric of democratic individualism to allow for a solely positivistic world view. They sought a place for individual creative genius in the reading of literature. What Taine did give them was the sense that race, environment, and historical moment were vital aspects of cultural production. Literary expression was, for Taine's American followers, simultaneously individual and national expression. Or as Howells put it in regard to a criticism of the dourness of French realism, "The expression of French life will change when French life changes...."<sup>32</sup> The literary character was no longer to be limited to that side of sentimentality which focused on the moral career of an individual. Rather, literary characters were turned to the social side of sentimentality as types shaped by larger forces than individual experience. It was incumbent upon the individual genius to use the literary materials of his or her own life. In short, American literature was to be a sort of ethnographic laboratory for the study and invention of the American people. The name for this new literature was "realism."

*The Sentimental Investment in Realism*

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<sup>32</sup>Editor's Study" [November 1889], 222.

Literary historians have generally hailed Howells as the “center and circumference of American realism.”<sup>33</sup> He was certainly the popular face of the aesthetic, through both his own fiction and his monthly essays in a *Harper’s* magazine column, “The Editor’s Study” (1886–1892). But this identification of Howells with realism obscures the wide and deep appeal realism had in American literary culture, even among those who did not accept all the tenets of Howells’s militant version.<sup>34</sup> If the movement is seen in less polarizing fashion, it becomes apparent that even many of those authors and editors once deemed implacable enemies of realism in fact adopted much of the realist aesthetic. Indeed, sentimentalists themselves had long sought to ground sentimental culture in a realist aesthetic as they increasingly linked culture to American nature.

Josiah Holland, for example, was an early advocate of a sentimental realism that reflected American life. To be sure, his first criterion for a successful novel, or any literary work for that matter, was that it have a moral message, a spirit of ministry, and a will to improve the lot of humankind.<sup>35</sup> The vital prerequisite of a successful poet, Holland contended, “is a heart.”<sup>36</sup> The Scottish poet Robert Burns was a paragon of the culture of sentimentality, in Holland’s understanding, because “he was in sympathy with life....” Holland explained that Burns “loved nature, he loved mankind, he entered sympathetically into human trial and trouble; he hated oppression, he despised cant, he respected and defended manhood, and with all his [personal] weaknesses, over which he mourned and with

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<sup>33</sup>Sundquist, “Realism and Regionalism,” 503. Indeed, Sundquist reduces realism to Howells: “during his lifetime Howells was literary realism in America” (508).

<sup>34</sup>Benjamin Spencer noted the antebellum roots of realism. His discussion, however, did not consider the cultural sources of the aesthetic, but saw realism as a product of a will to nationalism (*The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1957]). For Spencer, realism came about due to an “impulse to realism.”

<sup>35</sup>Another important element in evaluating an author’s work was the author’s own character. Good work mattered little if an author hypocritically led a sordid life. Although Holland could praise Dickens for his sympathy with the plight of the suffering (“The Difficulty with Dickens,” *Scribner’s* 2 [October 1872]: 653-54) he simultaneously chastised Boz for an antipathy toward Christian missions and efforts at reform (*ibid.*; and *Plain Talks on Familiar Subjects* [New York: Scribner, 1865], 157-58). See also his condemnation of Poe in which he declared that a writer of such poor character “could never write a poem that would help anybody, or write a poem that possessed any intrinsic value whatever” (“Character, and What Comes of It,” *Scribner’s* 21 [January 1881]: 469).

<sup>36</sup>“Lord Lytton,” *Scribner’s* 5 (April 1873): 763.

which he struggled, he revered Christian goodness.”<sup>37</sup> Holland praised Lowell’s poem “The Vision of Sir Launfall” because of its sentimental moral: A knight’s discovery that the Holy Grail—for which he had long searched in distant lands—in fact resides in the figure of a leper at his castle gates who leads him to share his riches with the poor.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Holland condemned Poe’s poems because they did not “voice any man’s or woman’s aspirations or soothe any man’s or woman’s sorrows. They helped nobody.”<sup>39</sup>

By the 1870s, the novel had become for Holland the preeminent moral medium. But he faced a dilemma seemingly as intractable as his fight against religious sectarianism. Among significant portions of the American populace the novel was a social vice akin to the theater, alcohol, and worse. “Fiction was still to most readers, to the normal public of a magazine,” *Scribner’s* sub-editor Frank Tooker recalled, “only ‘a pack of lies’ ....”<sup>40</sup> But the novel, for Holland, was a form of religious expression. Unfolding in time, it had the form of revelation in the process of a character wrestling with questions of good and evil. The American people had to be won over to the novel. Holland saw this as his Christian duty. The great problem for Holland, then, was to make the moral novel speak to the plain people of the country.

To accomplish the task, Holland developed three strategies of writing that later came to exemplify Howellsian realism. First, he fostered a plain manner of writing, firmly in line with the new telegraphic style. “Simplicity, directness, perspicacity and perspicuity”—these, he argued, were the forms of speech essential to winning over those readers suspicious of fiction.<sup>41</sup> Local scenery was essential to appeal to what Americans already knew. Holland

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<sup>37</sup>“Lord Lytton,” 763.

<sup>38</sup>*Plain Talks on Familiar Subjects*, 163.

<sup>39</sup>“Dandyism,” *Scribner’s* 20 (September 1880): 788. Four months later, Holland added to his moral condemnation of Poe, rejecting his poems as “one continued selfish wail over lost life and lost love” (“Character, and What Comes of It,” 469).

<sup>40</sup>L. Frank Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York: Century, 1923), 259-60. Howells made the same point in *Silas Lapham*. During a discussion with the urbane Bromfield Corey, Mrs. Lapham recalls, “I used to like to get hold of a good book when I was a girl; but we weren’t allowed to read many novels in those days. My mother called them all *lies*” (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* [1885, reprint; New York: Signet, 1963], 82, emphasis in the original).

<sup>41</sup>“Literary Style,” *Scribner’s* 8 (September 1874): 620.

wrote of homely themes, adorning them with local details. Indeed, it was precisely in these terms that Lowell, that early advocate of realism, praised Holland's first long poem, *Bitter-Sweet*: "as genuine a product of our soil as a golden-rod or an aster. It is purely American—nay more than that, as purely New English, as the poems of Burns or Scott were Scotch [with] a flavor in it deliciously local and familiar...."<sup>42</sup> Last of all, a writer had to enter into a symbiotic relationship with the people. For to benefit the people, to minister to them, a writer had to be in sympathy with their wants, needs, and situations. The author's "true glory is only to be found in ministering."<sup>43</sup>

Holland's immense literary popularity demonstrated that there was a large audience for his moral realism. But his preoccupation with ministering prevented his work from becoming much more than a mechanical expression of Christian sentimentality. Holland lamented that wicked characters were more attractive as literary figures. Popular picaresque heroes of the 1870s, such as John Hay's Jim Bludso or Bret Harte's John Oakhurst, seemed larger than life while good characters too often seemed "constrained."<sup>44</sup> The wicked character, Holland noticed, acted from interior motives, from "appetites and passions [with] certain purposes, desires, ambitions...."<sup>45</sup> "Good" characters were uninteresting, Holland thought, because they were too predictable. How then, Holland asked, could an author give "good" characters the same gravitas that seemed to attach to the "free man"? The best answer he could offer was to urge authors to present goodness "as a spontaneous human growth."<sup>46</sup> In this answer, Holland was fumbling toward a main tenet of realism: character development. But Holland's exclusive emphasis on the moral made spontaneous and "natural" development virtually impossible. Holland's moral formula too severely

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<sup>42</sup>*Atlantic* 3 [May 1859]: 651-52.

<sup>43</sup>"The Literary Class," *Scribner's* 12 (June 1876): 268.

<sup>44</sup>"Goodness as Literary Material," *Scribner's* 16 (September 1878): 743. Bludso appeared in Hay's early dialect work, *Pike County Ballads*. Oakhurst was the gambler who sacrificed himself for the safety of a young newlywed couple in Harte's short story, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat."

<sup>45</sup>"Goodness as Literary Material," 743.

<sup>46</sup>"Goodness as Literary Material," 743.

constrained the realist author's creative freedom by mandating a rigid literary formula and a phony conversion narrative. Sentimental Christian literature such as Holland's could not become fully realist because the Christian moral was a patent *deus ex machina*.

To become fully realist, sentimental literature had to fuse its moral and aesthetic elements. The moral had to be "naturally" submerged in stories of the quotidian. This was Howells's goal as editor of the *Atlantic* in the 1870s, as serial novelist in the *Century* in the early 1880s, and as literary critic in *Harper's Monthly* in the late 1880s—a goal largely shared by his fellow magazinists.

According to Howells, the goal of realism was "to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition." The basic premise of its aesthetic, he continued, was that "fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature."<sup>47</sup> The fiction author's duty was "to report the phrase and carriage of every-day life,... to tell just how he has heard men talk and seen them look...."<sup>48</sup> Close observation was essential because it ensured that a writer was capturing "the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women."<sup>49</sup> Grafting onto American sentimentality the realist work of a new generation of Continental European writers (Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy, and Turgenev chief among them), American realism sought to capture the essence of American life, even as it served the moral ends of truth and beauty. Realism appealed to magazine editors of the 1880s because it

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<sup>47</sup>"Editor's Study" [May 1886], 22a. A year later, after Howells had come under attack for his theorizing, he infused his Editor's Study column with the air of a holy mission. He now put realism in terms of a critical project in his famous outburst: "Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach...." ("Editor's Study" [May 1887], 81b).

<sup>48</sup>"Editor's Study" [December 1887], 111b. Howells's realist aesthetic was apparent to critics by 1880, when William Crary Brownell wrote in a review of *The Undiscovered Country* that Howells's "theory is apparently that this is an 'everyday' world full of picturesque and, if you like, tragic material; but that, however great the tragedy, it is after all and in the main an 'everyday world'" (cited in Edwin H. Cady, *Road to Realism: The Early Years of William Dean Howells, 1837-1885* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1956], 198).

<sup>49</sup>"Editor's Study" [April 1887], 74b.



offered a wide cultural lens through which they could capture the social breadth of the nation without rejecting what they saw as literature's moral imperative.

Gilder and Johnson were generally in accord with Howells's realism. Indeed, the *Century* was instrumental through the early 1880s in publishing Howells's first, bona fide realist works (as magazine serials), including the controversial depiction of divorce *A Modern Instance*, the unblinking exploration of rural versus urban values in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and the "anarchical" exploration of "low company" in *The Minister's Charge*.<sup>50</sup> Gilder, in particular, was eager to advance the aesthetic. He was dedicated to Turgenyev as a model of literary style into the 1880s. In 1885, he tried to rescue Henry James's floundering serial novel, *The Bostonians*, by recommending he consider "whether the art [of the serial] would not be better if something of Tourgieneff's condensation were used."<sup>51</sup>

In July 1887, Gilder published a speech he had given earlier in the summer, in which he both extolled realism and expressed certain reservations. "The more reality [in literature] the better!" he exclaimed. Determined to deflate the "desultory" opposition between realism and idealism, he qualified his enthusiasm in sentimental fashion: "But," he suggested, "let it be a reality all the way through; reality of the spirit as well as of the flesh; not a groveling reality; not a reality microscopic, or photographic, or self-conscious, or superficial; not a reality that sees ugliness but is blind to beauty; not a reality which sees the little yet neither sees nor feels the great; not a reality which ignores those social phenomena, those actual experiences of the heart, those natural passions and delights which have created in man the 'romantic spirit'; those experiences of the soul which have created in him 'the religious

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<sup>50</sup>The *Literary World*'s critic was one among many who protested *The Minister's Charge*, Howell's exploration of Boston society: "We believe that no phase of life is too common, too rude, or too vulgar to be seriously considered by the novelist. But Mr. Howells in *The Minister's Charge*, is more than democratic, he is anarchical" (cited in Carter, *Howells*, 147). Howells complained to Henry James about such critics: "Of all grounds in the world they take the genteel ground, and [quoting O.W. Holmes] every 'Half-bred rogue that groomed his mother's cow' reproaches me for introducing him to low company. This has been the tone of 'society' about it; in the newspapers it hardly stops short of personal defamation" (Howells to James, 25 December 1886, *Selected Letters of Howells*, vol. 3, 174).

<sup>51</sup>Gilder to James, 18 May 1885, *Century* letter book E.9, Lilly Library.

spirit,' and which are facts of existence certainly no less important than any other."<sup>52</sup>

Concerned that Howells not misinterpret his essay, Gilder enthusiastically wrote to him that he was "very largely [in] sympathy [with] the thing you are doing and driving at both in your stories & in your essays & criticisms."<sup>53</sup> Nine days later, Gilder wrote again, still unable to contain his enthusiasm. He earnestly wanted to hear Howells's opinion about his speech: "I quarrel a good deal with some of your opinions, so exquisitely— sometimes magnificently expressed— in the [Editor's] Study;— but you are I know, whipping a lazy horse up hill! I quarrel I say & yet I hold out my hands to you as to a voice crying in the wilderness. With all its [Gilder's speech's] qualifications & protests & leanings toward something else I hope you will find in my essay more sympathy than your critics give for the new monument [of realism]."<sup>54</sup> Gilder's overriding concern in the realist debate was to prevent the remedy for lachrymose literature from becoming more destructive than the disease. "True sentiment," he warned in an address in May 1887, "often suffers in the attempt to stamp out

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<sup>52</sup>Gilder, "Certain Tendencies in Current Literature," *New Princeton Review* 4 (July 1887): 5-6. On Gilder's support for realism, see Herbert Smith, *Richard Watson Gilder* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 141-44. Smith emphasizes that Gilder's appreciation of realism came less from Howells's theoretical pronouncements and more from his literary practice in works such as Silas Lapham, in which Lapham's nobility of character allows him to choose the moral course even though it might lead to financial ruin (142-43).

<sup>53</sup>Gilder to Howells, 5 July 1887, Howells Papers, Houghton Library. On this correspondence, see Leonard Lutwack "William Dean Howells and the Editor's Study," *American Literature* 24 (May 1952): 199-200. Lutwack unfairly portrays Gilder as an apprehensive supporter of realism, claiming that Gilder published his "moderate plea for realism" in the *New Princeton Review* "where it would be sure to escape general notice" (200). If he wanted it to escape general notice, then why publish it at all? The *Review* was in fact an important outlet for critical writing in the late 1880s (on the *Review*, see Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3).

<sup>54</sup>Gilder to Howells, 14 July 1887, Howells Papers, Houghton Library. Gilder had also informed Howells in his first letter that he had "come under the spell" of Howells's realist heroes Tolstoy and Turgenev. They had deeply affected him, particularly Tolstoy, "I do not see how any one can read Tolstoi without being intellectually, & perhaps morally, born again" (Gilder to Howells, 5 July 1887, Howells Papers, Houghton Library). In the second letter, however, Gilder lauded Turgenev over Tolstoy as a realist, "Tolstoi perhaps— evidently— does not quite impress me to the extent he does you.... [T]o me he is not the consummate artist that Tourguéneff is" (Gilder to Howells, 14 July 1887). Gilder demonstrated his interest in Tolstoy by publishing his work and by praising the Russian author at a seventieth birthday celebration: "As to his art, we should not be so interested in Tolstoy's opinions if he had not the power of putting the human spirit into human language beyond the power of any man now living" ("In Honor of Tolstoy," *Critic* 33 [n.s. 30] [October 1898]: 287)

sentimentality....”<sup>55</sup> Gilder was worried that realism might shear away what he saw to be literature’s duty to clear the path of “moral progress.”<sup>56</sup>

Johnson was not as committed to realism as Gilder. That he was committed is evident from his support for the aesthetic as late as 1912.<sup>57</sup> But in 1879, he could snipe to one author, “You know that the 19th century is so pestered with admiration for realism....”<sup>58</sup> A few years later he attempted to inspire the diffident author by telling him “Give wings to your imagination, and don’t let ’em be clipped by current fashions in so-called ‘realism.’ We are bound soon to get something great in imaginative fiction or the signs fail. I fear it won’t come out of Mr. Howells’ methods....”<sup>59</sup> This letter suggests that there was some dissension in the *Century* offices. For the magazine was just then running Howells’s realist serial, *A Woman’s Reason*, and was soon to publish not only Howells’s *Rise of Silas Lapham*, but Henry James’s *The Bostonians* as well. Johnson’s reservation about realism was sentimental. Realism, he wrote in 1912, was “necessary as a means,” but not as an end. For Johnson, it had always to be tempered by an idealism that “breathes the breath of life into all it touches.”<sup>60</sup>

Realism was a search for beauty and truth firmly in line with sentimentality. For Howells, as for Gilder and Johnson, beauty and truth were virtually synonymous. “The finest effect of the Beautiful,” he wrote in the Editor’s Study, was “ethical, and not aesthetic merely. Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Howells, as if responding to Gilder’s concerns, favorably quoted Keats’s aesthetic formula—“Beauty is

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<sup>55</sup>This address was the basis for Gilder’s “Current Tendencies” article. Parts of it appeared in *The College Argus*. The only text of this article I could locate was in the Gilder Papers, Scrapbook 4, New York Public Library.

<sup>56</sup>“Certain Tendencies,” 12.

<sup>57</sup>Johnson, “The Responsibilities of the Magazine,” *Independent* 73 (27 December 1912): 1488. On Johnson’s realism see also Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964), 72.

<sup>58</sup>Johnson to Cable, 28 July 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>59</sup>Johnson to Harris, 19 March 1883, cited in Paul Cousins, *Joel Chandler Harris* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 139.

<sup>60</sup>Johnson, “Responsibilities,” 1488.

<sup>61</sup>“Editor’s Study” [November 1886], 50. The fact that Howells could not determine here whether the source of morality was external or internal to human nature significantly reveals the dilemma sentimental culture had in locating the source of moral legitimation.

Truth, Truth Beauty”—in the December 1887 “Study.”<sup>62</sup> Howells’s views accorded with the Scottish common sense philosophers’ linkage of beauty and morality. For Howells, beauty was the guarantor of humanity’s moral imperatives. Beauty, he wrote, “exists in the human spirit, and is the beautiful effect which it receives from the true meaning of things; it does not matter what the things are, and it is the function of the artist who feels this effect to impart it to others.”<sup>63</sup> This beauty was not that ethereal evanescence, with its Oriental perfumes or smooth classical proportions, contemplated in the esthete’s atelier, the intellectual’s study, or the aristocrat’s library. Realism was to be a democratic art.<sup>64</sup> It would be, in a sense, the culmination of the anxious Americans’ search for a popular art form. It was not something American readers would appreciate in academically aesthetic terms. Rather, it was to be the laboratory in which they worked out the cultural ramifications of their democracy. Realism was a response to the poverty of late nineteenth-century American politics. In the absence of a morally invigorating political life, realism would critique life for those who were actively living it. Realism would demand a new democratic criticism of the people. It would demand a new aesthetic that judged literature, not on abstract literary principles, but according to literature’s fidelity to the events and emotions of every-day American life.<sup>65</sup> In this turn to realism, Howells had come to appreciate the democratic significance of Holland’s popularity.

Realism, for editors from Howells to Gilder and Johnson, was the aesthetic moral of American democratic culture. The truth and beauty of realism flowed from the political essence of American democracy transmuted to the realm of culture. Realism’s cultural aim was to discover the commonalities of American life, the traits that wove the country’s many threads of local culture into a united people. Niagara Falls did not represent American

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<sup>62</sup>“Editor’s Study” [December 1887], 110. Gilder’s passionate interest in Keats dated to the 1870s. He and Johnson were later leading forces in raising funds for the Keats-Shelley memorial in Rome.

<sup>63</sup>“Editor’s Study” [November 1889], 223a.

<sup>64</sup>See, e.g., Howells’s contention that “It is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a meaning or message for them...” (“Editor’s Study” 74b). He also advocated a criticism that grew out of every-day experience.

<sup>65</sup>“Editor’s Study” [December 1887], 111a.

culture, for Howells. “Such beauty and such grandeur as we have,” Howells asserted, “is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else.”<sup>66</sup> Because there could be no equality of condition, nor even similarity of cultural traits in the democratic expanse of America, the artist’s duty was to portray “those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity....”<sup>67</sup> America, Howells suggested, would turn the old feudal order on its head by discovering the noble in the everyday and thereby invent an equality of culture. “The arts,” Howells cried, “must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art....”<sup>68</sup> Gilder and Johnson could not have agreed more. In 1882, they published Thomas Perry’s glowing review of Howells’s early work in which the critic proclaimed, “Realism is the tool of the democratic spirit, the modern spirit by which the truth is elicited.”<sup>69</sup>

For Howells, as for Gilder and Johnson and their contemporary magazine editors, the core sentimental feeling of sympathy was fundamental to their project of fostering a united nation. Following Taine, they believed that the purpose of literature was the expression of the national life. But mere expression was inadequate to create unity. Sympathy was the operative element that would forge what Benedict Anderson calls “the deep horizontal comradeship” essential to national culture.<sup>70</sup> But where Anderson considered literary changes in the perception of time to be the key psychological component of national belonging, the realists believed that belonging was the product of the psychological mechanism of sympathy. American democratic sympathy was merely waiting for an honest, democratic, national expression to call it into action. Literature would express the basic tenets of American uniqueness, and sympathy with those tenets would bind each American, no matter

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<sup>66</sup>“Editor’s Study” [July 1888], 146a.

<sup>67</sup>“Editor’s Study” [July 1888], 146a.

<sup>68</sup>“Editor’s Study” [July 1888], 146a.

<sup>69</sup>Thomas Perry, “William Dean Howells,” *Century* 23 (March 1882): 683.

<sup>70</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

his or her social or economic station, with all others. Realism's task, averred Howells (almost echoing Holland), was to "widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition...." As such, its method had to encompass the most basic aspects of American character by asserting that "fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature."<sup>71</sup> Thus, realism vitally depended on a literature that was more than a reflection of reality. It had to go further and offer the seamless experience of reality.

To accomplish that end, the primary aesthetic goal of realism was to banish romanticism from American literature and to curtail the emotional excesses of sentimental fiction. Howells condemned romantic literature for it depicted society's victims as "impossibly virtuous and beautiful."<sup>72</sup> Earlier sentimental literature was flawed in its too strong emphasis on emotional affect, particularly the streams of tears sentimental characters had been forced to shed. Howells's *Lapham*, as one literary scholar has argued, "attack[ed] sentimental self-indulgence in love as fiercely as it [did] corruption and dishonesty in business."<sup>73</sup> (By extension, the Century magazine *also* attacked sentimental self-indulgence as its editors enthusiastically published *Lapham*.) But it did so not as an attack on sentimentality but as a reform from within sentimental culture. Surely, the realists argued, there were other emotions worth exploring. The realists also objected to the earlier sentimental literature's need for a didactic moral. Johnson felt this deeply. He had learned early on the wholesome value and subtle power of the story told "through the human touch... without any *moralité*." And he learned it, not in debates over literary criticism, but as the natural method of his father's story-telling. Realist magazine editors after 1880, no matter their position on the conflict of romanticism versus realism, accepted those aspects of realism

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<sup>71</sup>"Editor's Study" [May 1886], 22a.

<sup>72</sup>"Editor's Study" [September 1887], 95.

<sup>73</sup>Sundquist, "Realism and Regionalism," 506.

which curbed the emotional excess and didactic moralizing. They also, virtually universally, accepted a third aspect of realist style.

Realists were strongly opposed to author's inserting themselves in fictional narratives. The overt moral of sentimentality was one example of this. Magazine editors suppressed authors' attempts to step out of their narrative and speak directly to readers. The realist commitment to truth was at stake.

Ironically, illusion was a central feature of the truth of realism. Author asides or comments on the characters destroyed this illusion. Authorial interruptions "spoil[ed] the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides."<sup>74</sup> Or as Johnson phrased it, all art (fiction in particular) was "a compromise with facts to obtain an effect of truth through beauty and illusion."<sup>75</sup> Sentimentality had long emphasized the pictorial as a means to bring home the experience of distant phenomena. Illusion, a life in the imagination, was essential for sentimental culture and for the realist aesthetic. Truth, to be real, had to have the force of objectively experienced events, places, and actions. If realism were to achieve any epistemological status beyond mere entertainment or subjective experience, Howells explained, it had to figure "that apparent self-being which is the perfect artistic illusion or the effect we call reality."<sup>76</sup> Correlatively, the nation, to be real, had to exist in an imagined community powerful enough to rival lived experience.

Illusion was essential to realism for another reason. Realism provided magazine editors with their own comforting illusion: the vital illusion of audience. That is, for Howells, Gilder, and Johnson, readers existed in the stories told about them to the same degree that stories told about readers' daily existence. Realism, they believed, was not an aesthetic that could be imposed on readers. Rather, it was, in their eyes, the liberation of a

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<sup>74</sup>"Editor's Study" [November 1889], 226b.

<sup>75</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), 127.

<sup>76</sup>Howells, "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly* 40 (7 March 1896): 223; cited in Elsa Nettles, *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 64.

truly popular, universally common taste. To the extent that realist literature expressed that common taste it embodied the editors' ideal, democratic reader.

Howells castigated those notions of taste employed for social exclusion. Critics, he warned, were developing a "pride of taste" which was nothing but a "pride of caste."<sup>77</sup> The antidote was a call to "Democracy in literature."<sup>78</sup> To justify the call, Howells rehabilitated Edmund Burke, approvingly quoting the conservative aesthetician's claim that "*The true standard of the arts is in every man's power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things, in nature, will give the truest lights.....*"<sup>79</sup> Satirically characterizing Burke as a harbinger of the coming "communistic era in taste," Howells looked forward to a new standard of literary judgment that employed one simple test, asking of any new artwork, "Is it true?"<sup>80</sup> The new arbiters of taste would not be those who studied art, nor those who reflected on life, but those who understood life, those who lived it.

Taste was the ability to ascertain whether an art work was truthful and beautiful. As such, taste was essential to the moral element of the project of the realist editors. It was the ability to distinguish works of fleeting popularity from those of permanent worth. Permanent worth was determined by a work's essential Americanness, its fidelity to American emotions and scenes. Literary value, following Taine, was determined by how well a book or story captured the history, environment, and racial essence of the American people. In the terms of the realist aesthetic, such fidelity was denoted by the term beauty, or as Howells put it, "common beauty, common grandeur."<sup>81</sup> Beauty also referenced morality: The more American a story was, the more moral it was. Taste, in short, was the ability of American readers to determine whether a cultural work was, as Gilder put it, "the product of a strong or

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<sup>77</sup>"Editor's Study" [September 1887], 96a.

<sup>78</sup>"Editor's Study" [September 1887], 96a.

<sup>79</sup>"Editor's Study" [December 1887], 111a; emphasis in original.

<sup>80</sup>"Editor's Study" [December 1887], 111a; "Editor's Study" [April 1887], 74b.

<sup>81</sup>"Editor's Study" [July 1888], 146a.



a weak nature.”<sup>82</sup> Nature here had a double register. It referred to both the individual’s and the nation’s character.

Taste required openness, the principles of evolution and progress demanded it. “[T]he one good thing necessary to the education of the taste,” Gilder maintained in 1878, “is the receptive mind and mood. When the mind loses its curiosity, teachableness, humility,—then its education is at an end.”<sup>83</sup> Unlike the conservative adherents of quasi-aristocratic aesthetic theories, Gilder understood taste in dynamic terms: “There is such a thing as a growth in taste....” Taste was the product of learning and a certain cultural flexibility.<sup>84</sup> A key element of taste was the ability to recognize that one’s taste had grown and changed. Taste, for the realist editors, was not a rigid set of academic standards. Inasmuch as literature was a laboratory for forging a better life, realist literary criticism was also criticism of life.

The open, democratic taste, however, could only be an ambivalent arbiter, much to the realist editors’ chagrin. It had no permanent Platonic forms (or types in the language of the day) against which to judge literary characters and cultural works. While Gilder and Johnson might, at times, ardently wish for such types, their dynamic sense of the world always led them back to the necessity of learning and being open to change. In the absence of a God to legitimate their moral system, they had little choice but to place their faith in the progress of the beautiful, the spread of what Gilder called “the fire divine,” and humanity’s natural aptitude for truth. So long as their magazine sales increased, they could maintain that faith.

### *The Science of Local Color*

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<sup>82</sup>“The Old Cabinet,” *Scribner's* 16 (June 1878): 290.

<sup>83</sup>“The Old Cabinet,” *Scribner's* 13 (February 1877): 563.

<sup>84</sup>In this essay, Gilder could sound like the rigid defender of effete [art] that several have accused him of being. Taken out of context his contention that “strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a difference in taste. The difference is in the presence of taste, or the absence of it” (“Old Cabinet” [June 1878]: 289) could sound like a call to man the class barricades. But the real target of his statement was not the working class, but the priggish conservative who refused to actively confront art. “The true Philistine,” Gilder said, “is the man who ‘never makes a mistake,’ who has had the same principles, the same opinions ‘for the last thirty years’” (289)—that is, the Bourgeois Gentleman grown old.

In the 1880s, American culture was divided between two seemingly irreconcilable modes of life: the country and the city. Both of these arenas of national life found expression in the realist aesthetic, with urban life generally denoted as realism and rural life as local color, or regionalism. Literary historians have generally been perplexed by the relations between these two modes. On the one hand, they have separated them as two virtually distinct genres, with urbanist realism being a precursor to naturalism and modernism and regionalism being a sentimental, nostalgic lament for a once simple home culture ravaged by the complexities of modern life.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, they have recognized that, “[b]ecause their edges blur and their central meanings shift, the categories ‘realism’ and ‘regionalism’ cannot be conveniently separated.”<sup>86</sup> They have been unable to discover the organic link between the two faces of realism, urban and regional.

Sentimentality is the link. Realism demanded that readers experience the differences of American life as if one actively lived them. Flowing from the basic tenets of sentimental culture in combination with the new naturalism, realism also demanded that readers experience all phases of national culture. Thus, the characters of distinct subcultures were not deemed “exotics.” They were not held up as grotesque “others” in an attempt to define staid, middle class norms. Rather, they were all expressions of American national character. They were the stuff of American uniqueness, defining the country as distinct from European nations. The new fields of character that local color authors mined were compensation for the nation’s lack of a history such as those European nations could boast—Taine had made history an essential element of a national culture. A national people, to be considered a race in Tainian terms, had to constitute a world historical people. But American had no racial history. Realism in its regionalist guise addressed this dilemma. In place of a history of ancient and mythical events, realism posited a living history of unique American characters. American nationalism no longer required a distinct natural landscape. It now required an

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<sup>85</sup>See, e.g., Sundquist, “Realism and Regionalism,” 508-509.

<sup>86</sup>Sundquist, “Realism and Regionalism,” 501.

overdetermined conception of race. Americans were to be the people made of many different peoples living in different regions each colored in a unique fashion.

Local color allowed American authors and magazine editors to transform the nation's heteroregionalism from a cultural liability into a positive, defining characteristic. "This country," wrote author James Lane Allen in 1886, "presents a field of unequalled diversity for special studies in local color."<sup>87</sup> This field of study required new aptitudes of the author. The literary sketch had traditionally characterized the author as an artist whose medium was words rather than paints. But, now, in the full sway of realism, Allen added another requirement: The author had now to "be in some measure a scientist." The new realist literature of local color was "a direct consequence of the development of certain branches of physical science." Literature now had two aims. The first, artistic aims, Allen asserted, "should be to make the picture of human life natural and beautiful, or dreary, or sombre, or terrific, as the special character of the theme may demand...." The second, scientific aim of local color was "to make the picture of human life natural and—*intelligible*, by portraying those picturable potencies in nature that made it what it was and must go along with it to explain what it is."<sup>88</sup> These potencies required a highly sensitive authorial intelligence to capture and depict them accurately. They suggested a new relationship between the author and his or her subject—subject being understood as a human product of American nature.

The local color movement began with the rise of Bret Harte out of the literary mines of the California gold fields in the late 1860s.<sup>89</sup> It was both the product and the repudiation of the antebellum literary sketch. Where the earlier sketch was drawn by a sauntering seeker

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<sup>87</sup>James Lane Allen, "Local Color," *Critic* (9 January 1886): 13.

<sup>88</sup>All quotes from Allen, "Local Color," 13; emphasis in original.

<sup>89</sup>Claude M. Simpson, "Introduction," *The Local Colorists: American Short Stories, 1857-1900* (New York: Harper, 1960), 3. There has been little historical work on the development of local color. One recent collection suggests that the movement began only in the 1880s, and then includes only two local color stories written before 1890 (one by Murfree and a selection from *Nights with Uncle Remus*, which, by all rights, should not be classified as local color). The selections seem to have been made with an eye to proving later political theses and to including canonical literature (such as Sherwood Anderson's "Hands"—an absolutely marvelous story, but hardly an example of the local color genre). See Elizabeth Ammons & Valerie Rohy, eds., *American Local Color Writing, 1880-1920* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

after the picturesque in distant, unfamiliar regions, local color required intimate and *real* knowledge of a particular locale. The literary sketch derived from an quasi-aristocratic sensibility. It was akin to the antebellum economic structure of core and periphery. The antebellum sketcher represented a literary core exploring its cultural periphery. But local color had pretension to being democratic. It was the panoply of the nation's multiple peoples speaking through the single vehicle of the magazine. Where the literary sketch was written by a stranger, local color was best written by a native member of a culture—or at least someone who could pass for native. For only natives possessed the social knowledge of material existence and spiritual essence to adequately portray a people. Gilded Age author Hamlin Garland defined local color as “demonstrably the life of fiction.” In an era when Americans were discovering themselves and their local expressions of national spirit, local color was “the native element, the differentiating element. It corresponds to the endless and vital charm of individual peculiarity.”<sup>90</sup> But local color, Garland went on, was not the depiction of the parochially exotic. For, as any adept of Taine would understand, it had to flow from and into the dynamic force of a literature: its “national character.”<sup>91</sup> Local color progressed beyond the picturesque of antebellum literary sketches because of this connection with national culture. The older genre was the work of tourists, outsiders. Local color was literature that “could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native.”<sup>92</sup> It depicted the “actual life” and social conditions of the nation in its local variations.<sup>93</sup> The “tourist,” Garland admonished, “cannot write the local novel.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Hamlin Garland, “Local Color in [Literary] Art,” in *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1894), 57. Garland originally gave this paper at the Literary Congress at the Chicago World’s Fair, 14 July 1893 (Pizer, *Hamlin Garland’s Early Work* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960], 115. Although Garland’s essay appeared twenty years after *Scribner’s* discovered Cable, his definition of local color largely captures the ideas with which the earlier editors were working.

<sup>91</sup>Garland, “Local Color,” 63.

<sup>92</sup>Garland, “Local Color,” 64.

<sup>93</sup>Garland, “Local Color,” 58.

<sup>94</sup>Garland, “Local Color,” 64.

*Speaking Local Color: Dialect*

Dialect was central to the realist aesthetic. It was to culture what local color was to nature. It was the linguistic version of the specific “picturable potencies” of particular local colors. But dialect was more than a simple sign of local culture. It was crucial to realist magazinists’ nationalist pretensions. Nationalism required a medium between local experience and national culture. American culture, if it were to be true to its democratic ideals, could not be imposed from above. It had to celebrate the local and individual. American culture thus ran the constant risk of fragmenting in its very production. On the one hand, then, dialect was the promise and production of American local difference. On the other hand, dialect was capable of stitching up this difference. To be unified as a culture, American nationalism required some unifying agent. Dialect provided a unifying resolution to cultural fragmentation because it was also the expression of American cultural (rather than political) history.

Dialect was realism’s history. The antebellum attempt to create a picturesque nationalism had failed largely because it could not link American nature to American history. Speakers of dialect, however, gave the American landscape the patina of age the picturesque had lacked. Dialect was living linguistic history. As such it created an ambivalence for its readers. It was simultaneously a process of incorporation and distancing. Dialect did not create *social* others so much as *historical* others.

The realists did not invent dialect. Two sometimes widely diverging uses of dialect had developed during the antebellum decades. Literary dialect had been a topic of nationalist discussion throughout most of the nineteenth century. Humorous dialect spread rapidly through American print and theater cultures beginning in the 1830s. The confusing interactions of these two modes of dialect complicated the realists’ attempts to convert it to an American cultural history.

Literary dialect had its origins in attempts during the Early Republic to distinguish American speech from that of England. A handful of observers discovered signs of linguistic

difference in the late 1820s and early '30s. In 1829, John Neal published a list of words that had unique “Yankee pronounceashun.”<sup>95</sup> In 1832, the *New-England Magazine* sought to prove that the U.S. was as dotted with distinct regional and local dialects as England.<sup>96</sup> But into the 1840s at least, few critics would have argued that the American language as a whole was as derivative of the mother tongue as American literature was of its British forebears. “[T]he mass of our individuality,” one commentator claimed as he surveyed the state of American language and letters in 1845, “is English.”<sup>97</sup> In the 1850s, as the science of philology made its way to American readers through books and magazines, culturists such as James Russell Lowell gained a new appreciation for American language.<sup>98</sup> While Lowell, following Noah Webster, argued that American English represented a pristine early form of the English language, he also joined others in celebrating cis-Atlantic dialects as unique expressions of American culture.<sup>99</sup> Lowell’s own pseudonymous “Biglow Papers,” a series of Yankee dialect poems decrying first the Mexican–American War and then the rise of the Confederacy, were widely popular. Lowell chose dialect to broadcast his political convictions because he understood it was a far more popular idiom than the “ambrosial diet” of the poems he wrote in standard English.<sup>100</sup> Although Lowell was ambivalent about the success of the Biglow poems (“Mr. Biglow has a thousand readers for my one,” he complained<sup>101</sup>), he nonetheless desired to find a language that would put “the tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar.”<sup>102</sup> By time he became editor of the *Atlantic* in 1858, he

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<sup>95</sup>“Yankee Pronounceashun,” *Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* 2.26 (25 June 1829): 205.

<sup>96</sup>“Yankeeisms,” *New-England Magazine* 3 (November 1832): 377-81.

<sup>97</sup>See for instance, “Il Secretario [E.W. Johnson],” “American Letters: Their Character and Advancement,” *American Review* 1 (June 1845): 579.

<sup>98</sup>Cmiel notes the popularity of new books on philology, but neglects to mention parallel interest displayed in magazines (*Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 107). For magazine articles, see, e.g., George P. Marsh, “Old Northern Literature,” *American Review* 1 (March 1845): 250-58; and “Idioms and Provincialisms of the English Language,” *American Whig Review* 9 (March 1849): 251-65.

<sup>99</sup>On Lowell’s theory that American English was closer to classic English than the refined version spoken in the British isles of his day, see Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 110-11.

<sup>100</sup>Cited in Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 108.

<sup>101</sup>Cited in Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 108.

<sup>102</sup>Cited in Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 109.

firmly believed that folk sources revitalized a language. Though unable to find a median language between Biglow and ambrosia, he became a major influence on postbellum realist magazinists, his successor in the *Atlantic* editorial chair William Dean Howells in particular. “Let fiction,” Howells would later demand, “speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere....”<sup>103</sup>

Realists hoped dialect would be able to bridge both regional and class divisions in American society. As early as 1832, a writer in the *New-England Magazine* noted the power of dialect to speak across class boundaries. The effect of dialect in Scott and Burns, he claimed, had been to “transplant... the flowers of speech that naturally bloom in the environs of the dunghill and sewer, to the more agreeable, though perhaps less odoriferous, atmosphere of the boudoir and drawing-room.”<sup>104</sup> Fifty years later, scholar Charles Forster Smith expressed the same belief in regional terms. Dialect literature, he noted, allowed Americans across the country to know Southern groups once unknown. The new subjects of Southern dialect writing—the cracker, the negro, the mountaineer, the Creole—comprised “[j]ust those classes that were ignored in the consideration of what constituted the South before the war....”<sup>105</sup>

This was precisely the goal of the magazine editors who published this literature. Howells, in his ten years as editor of the *Atlantic*, published more than fifty dialect stories, by authors as diverse as Missourian Mark Twain, Californian Bret Harte, Southerner Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Noailles Murfree), Midwesterners John DeForrest and Constance Fenimore Woolson, and New Englanders Sarah Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>106</sup> But it was in the *Century* magazine that dialect (and local color) literature turned into a literary avalanche. “There was a cult of the vernacular in 1888,” recalled realist author Hamlin Garland, “and Gilder was its high priest.” And Henry Mills Alden of

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<sup>103</sup>“Editor’s Study” [May 1887], 81b.

<sup>104</sup>“Yankeeisms,” 378-79.

<sup>105</sup>Charles Forster Smith, “Southern Dialect in Life and Literature,” *Southern Bivouac* (1885): 346.

<sup>106</sup>Nettles, *Language, Race, and Social Class*, 65.

Harper's, he added, "was almost equally hospitable."<sup>107</sup> Garland lauded their support of dialect and local color work. Due to these editors "fiction as well as poetry was basing itself on the common earth."<sup>108</sup> But Gilder and Alden could hardly afford to be sanguine about their successes.

Literary dialect was fraught with ambivalences. Magaziners and literary critics walked a very thin line between dialect as a form of social psychology and as a social construct that had little to do with life as lived. In a day when the individual psyche was still largely an unexplored domain, dialect pointed to the cultural character of a nation or region. For dialect was never about individuals. It was always about social types. It was the psychology of a people. Sophie Bledsoe Herrick, long time *Century* subeditor, carefully drew the connections between the psychology of social types, dialect, and the role of the artist. Writing to Page in 1885, she revealed a conception of literary dialect fully in line with Tainian theory. For her, the ability to capture dialect on the printed page was a natural aptitude akin to an ear for music or an eye for color. "Mere familiarity" with one's subjects was not adequate to portraying them in dialect.<sup>109</sup> The Negro, for instance, was not simply the sum of his dialect. The artist's duty was to reveal *through* dialect both "the essence way down below the mere formal expression" and "the subtler qualities of character." Herrick's abiding concern was to see "the real thing." Dialect was perforce an element of local color. For only those raised among Negroes, she attested, had any hope of plumbing their essence. To be a skilled dialect writer, one had to be both a native and a gifted artist. Even then, she acknowledged, the task was difficult: "They are a different type of the human race; not easily to be learned by a Caucasian." The task, however, had to be done. Herrick cautioned Page

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<sup>107</sup>Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 104.

<sup>108</sup>Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, 104.

<sup>109</sup>She complained to Page about the seemingly innumerable Southerners who believed they could draw Negroes well simply because they had lived among the ex-slaves for so long.



that his feeling for dialect imposed on him a heavy responsibility. It was his duty “to rescue the fast fading life of the past from absolute extinction.”<sup>110</sup>

As a reputed social psychology, dialect was crucial to the “art” of local color realism. It provided instant literary characterization. Different literary dialects indexed different sets of psychological characteristics. When Herrick referred to the Negro as “a different type of the human race” above, she was using one of the key words in the vocabulary of nineteenth-century realism. The “Negro type” was loyal, pathetic, humorous, self-effacing. The “Irish type” was boisterous, rowdy, contemptuous of authority. To a certain degree then, dialect speakers represented character types as much as cultural icons. Magazine readers could use these types to think with, to conceive their relations to one another and to the *socius*. The point was not one specifically of self-identification—though that was always one of the potential ambivalences of dialect reading. Rather, it was to conceive of different forms of society and the social relations that sprang from them. A society of Negro dialect speakers, then, should be one in which manners are supreme and the noble virtues of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and humility are paramount. The ambivalent nature of dialect as cultural representation, however, meant that readers of dialect could come to believe that actual people embodied these characteristics. The dialect character type could quickly ossify into stereotype.

Magazinists and critics understood that dialect was socially constructed. They had few scholarly scruples about preserving actual speech with a “photographic” realism— notwithstanding the notes they sometimes appended to stories suggesting that the dialect was rendered according to principles of scientific observation.<sup>111</sup> Their goal was commercial popularity. It mattered little to editors and authors whether dialect exactly and entirely mirrored actual speech.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Herrick to Page, 29 August 1885, Page Papers, Duke.

<sup>111</sup>See, e.g., the note that accompanied Thomas Nelson Page’s “Meh Lady,” *Century* 32 (June 1886): 187-205.

<sup>112</sup>The exception might be Joel Chandler Harris.

Literary dialect was a series of invented languages, each with its own rules. Negro dialect, for example, always dropped final “r” and transformed the “th” to “d” (“before the war” thus became “befo’ de wah”). Irish dialect rendered “t” as “th” (turning “after” into “afther”). But these rules did not constitute a foreign language, impervious to casual readers. A literary dialect had to be a variant on standard speech, but not too variant. Successful dialect greatly depended on its accessibility to a wide array of readers, no matter their own race, region, class, or ethnicity. Dialect had to be a language that anyone could read, anyone could speak, and anyone could write. Dialect, in effect, was a caricature of speech.

In the commercial and cultural context of the national magazine, editors saw nothing wrong with manipulating dialect according to audience interests, literary criteria, and publishers' style guidelines. George Washington Cable reworked much of the dialect of *The Grandissimes* for its book publication.<sup>113</sup> Numerous words in Page's “Marse Chan” were significantly altered not only from the manuscript to the magazine story, but once again when the story was published in book form. The word “together” in manuscript, for example, became “togedder” in the *Century* and then “togerr” in the book.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the author and editors were not the only ones with the right to modify the dialect. The *Century*'s type setter Theodore De Vinne had his own dialect style guide which authorized him and his workers to change words in conformity to dialect precedents set in earlier volumes of the *Century*.<sup>115</sup>

The disconnection between dialect and actual speech was not an editorial secret. But the discovery of actual instances of disconnection could still occasion a sense of loss.

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<sup>113</sup>Louis D. Rubin, *George Washington Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 282n6. In his original manuscript, Honoré Grandissime often uttered the interjection, “my de-sir” (see Rubin, *Cable*, 88n). By the time the phrase reached book form, it had become “My-de’-seh.”

<sup>114</sup>See manuscript, 7, line 16; *Century*, 934, left column, line 5; *In Ole Virginia*, Scribner's Plantation Edition, 8, line 25 infra. At another point, “odther” (manuscript, 30, line 10) transformed into “udder” (*Century*, 937, right column, line 9 infra) and then “urr” (*In Ole Virginia*, Scribner's Plantation Edition, 25, line 8). There are numerous such changes throughout the story. Where such changes in Page seem to have been concerned chiefly with stylistic consistency, Joel Chandler Harris, alone among the dialect writers, worried that his dialect was scientifically accurate (Robert Hemenway, “Introduction: Author, Teller, and Hero,” *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* [New York: Penguin, 1982], 36).

<sup>115</sup>Blair & Fischer, “Textual Introduction,” *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 492.

Charles Forster Smith reported searching for dialect among the mountaineers of Western North Carolina. They were “considerably amused,” he noted, “at some of the words that I told them they had been made to use” in various dialect stories.<sup>116</sup> Yet, Smith went on to defend the cultural mission of dialect because of the way it was popularizing Southern culture throughout the nation. . Charles Dudley Warner, long-time contributor to the cultural magazines and friend to Gilder and Alden, felt cheated to discover on a trip to those same mountains that the natives did not know they were supposed to speak in dialect. They seemed, he wrote in an 1885 *Atlantic* article, to have no “dialect or local peculiarity of speech. Indeed, those we encountered that morning had nothing in manner or accent to distinguish them. The novelists had led us to expect something different; and the modest and pretty young lady with frank and open blue eyes, who wore gloves and used the common English speech, had never figured in the fiction of the region. Cherished illusions vanish often on near approach. The day gave no peculiarity of speech to note, except the occasional use of ‘hit’ for ‘it.’” Such deflations ultimately had little effect on dialect’s popularity among either readers or the magazinists who published it. Because it did not exist, it had to be invented.

Conservative critics attacked dialect, however, precisely because of the social project of cultural amalgamation they thought was behind dialect literature. They deeply feared that dialect cut across social boundaries, erected and maintained through all sorts of institutions, and brought the better sorts into an unhealthy contact with the coarse and vulgar. Dialect, they claimed, was a social parasite that infected American thought through its language.<sup>117</sup> T.C. De Leon, for instance, argued that dialect writing “must be the expression in lower

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<sup>116</sup>Smith, “Southern Dialect,” 349.

<sup>117</sup>Gavin Jones offers an important corrective to Cmiel’s *Democractic Eloquence*, for Cmiel pays little attention to dialect. But I am not sure that Jones’s extended metaphor of dialect as “contamination” is, in the end, very helpful. It makes dialect into a potentially subversive act against established culture, when it seems that the propagators of dialect appreciated it as a method for constructing American culture. See Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chs. 1 & 3, esp. 67-71.

forms of speech of the thought of the lower order of mind.” He did not condemn dialect outright. He admitted that dialect could be effective when it “naturally” arose out of a story’s circumstances. But this was rare. For De Leon—Southern journalist, author, and Confederate veteran—dialect was “largely nauseating.” It was a social disease, he suggested, “because it disinclines, or unfits, the reader for segregation.”<sup>118</sup>

The socially constructed nature of dialect created a major commercial problem for magazine editors. Numerous readers, not just the occasional critic, were deeply disturbed by dialect literature. Editors constantly grappled with the dilemma of how far to push the use of dialect without alienating such readers. Gilder explained the antinomies of dialect and audience reception in a letter to Hamlin Garland. The passage is worth quoting at length because, as Garland noted, it “revealed the heart of his [Gilder’s] editorial policy.” It is all the more poignant because it was written after Gilder’s editorial turn in the 1890s toward a defensive editorial position. Yet, even as a new pessimism about the “masses” settled on him, he retained his belief in realist dialect. “[T]he newspaper press nowadays is vulgarizing,” Gilder began.

It not only expresses the vulgarity of the American masses but increases it—that is, to a large extent. Every decent man and woman, including many newspaper men, deprecates this condition of things. Now if we print too many stories which are full of the kind of language which should not be used, we seem to many persons to be continuing the work of vulgarization. On the other hand, we value correct pictures of life—of even pretty common life—and the consequence is we are giving an undue proportion, possibly, of dialect fiction.<sup>119</sup>

Gilder and Johnson heard the critics who attacked dialect as a pedagogy of rudeness. They sympathized with but they did not kowtow to the self-righteous prigs fearful of a

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<sup>118</sup>De Leon, “The Day of Dialect,” *Lippincott’s* 60 (November 1897): 683.

<sup>119</sup>Gilder quoted in Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, 182-83. Gilder’s literary support for Garland is all the more striking considering that the young author was then the eye of a critical storm. His call for a greater literary realism at the literary congress of the Chicago World’s Fair brought charges in the press that he was the leader of a “piratical crew [of] ravening heretics.... [W]orse than iconoclasts, they are but one remove this side of anarchists” (Charles H. Dennis, *Eugene Field’s Creative Years* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1924], 132).

contaminated language. Far from “guardians” of an elite culture, they sailed between the Scylla of those “who deprecate the very existence of the popular magazines” and the Charybdis of those “who fear that our literature may lose in frankness and in force from the supposed necessity of trimming too consciously to the taste of an audience which has many sensitive and hypercritical elements.”<sup>120</sup> As Gilder told Garland, he understood the threat felt by genteel readers: “People who are trying to bring up their children with refinement, and to keep their own and their children’s language pure and clean, very naturally are jealous of the influence of a magazine—especially of the *Century Magazine*—in this respect.”<sup>121</sup> To protect against complaint or the accusation of social injury, Gilder stipulated that dialect stories had to “strongly recommend” themselves before he would publish them.<sup>122</sup> The *Century* editors often policed dialect stories for “vulgarisms” to prevent attacks by the defenders of the pure. In one story, at least, the editors were able to use dialect to obscure a potentially ungentle reference. Where an author referred to a character as an odious alcoholic, the editors more vaguely and colloquially described the character as “nothin’ but a half-strainer.”<sup>123</sup>

Magazine editors remained committed to dialect because it was crucial to the legitimacy of local color realism. It was the sign of an author’s regional authenticity. To a great extent, dialect worked as a barrier, inhibiting outside authors from masquerading as native. Howells’s inept use of the Southern dialect in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (in the characters of Mr. Woodburn and his daughter), for instance, clearly marked him as a stranger to Southern life. So powerful was dialect as a sign of Southernness by the mid 1880s that Henry James apologized to the readers of *The Bostonians* for his inability to render Mississippian Basil Ransom’s speech cacographically.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>Gilder, 1885, reprinted in “Certain Tendencies,” 9.

<sup>121</sup>Gilder quoted in Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, 183

<sup>122</sup>Gilder quoted in Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, 183.

<sup>123</sup>“Marse Chan” manuscript, p. 39 1/2, in Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia. A “half-strainer” was a sort of moral half-breed, part good but equally part trouble. It was colloquial enough to avoid the purists’ attention.

<sup>124</sup>“It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters [Ransom’s] charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound, which is to be associated in the present instance with nothing vulgar or vain.... [T]he reader who likes a complete image, who desires to read with the senses as

The socially constructed nature of dialect and its cacography constantly threatened literary dialect's pretensions to social reality. The fact that editors could make changes at will, or impose a "house style" of dialect on authors, revealed just how specious dialect was. The lack of correspondence to actual speech was the ticking time bomb in dialect literature. For it was here that literary dialect risked collapsing into its most egregious alternative form: minstrel dialect.

Purportedly "Negro" dialect became a staple of New York newspapers by the 1830s.<sup>125</sup> In that decade, Negro dialect took two forms, minstrel dialect and its own literary dialect. These would have a complex relationship over the ensuing decades, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes diverging into opposing modes. Minstrelsy, on its own, is an exceedingly complex phenomenon that has attracted numerous historians in recent years. They have enumerated key aspects of it which allow for a comparison with literary dialect.

Blackface minstrelsy was an expression chiefly of urban culture. Its height of popularity was the 1840s, a time when industrialization was creating massive immigration to the cities and manifest destiny was drawing great numbers of settlers further to the west. Most minstrels, as Alexander Saxton and others have remarked, were northern, city-bred whites.<sup>126</sup> Their minstrelsy was intimately associated with the Democratic party's political vision. Minstrelsy from the 1840s through the 1860s, Saxton demonstrated, "propagandized metaphorically the alliance of urban working people with the planter interest of the South." Minstrels created this link by celebrating/lamenting the Northern worker's journey from the country to the city or the Pacific coast settler's westward journey toward the frontier. These

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well as with the reason, is entreated not to forget that [Ransom] prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels, that he was guilty of elisions and interpolations which were equally unexpected, and that his discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone, something that suggested the teeming expanse of the cotton-field" (James, *The Bostonians* [Penguin, 1986], ch. 1, 36. Henry Adams also declined to give his Southern characters dialect speech in *Democracy*.

<sup>125</sup>Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 107-108.

<sup>126</sup>Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 168. This paragraph is largely based on pp. 165-74.

two audiences gave black-face minstrelsy its two main valences: its urbanity, on the one hand, and, on the other, its nostalgia for a lost world left behind by the journey. This nostalgia for a gone world explains why the South became the scene for minstrelsy. To a great extent, minstrelsy was the urban working class's expression of the mid nineteenth-century turn to nature. "Early minstrels," Saxton explained, "had understood slave music not as African but as close to nature. Correspondingly, they perceived slaves as *part* of nature—part of the nature of the South." The South, Saxton argued, symbolically stood for an idealized but lost home. Collectively, the plantation South represented for urban workers and Pacific Coast immigrants a lost rural past. Individually, it stood for a lost childhood.

Minstrelsy was inherently racist because of its alliance with Democratic party politics. To make their idealized symbolism work, black-face minstrels also had to idealize plantation slavery as a nonthreatening, even cheering institution. Industrialism was thoroughly transforming the Northern landscape, rendering it incapable of serving the symbolic function of an idealized rural home. Moreover, slavery, as a form of unfree labor, worked as a metaphor for workingmen's own situation so long as workingmen believed that they had once been free. The pathos of their own situation only made sense if they could claim that their status had declined from rural freedom to urban wage slavery. They thus had to mythologize their own rural homes as sites of free labor. Ironically, then, a favorite target of the burnt-cork players was the Abolitionist. It seems odd that minstrelsy's largely working-class audience would revile the Abolitionist's cant of freedom. It was as if minstrelsy had to choose between two fights: one against the captains of industry or the other for black freedom. Racism born of self-preservation largely dictated their choice.

Minstrelsy harbored numerous ambivalences. David Grimsted has pointed out that the low comedy man of the antebellum theater (whether Yankee, Irishman, or Negro) was "at once shrewd and simple minded."<sup>127</sup> The black-face minstrel too was simultaneously docile

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<sup>127</sup>David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (1968, reprint: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 186.

yet capable of biting satirical comments against powerful social figures. Moreover, as Eric Lott has argued, minstrelsy was bound up with a simultaneous setting of racial demarcations and illicit transgressions of those very boundaries.<sup>128</sup> Another ambivalence concerned the very use of blackface: Numerous stage directions in published versions of “Ethiopian sketches” suggested ways to adapt blackface works to other ethnic groups: white, Irish, Yankee, Dutch.<sup>129</sup> But perhaps the greatest ambivalence of all concerned the relationship of minstrelsy to the production of a uniquely American culture. Numerous culturists hailed plantation music as the source of American national culture. James K. Kennard lampooned Young America’s anxious search for a national literature in 1845 by answering his rhetorical question, “Who are our national poets?” with “Our negro slaves to be sure! *That* is the class in which we must expect to find our original poets, and there we *do* find them. From that class come the Jim Crows, the Zip Coons, and the Dandy Jims, who have electrified the world. From them proceed our only truly National Poets.”<sup>130</sup> But by the mid 1850s, probably to Kennard’s horror, slave music could be sincerely classed among the nation’s few indigenous cultural productions. An anonymous writer in the antislavery *Putnam’s* in 1855 warned that white appropriations of authentic black plantation music presaged the downfall of the American republic.<sup>131</sup> In language that came to haunt the literary appropriation of Negro dialect after the Civil War, the author proclaimed black music to be the only true expression of American nature. “[t]he true secret of [black songs’] favor with the world is to be found in the fact that they are genuine and real.” Ridiculing the “senseless and ridiculous imitations forged in the dull brain of some northern self-styled minstrel,” the *Putnam’s* critic

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<sup>128</sup>Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49-55, 148-53.

<sup>129</sup>William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mast: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 157.

<sup>130</sup>James K. Kennard, Jr., “Who Are Our National Poets?” *Knickerbocker* (1845), reprinted in Annemarie Bean et al., eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 50-63; quotation is at 52. For more on Kennard and minstrelsy’s relation to American nationalism in the 1840s, see Lott, *Love and Theft*, ch. 4: “The Blackening of America: Popular Culture and National Cultures.”

<sup>131</sup>“Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern,” *Putnam’s* 5 (January 1855): 76.



praised the “veritable tunes and words which have lightened the labor of some weary negro in the cotton fields, amused his moonlight hours as he fished, or waked the spirits of the woods as he followed in the track of the wary raccoon.” So saturated with authentic experience was this music that it was “impossible to counterfeit, or successfully imitate, one of these songs....” Anyone, the critic scoffed, could detect the falsity of white burnt-cork mimicry, for “[t]he shameless imitations carry their imposture upon their faces.”<sup>132</sup>

Literary Negro dialect was not prevalent before the Civil War. Books set on the plantation such as John P. Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* frequently rendered black speech in standard English.<sup>133</sup> Three Southern authors employed Negro dialect in the 1830’s and ’40s—ironically, all three, Edgar Allen Poe, William Alexander Carruthers, and William Gilmore Simms had close ties to New York City, and so may have been inspired by the developing blackface minstrel theater.<sup>134</sup> But the dialect was rare, Poe, for instance, used it only in his 1843 tale, “The Gold Bug,” and Simms used it sparingly as in his 1845 story, “The Snake of the Cabin.” These few examples of antebellum literary Negro dialect hardly offered a counterbalance to the minstrel dialect that swamped theater stages of the North and West. Magazine literature after the Civil War, however, would completely alter the grounds on which Negro dialect’s authenticity and imitation could be judged.

As the magazines increasingly used Negro dialect to invent a reality for Southern literary culture after the Civil War, these sorts of ambivalences transmuted. The aesthetic of realism worked to strip away the overt politics of minstrelsy. In linking dialect to region, it simultaneously sundered the relation between dialect and racial or ethnic essence. Different

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<sup>132</sup>“Negro Minstrelsy,” 72-73.

<sup>133</sup>Hyder E. Rollins, “The Negro in the Southern Short Story,” *Sewanee Review* 24 (January 1916): 43.

<sup>134</sup>Carruthers, for instance, made frequent references to the songs of the blackface minstrel singers (Curtis Carroll Davis, “Introduction,” in Carruthers, *The Knights of the Golden Horseshoe* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970], xiv-xv). James Fenimore Cooper also put Negro dialect into the mouth of the slave character, Caesar, in *The Spy*. But Caesar served the narrative as comic relief, not as a figure of Southern culture, particularly since he was a New Yorker.

dialects expressed the psychology of different social, regional types. Particular dialects would come to have unique capacities to signify particular aspects of culture. The Scottish dialect, George Wakeman claimed in the *Galaxy* in 1866, was the very voice of “love and endearment.” The “Yankee mode of speaking... renders it excellent for humorous portraiture” (as witness, Wakeman pointed out, Hosea Biglow). The Knickerbocker accent automatically “brings up a hundred quaint and old-fashioned scenes.” The black plantation songs signified the quintessential call for sympathetic response: pathos. In the coming decades, as Northern magazines spurred a craze for Southern literature built around the black slave and freedman, the term “pathos” would dominate the critical discourse of sentimental realism.

### **Form Follows Aesthetic: Valorizing the Short Story and the Serial Novel**

Realism was preeminently a literature of the magazine. For it was in the monthly periodical that the social vision of the urban newspaper aesthetic could be merged with the picturesque tour in search of nature. Where the penny papers focused almost solely on urban society, the problem for magazine editors had been to widen their medium’s purview to reproduce the nation in its myriad manifestation, rural as well as urban. Antebellum editors had been stymied largely because they conceived of magazines as reviews that would guide authors to the production of a single capstone novel that would somehow embody all of American experience. But postbellum editors, imbued with the tenets of realism and its emphasis on local color and multiple dialects formulated a different strategy for embodying the totality of American life. The overarching question for postbellum nationalists was how to portray the multiple races, nations, and cultures of the U.S., not as unique in themselves, but as elements of a single great *e pluribus unum*. Realism suggested, beyond its approaches that concerned style and content, a formal response as well. The postbellum magazine became, in a sense, a laboratory of national culture.

The magazine format allowed for all manner of generic experiments. Most important of all was the realist magazine editors' development of the American short story. The short story evolved into a bona fide literary form in the *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, the *Century*, *Harper's*, and their numerous imitators. It allowed them to reiterate the scenes and actions of local color literature over and over.<sup>135</sup> It also allowed for generic experimentation in fusing elements of local color and the urban picturesque.<sup>136</sup>

Postbellum magazines, to a great degree, invented the short story. It had its roots in the form of sketches, first developed in works such as Washington Irving's collection *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* Critics had long considered sketches as a mere commercial genre, fit for lady's magazines and gift books.<sup>137</sup> Even Hawthorne's short works could be categorized as female, particularly since they often appeared in such media.<sup>138</sup> Authors and editors tended to see such short works as no more than an apprentice exercise. But in the postbellum decades, these attitudes disappeared. The short story quickly became the premier American literary form. In 1880 *Scribner's* could praise a Bret Harte story only defensively: "Short story though it be, it is an honor to American literature."<sup>139</sup> Yet, by 1887, Howells remarked the form's advancing acceptance. American writers, he claimed, had "brought the short story nearer perfection than almost any other people." The reason for this

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<sup>135</sup>On the cultural need for such reiteration, see J. Hillis Miller, "Narration," in Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 70-79.

<sup>136</sup>Poe's initial and brief essay at defining a shorter literary form appeared in his famous review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in an 1842 number of *Graham's* magazine. See Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 571-74. The first extended literary work attempting to delineate a specific definition of the short story was Brander Matthews's "The Philosophy of the Short-Story," *Lippincott's* (1885). See Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story* (reprint of 1923 edition: New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1966): 291-95; and Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>137</sup>Levy, *Culture and Commerce*, 31.

<sup>138</sup>W.A. Jones, "Female Novelists [1844]," (in *Characters and Criticisms* [New York: Westervelt, 1857], 198-99). See also, Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 17.

<sup>139</sup>Cited in Pattee, *American Short Story*, 292.

was the American magazine: “The success of the American magazines, which is nothing less than prodigious, is only commensurate with their excellence.”<sup>140</sup>

The watershed moment for the short story was Brander Matthews’s essay, “The Philosophy of the Short-Story,” published in *Lippincott’s* in 1885. Matthews set out to define just what constituted a short story and to pinpoint the short story’s method for creating effects. He thus took care to distinguish the short story from both the sketch and the novel (“the genuine Short-story abhors the idea of the Novel”). His overriding cultural concern was to claim the short story as a genuinely American art form and to explain why American authors excelled in writing them. As with Howells, he clearly linked his explanation to the power of the American magazine. “The Short-story,” he noted, “is of very great importance to the American magazine.”<sup>141</sup> (Book publishers recognized the close relation between the short story and the magazine in that they shied away from publishing short story collection through the end of the century.<sup>142</sup>) American magazines paid well for short stories, where in a country like England, authors could make a living only by writing novels. Moreover, short stories in American magazines had the power to catapult authors to instant fame—an event unknown in England. Matthews’s article sparked that note of pride in American literature that the antebellum anxious nationalists had so ardently hoped for. Critical response increasingly savored the American short story, which had an unintended consequence. As the short story rose in critical estimation, the reputations of earlier American writers of the form—Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe, in particular—were rehabilitated.<sup>143</sup>

As short stories gained precedence in postbellum magazines, novels began to reflect their form. Dickens’s novels beginning in the 1830s had first appeared in serial form and went far in legitimating the practice. But serial novels did not achieve any notoriety in the

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<sup>140</sup>“Editor’s Study” [February 1887], 66a. On the rise of the short story in the American magazine, see Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, , 113-14.

<sup>141</sup>Matthews, “Philosophy of the Short-Story,” 372.

<sup>142</sup>Simpson, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>143</sup>Levy, *Culture and Commerce*, 34.

U.S. until *Harper's* made serials the literary anchor of the monthly magazine in the 1850s.<sup>144</sup> The structure of novels was deeply affected in the process. Novels could no longer stretch into behemoth tomes. Plot-driven narratives had to cater to the amount of space available in twelve or so monthly installments, and their pacing had to follow accordingly. Character-driven novels could not unfold slowly. They had to grab the reader's attention with sharp details, vivid local color, and striking situations.<sup>145</sup>

The magazine short story and serial novel were ideal vehicles for the realist project of creating a national culture. The magazine was, in a sense, a serial genre constituted of short stories. As such it mirrored the realists' aim of inventing American national culture as a series of stories about regional culture.

Moreover, as a serial collection of short items, the magazine format allowed realist editors to intersperse short fiction among nonfiction articles. The fiction and the nonfiction then mutually corroborated the realist vision at work in each. The fiction provided national spirit for the nonfiction, while the nonfiction assured the material reality of the fiction. Both could speak to similar issues: a story about Georgia "crackers" could be repeated nonfictionally in a report about the transformation of Georgia's old plantation system. They could also draw implicit parallels with other topics: progress in cell research, the history of New England, or the moral trials of Silas Lapham. What linked these various topics was what Benedict Anderson called their "profound fictiveness" and the necessity of imagining the relations among them.<sup>146</sup> Anderson's concern is to show the role of the newspaper in the

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<sup>144</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 619; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 2, 547; Charvat, "Literary Economics and Literary History," in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 287-88. A few serial novels had appeared in American magazines in the 1830s and '40s, but they were unusual (Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 1, 619). The word "serial," moreover, did not refer to periodical novels until the mid 1840s (*Oxford English Dictionary*, compact ed., 497). Charvat notes that *Harper's* magazine's establishment of serials as a permanent feature of the monthlies was a key moment in the professionalization of American authorship, as authors realized that they could potentially sell the same work twice (288).

<sup>145</sup>The production of novels was also affected. In many cases, editors considered serialization a vital first step in the publication of novels, and many authors found it to be the chief way of making a living as professional writers.

<sup>146</sup>Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 33.

production of national consciousness. The imaginative process for Anderson results from the “calendrical coincidence” of the newspaper’s daily production and its ritualistic consumption. The newspaper’s periodical appearance is an emblem for what Anderson, following Walter Benjamin, calls “homogeneous, empty time.” That is, time is marked not by older forms of “prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and [is] measured by clock and calendar.”<sup>147</sup> The arrival of the newspaper, which is mass produced, creates a reassurance in its audience that “the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.”<sup>148</sup> If these are what the newspaper does, then how much better suited to both was the postbellum American magazine. Serial novels provided a temporal continuity that duplicated the serial dates on the magazine’s successive covers. The interplay of fiction and nonfiction duplicates the interweaving of imagined worlds and everyday life implicit in the ritual of receiving the magazine at monthly intervals. Most important, the postbellum magazine made the imagination of the real nation its overt project.

Richard Watson Gilder came to see the American magazine in just these terms, especially in its relationship to the American short story. In a letter to James Lane Allen, discussing his support for Southern literature, he noted that “in the North, as well as in the South, short stories seem to have reached the greatest perfection....” Nodding to the relatively new literary status of the form, Gilder went on: “I regard a good short story, not only in itself as a notable work of art, but as having no little importance as a separate scene in the great panorama of contemporary life.”<sup>149</sup> Thus Gilder would most likely have agreed on two counts with Howells’s point that the short story achieved “phenomenal success” because of the success of American magazines: formally, it was the ideal frame for periodical literature and ideologically it brought together representations of the vastly different groups of Americans that made up the United States. The magazine, which brought these multiple

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<sup>147</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.

<sup>148</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35-36.

<sup>149</sup> Gilder to James Lane Allen, 28 January 1890, letter press book #4, New York Public Library.

images of America together, then, for Gilder, was the single canvas on which the national panorama was drawn.

The magazine short story became by 1900 a defining characteristic of American culture. Matthews used it to declare finally the nation's literary independence from England. Howells patriotically proclaimed in 1901 that the short story was "a form which I have great pleasure in as a reader, and pride in as an American."<sup>150</sup> German-American psychologist Hugo Munsterburg declared in 1904 that "The Americans have always shown a special aptitude and fondness for the short story.... Perhaps the American is nowhere more himself than here; and short stories are produced in great numbers and are especially fostered by the monthly magazines."<sup>151</sup> Such was the success of the short story as an expression of national culture that by 1927 critic Ruth Suckow could note, albeit somewhat ironically, that the American short story "has been put into the schools, like the salute to the flag."<sup>152</sup>

### **The Nature of Realism: Toward the Reconstruction of Culture**

Holland and his successors were part of a fundamental transformation of American culture. Nature, once the site of unspeakable evil, became the very source of American culture. Early nineteenth-century American Christianity devoted itself to the worship of a supernatural God who lived beyond the material world. By the time Holland came to adulthood, however, both religious and secular Americans were reconceiving nature. Realism transformed American nature by populating the landscape with unique characters that were simultaneously local and national. Rejecting the lachrymose, religious didacticism of the extremely popular sentimental literature of the 1850s, the realism of the 1880s signaled a shift away from an individualist, face-to-face social imagination produced in and for local audiences. Realist characters now seemed to be the product of the nation's very soil. Realism fused the social

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<sup>150</sup>"Some Anomalies of the Short Story," *North American Review* 173 (September 1901): 424.

<sup>151</sup>Hugo Munsterburg, *The Americans* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1904), 469.

<sup>152</sup>Cited in Levy, *Culture and Commerce*, 54.

imagination of urban literature with the American landscape to produce unique *national* characters. Realism was able to create this fusion because it did not rebel against the culture of sentimentality. Instead, it derived its power from a sentimentality shorn of its religious trappings. Realists understood their purpose in sentimental terms, as the aesthetic moral legitimated through the awesome force of truth and beauty. Realism was to be the secular fulfillment of the culture of sentimentality.

But this fulfillment was a Pyrrhic victory. Local color and dialect made regionalism the dominant mode of American nationalist thought in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Local color demanded that, even as magazine editors held a vast amount of power in the centralized production of American culture, they had to cede much of that power to authors who could claim local legitimacy. The ultimate good of the realist aesthetic would depend greatly on the specific projects and the particular “legitimate” local colorists these editors engaged. As New York editors sought to salve the great cultural wounds of the Civil War, the realist aesthetic would tragically prevent them from comprehending the threat of new conceptions of race. Unfortunately, local color increasingly became the black and white of a racial culture that consigned blacks to speak in a Negro dialect—if they wanted to be represented in the democracy of culture.

At the same time, race would undermine the regionalist project by fragmenting the magazine’s audiences into racial and class formations. Dialect, in the realist aesthetic, was meant to be the expression of difference as a precondition for the cultural construction of a unified culture. Postbellum magazine editors saw local speech as the paradoxical needle stitching a seamless web of literature and audience. But dialect only appeared to speak to the magazine’s ideal audience, the democratic masses. Its actual audience was, it seems, comprised mostly of middle class whites. For these middle classes, dialect provided a history of their own social mobility that they simultaneously embraced in their cultural imagination and forgot (or, worse, excluded) in actual practice.





## Chapter 7

### **Cultural Reconstruction: National Unity and Racial Division in the American Magazine**

*Huckleberry Finn*, the source of modern American literature, was written in dialect, suffused with sentimental culture, riven with racial ambivalence, and first published in an unexpectedly “sivilized” place.<sup>1</sup> That place was the *Century* magazine.<sup>2</sup> Historians of the Gilded Age and literary critics have rarely acknowledged that *Huck* first appeared in a monthly magazine.<sup>3</sup> When they have noted it, they have hardly known what to make of it. It cuts against numerous established disciplinary boundaries and canonical categories, and raises difficult questions. What was Huck Finn—poor, ragged, mendacious, resolute enemy of established order and the copy-book virtues—doing in the *Century*’s cultural warehouse among the Rembrandt, Shakespeare, and Turgeneff articles? Why did this “triumph over the sacred tribal law of conformity,” as Vernon Parrington called it, first appear in a magazine modernists such as he reviled as priggishly Victorian?<sup>4</sup> Why did the *Century* editors, if they

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<sup>1</sup>The claim regarding *Huck*’s place in American literature was made by Hemingway. On Twain’s sentimentality, see Gregg Camfield, *Sentimental Twain: Samuel Clemens in the Maze of Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>A third of the novel ran in the magazine over three months, December 1884 to February 1885. Scott points out that the *Century* published 38 percent of the story, although it cut 18 percent of this for various reasons (“The *Century* Edits *Huckleberry Finn*, 1884-1885,” *American Literature* 27 [November 1955]: 358). In terms of words, then, the *Century* published 28 percent of *Huck*.

<sup>3</sup>When they have recognized this fact it has most often been to revile Gilder for touching a “masterpiece.” See, e.g., Scott’s high dudgeon regarding the edits Richard Watson Gilder made. He fulminated against the *Century* editor for supposedly attempting to make the excerpts fit into a “chaste, urbane, conventional mold” (“The *Century* Edits *Huckleberry Finn*, 1884-1885,” 362). But what Scott does not consider is potentially far more interesting: Why would Gilder *want* to publish such a work in the first place?

<sup>4</sup>Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought*, vol. 3: *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), 95.

were the effete guardians of elite culture the modernists made them out to be, want to acquire a work written in a Niagara of cacographic dialect? And finally, why were the *Century* editors positively desperate to publish any and all of *Huck*? “I want this badly,” Richard Watson Gilder wrote Twain as they negotiated its publication in the *Century*.<sup>5</sup>

The answers to these questions are bound up in a vast project of the *Century* and its predecessor *Scribner’s*. Deeply troubled through the 1870s and ’80s by the failure of Political Reconstruction and the bitter sectional divisions it wrought, Josiah Gilbert Holland, Richard Watson Gilder, and Robert Underwood Johnson formulated a strategy of Cultural Reconstruction to resolve the problem of American national union. These editors and many of their competitors brought the entire history of the American magazine to bear on the problem of sectional reunion. Their solution, unevenly and never coherently theorized, was to encourage the development of regional literary cultures.

The central thesis of the project of Cultural Reconstruction was that the U.S. could achieve national unity only through inventing for its diverse regions a sort of representative democracy of culture. Where antebellum magazines foundered on their intensely parochial interests, Cultural Reconstruction would use the centralizing power of the magazine industry to produce regional cultures as part of a larger whole. Northeastern magazine editors believed that, just as the Civil War had settled the question of national sovereignty, the magazine now had the power to constitute and coordinate a plethora of regional cultures. Regionalism attempted to make a virtue out of necessity. The U.S., according to the editors of *Scribner’s/Century*, was simply too varied geographically and culturally to constitute a nation on the centralized and homogeneous national model of European theorists such as De Staël, Herder, and Taine. Moreover, the development of these regional cultures had been dangerously uneven, as the Civil War proved to Northern magazinists. They thus reasoned that a unified American nationalism could only be produced through the formation and

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<sup>5</sup>Gilder to Cable, 10 October 1884, cited in “Textual Introduction,” in Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Walter Blair & Victor Fischer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 487.

coordination of vibrant regional cultures. But coordination required cultural parity among the regions. All regions had to produce literature of a high quality if Cultural Reconstruction was to forge a national culture.

The paradoxical premise at the heart of Culture Reconstruction was that national unity could only be created through the production of cultural difference. The *Scribner's/Century* editors believed they could resolve the paradox by refining the aesthetic moral of sentimentality toward a higher realism. A greater literary realism, they hoped, would appeal to wider audiences and create the foundations for binding interregional sympathies. They could have opted for a national literature that addressed other themes. They could have championed stories that blatantly asserted the rights of the middle class, or that emphasized a shared history in the times before the rise of sectional tensions during the colonial or Revolutionary eras, or that xenophobically posited an American national superiority over European nations.<sup>6</sup> But these were not made the overt thematics of Cultural Reconstruction. Because of the long shadow cast by the Civil War, postbellum magazinists opted for a national culture constructed of regionalisms. Through realist local color and dialect literature, they believed they could create a cultural *e pluribus unum*. Their project was to have immense consequences for American ideas of class and race.

The linchpin of their regional project was the South. The central problem of Cultural Reconstruction was that Northern literature had been as brutally triumphant in the field of culture as the Union army had been on the fields of battle. There simply were no Southern writers who could match the caliber of the grizzled lions of Massachusetts (Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Emerson, Whittier) and the rising literary bantams of New York (Whitman, Bryant, Stedman, Taylor, Aldrich).<sup>7</sup> A curious Gilder asked New Orleans author George

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<sup>6</sup>Stories and serial novels and other nonfiction departments of the magazines, of course, did all these things from time to time. Class was always present as was the implied comparison of American and European culture, but Cultural Reconstruction did not set these as the foundation for the postbellum nationalist project.

<sup>7</sup>Poe was not considered a Southern author: Born in Boston and living much of his adult life in New York and Philadelphia, Poe wrote few stories that had Southern themes or settings.

Washington Cable in 1878, “Has good literature ever before been made out of Louisiana material by a Southern writer? In fact,” he wondered with a note of incredulity, “what romance of the South by a Southerner is there—that amounts to anything?”<sup>8</sup> These editors, thus, believed that they had to use Taine's ideas not to discover a culture that already existed, but to call Southern culture into existence.<sup>9</sup> The *Century* editors' project was complicated by the mass of Southerners who were patently disinterested in the problem. They refused to patronize either Southern publishers or Southern magazines.<sup>10</sup> So long as the South remained missing in cultural action, the *Century* editors feared, American culture would remain fractured along sectional fault lines. The magazine as cultural legislature Gilder and Johnson envisioned would provide a forum where the South could represent itself. The problem was that, in the early 1870s, there seemed to be no fit representative who could

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<sup>8</sup>Gilder to Cable, 15 July 1878, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Consider too the comment in a *Scribner's* review of *Colonel Dunwoddie, Millionaire*: “The Southern States, under their double infliction of slavery and plantation life, have been so devoid of anything that approaches to literature, that the Southern writer who makes his mark to-day will have the advantage of a background quite free from competitors” (*Scribner's* 18 [May 1879]: 148).

<sup>9</sup>I have found little direct evidence that either Gilder or Johnson read Taine. But he was everywhere around them. *Scribner's* briefly reviewed Taine's *History of English Literature* in 1872, referring to it as “comprehensive,... accurate,... and always so brilliant...” (*Scribner's* 3 [February 1872]: 507). His work had become highly influential in the U.S. by the early 1860s (Harry Hayden Clark, “The Influence of Science on American Literary Criticism, 1860-1910, Including the Vogue of Taine,” *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, 44 [Madison: n.p., 1956]: 109-64). Numerous associates and friends of Gilder and Johnson became adepts of his ideas. Novelist Edward Eggleston (a close friend of Josiah Holland and frequent acquaintance of his two associates) based his founding work of local color and dialect fiction, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), on his reading of Taine. T.S. Perry, a literary critic for the *Century* in the early 1880s was a Taine disciple. Taine was a favorite of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James (Clark, “Vogue of Taine,” 146ff.). Howells was “thoroughly saturated” with Taine by 1873 (Everett Carter, “Taine and American Realism,” *Revue de Litterature Comparée* 26 [1952], 359-60n2; idem, *Howells and the Age of Realism* [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954], 97-102). This interest inspired ambitious multi-volume collections of American literature published by such close Gilder and Johnson associates as Edmund Clarence Stedman (*A Library of American Literature from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* [1888-1890]) and Charles Dudley Warner (*A Library of the World's Best Literature*, 30 vols. [New York: Hill, 1896-97]). Taine's method gave rise to American literary scholarship in the work of other close associates of Gilder and Johnson and the editors at *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*, including Brander Matthews, Edmund Clarence Stedman, William P. Trent, Fred Lewis Pattee, and Montrose J. Moses (John W. Rathbun and Harry H. Clark, *American Literary Criticism, 1860-1905* [Boston : Twayne, 1979], 101-102).

<sup>10</sup>What Southern magazines there were lasted for only a short period—usually less than two years—and obtained at best small or local circulations. See Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 3: 1865-1885 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1938) 45–47; Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, 90-94; Susan B. Riley, “The Hazards of Periodical Publishing in the South During the Nineteenth Century,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 21 (162): 365-76.

speak in cultural congress for the South. The immense task Gilder and Johnson set for Cultural Reconstruction was the invention and production of Southern literary culture.

Regionalism represented a search for identity in a country too large, too varied, too new, and too internally weak to forge a national culture along traditional lines of shared history, unique language, or geographically bounded peoplehood. But it competed with other forms of identity, particularly race and to some extent class. Dialect would serve to provide both a language (or rather a set of languages) and a form of history for the magazines' largely middle-class readership. The magazinists championed dialect (thinking it would work like a the multiple and varied voices of a chorus coming together in harmonic unison, or like a representative assembly debating and reaching consensus). But they would discover that dialect was a trap. It became the tar baby of a white middle class attempting to forge for itself a distinct racial identity.

Regionalism became the conduit for ideas of race that twisted up from the South to infiltrate all sections of the country through the project of Cultural Reconstruction. The project, intended by its leading lights as a means to cultural unity, ultimately gave rise to a monstrous form of cohesion. By 1885, Gilder and Johnson had streamlined the project of Cultural Reconstruction into a simple formula: "The Northern freeman needs to put himself in the place of the Southern; the Southern freeman in the place of the Southern *freedman*. Mutual respect, sympathy, knowledge—these are indispensable."<sup>11</sup> The formula sounded easy. But in practice, instead of creating a unified culture that would ultimately make regionalism moot, it would come to enshrine racial division in American culture and give it an iconic figure available to *all* white Americans to use in their self-imagining. That cultural figure was the South, and it spoke largely in a "Negro"<sup>12</sup> dialect produced by white authors such as Mark Twain.

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<sup>11</sup>"A New Volume of 'The Century,'" *Century* 30 (May 1885): 164-65.

<sup>12</sup>Throughout this chapter and the next, the terms "Negro" and "Negro dialect" should be read as if in quotation marks to delimit them as cultural inventions that are now offensive to Americans. I have chosen to use the term "Negro" when whites (and at times blacks as well) are referring to a cultural construct about racial division that

### **The South in *Scribner's***

Josiah Holland might have made his new magazine into a truculent enemy of the South in the 1870s. His two antebellum sojourns in the South had apparently taught him no love for the rebellious section.<sup>13</sup> During the Civil War, he had bombastically reviled Confederates as “those who hate democracy, who hate labor, who hate the idea of human equality, who hate their country and its constitution, who hate the political mother that bore them... and [above all] hate the North and the universal Yankee.”<sup>14</sup> Even during the planning stages of *Scribner's* magazine, he still seethed over the rebellious provinces. The South, he wrote Charles Scribner in 1868, “is as thoroughly rebel today as it ever was. We ought to have hanged every leader, and confiscated property enough to pay the national debt.”<sup>15</sup> The only lesson the South took from the Civil War, he scoffed, was scorn for a North too timid to exact the ultimate penalty for treason.

But something happened to mollify Holland's ire by the time *Scribner's* was launched. In the magazine's first two years there was barely a mention of the South.<sup>16</sup> A pair of letters hints that Holland had some intention of including Southern issues. In one, he expressed high hopes for an article about the fall of Richmond.<sup>17</sup> Another promised to be

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has virtually nothing to do with the actual, lived experience of nineteenth-century African Americans. I considered using the term “black” but this has the unintended consequence of naturalizing a concept that I want very much to foreground as a product of racial fantasy. That is, the term “black dialect” refers to the actual speech of certain African Americans, whereas “Negro dialect” refers to an invention of white authors and magazine editors. I also considered borrowing the term “blackface” but it too readily elides the difference between minstrel forms of dialect and literary forms, distinctions I want to keep separate because of their quite different cultural valences.

<sup>13</sup>He liked to quip that he had whipped more rebels than any other man, as a result of having to physically entice his Vicksburg students to submit to an education.

<sup>14</sup>“The National Heart,” in *Plain Talks on Familiar Subjects: A Series of Popular Lectures* (New York: Scribner, 1866), 208.

<sup>15</sup>Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner's Monthly and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 39.

<sup>16</sup>The exceptions were two brief Negro dialect poems by Thomas Dunn English, July and November 1871. See also John, *Best Years*, 66.

<sup>17</sup>The reason it was turned down may have had something to do with Holland's own experience of the Confederate capital. He wanted the article revised to deemphasize “the drunken exaltation” of white Southerners after Lee's surrender. “Nothing is further from the truth,” Holland admonished in his robust

one of the “most intensely interesting things” *Scribner’s* had yet received. “I am afraid we must not use it,” Holland cautioned his assistant editors, apparently concerned about breaking open unhealed wounds, “It deals with the war and with the old slave material.”<sup>18</sup> Neither manuscript appeared in *Scribner’s*.

The last issue of volume four (October 1872) contained the first extended treatment of a Southern issue, Mrs. M.P. Handy’s dry account of Virginia tobacco agriculture.<sup>19</sup> A few other articles followed over the next several months, including a pair of articles by a former Confederate officer that amounted to little more than advertisements for a Southern railroad.<sup>20</sup> Then a trickle gave way to an avalanche. In November 1873, *Scribner’s* unleashed a torrent of articles unlike anything the nation had ever seen.<sup>21</sup>

Over the next year, *Scribner’s* published a massive series of articles on the South. Known collectively as the Great South papers, the series was unprecedented in scope, expense, and labor.<sup>22</sup> Reporter Edward King and illustrator J. Wells Champney roamed the region for almost two years. They traveled over 25,000 miles to all parts of the former

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Christian fashion. “A great many more men went upon their knees in gratitude to God for the close of the long struggle and the assurance of peace than got drunk” (Holland to Gilder, 27 February 1871, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library).

<sup>18</sup>Holland to Gilder, 3 April 1871, regarding the manuscript by a Miss Pritchard (Gilder Papers, New York Public Library).

<sup>19</sup>Mrs. M.P. Handy, “On the Tobacco Plantation,” *Scribner’s* 4 (October 1872): 651-56.

<sup>20</sup>Jed[ediah] Hotchkiss had been Stonewall Jackson’s topographical engineer (Drake and Jones, “Introduction,” *Great South* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press], xxvi n25).

<sup>21</sup>Other magazines and newspapers had run articles and series on the South (see, e.g., Sydney Andrews, “The South Since the War” [orig. in *Boston Advertiser*] John Richard Dennett, “The South as It Is, 1865-1866” [orig. in *Nation*; reprint; New York: Viking, 1965], and John Townsend Trowbridge, “The South”). But these had been concentrated in the immediate post-war period.

<sup>22</sup>Holland, ““The Great South’ Series of Papers,” *Scribner’s* 9 (December 1874); Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 464; Paul Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865–1900* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), 131. Nina Silber (*The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993]), notes the series in passing, and David Blight does not mention it (*Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001]). The series was not the first illustrated treatment of the South. *Harper’s* had run an article or two. And the publishing firms Appleton’s and Aldine had included the South in their illustrated works on the entire country. The Appleton’s series ran in its magazine (also called *Appleton’s*) for a number of months from 1870-1871, but then was transformed into a stand-alone work sold by subscription. On the Appleton’s series, see Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), esp. ch. 3, “Oliver Bell Bunce and the Rediscovery of the South,” 46-73.



Confederacy. Their reports filled an average of 40 pages per issue for fourteen months.<sup>23</sup> Each report contained as many as thirty illustrations. The series required a massive investment of money. It cost the magazine over \$30,000 (\$430,000 in 2000 dollars).

In historical hindsight, the Great South series was the inaugural moment of the project of Cultural Reconstruction. At the time of the series's inception, however, the *Scribner's* editors seemed to have at best a hazy idea of the goal of the series. The tentative nature of the first years of the project of Cultural Reconstruction are evident in the diverging ways the *Scribner's* editors conceptualized the Great South series.

The *Scribner's* editors initially conceived the Great South project largely in commercial terms. They seemed to follow other magazines in thinking of the South chiefly as a field for Northern capital. They hoped the series would, as Robert Underwood Johnson recalled it, "turn the attention of the country... to the economic resources and possibilities" of the South.<sup>24</sup> The first installment appeared in July 1873. It was not announced as part of a series, and was little more than another quasi-advertisement for a Southern railroad. The next installment did not appear for another four months, when the series proper began. The opening words of the November piece seemed cloyingly romantic: "Louisiana to-day is Paradise Lost," King opined, "In twenty years it may be Paradise Regained. It has unlimited, faery, enchanting possibilities." But King quickly clarified that these possibilities were resolutely commercial in nature. King's master theme was that the region was locked in a struggle, not of the black and white races, but of rival cultures produced by two *economic*

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<sup>23</sup>The series ran in July 1873 and then from November 1873 to December 1874. The July installment was greatly concerned with finding a new railroad route to the Gulf of Mexico through Texas. When the series began in earnest, in November, it was far more cultural in orientation.

<sup>24</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), 96. In this, the *Scribner's* editors were following other magazine projects that had investigated the economic potential of the region. See, for instance, the 1866 series of maps and industrial statistics published by *Harper's Weekly* for the benefit of "those [Northerners] who are thinking of settling there" (*Harper's Weekly* 10 [6 January 1866], cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 3, 48).

racess: “the picturesque and unjust civilization of the past” versus “the prosaic and leveling civilization of the present.”<sup>25</sup>

The *Scribner’s* editors attached some cultural concerns to the Great South’s commercial goals. They saw the South as “a vast region almost as little known to the Northern States of the Union as it is to England.”<sup>26</sup> The task Holland set for his author and illustrator was to give the South “a fair showing for its own satisfaction, and reveal our people at once to themselves and to one another.”<sup>27</sup> Far from his earlier truculence toward the South, Holland now urged King and Champney to portray the subject “sympathetically.”<sup>28</sup>

As the series got underway, the editors were surprised by the sectional nature of Northern and Southern responses. The series struck a chord among Southern readers. King reported that he was selling significant numbers of subscriptions to the people he met, and the magazine found itself inundated with information offered by Southerners sympathetic to the vast undertaking.<sup>29</sup> But the series angered numerous Northern critics. They accused the New York magazine of groveling for a Southern audience.<sup>30</sup> Johnson later dismissed such criticism. Ignoring the commercial interest of the North in Southern markets and resources manifest in the series, he reminisced that the Great South had been chiefly “conceived in magnanimity and sympathy.”<sup>31</sup> There was, he explained, “little business advantage to be derived from a region so near bankruptcy as the shattered South of that day.”<sup>32</sup> But

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<sup>25</sup>King, “The Great South: Louisiana,” *Scribner’s* 7 (November 1873): 1-2.

<sup>26</sup>Cited in Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 131.

<sup>27</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 40.

<sup>28</sup>Cited in Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 131.

<sup>29</sup>John, *Best Years*, 40-41. King estimated that he sold about one subscription for every 80 to 85 inhabitants of small towns (King letter, cited in John, *Best Years*, 41).

<sup>30</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 96.

<sup>31</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 96.

<sup>32</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 96. Johnson’s contention is backed up somewhat by the fact that, by all accounts, the series was the brain child of the publisher of *Scribner’s*, Roswell Smith. Smith was deeply interested in the Southern race problem. By the mid 1880s he had become a major supporter of the interracial coeducational Berea College of Kentucky. As a deeply committed Christian, he believed that the South should be quickly forgiven and restored. Yet he was also a driven businessman who rarely neglected to strike for the

Johnson's recollection of events fifty years previous says more about his later wishes than the editors' actual motivations.

The editors quickly discovered that there was in fact a business advantage to their magazine: The series significantly increased the national popularity and circulation of *Scribner's*.<sup>33</sup> The *Boston Transcript* praised the series and noted that it created for *Scribner's* "a permanent and extensive circulation throughout the West and North-West" as well as the South.<sup>34</sup> Southern critics hailed the series as a boon to their section.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the series was popular among British readers.<sup>36</sup> When the series appeared as a book, it was widely praised North and South as "truthful," "free from partisan control," and "obviously free from [sectional] prejudice."<sup>37</sup> If the series demonstrated that there was money to be made in popularizing the South, it simultaneously suggested to the editors a magnificent opportunity to turn culture to the repair of the nation.

The Great South series became, as Johnson later recalled, "the first high note of nationalism struck by [*Scribner's*]...."<sup>38</sup> Begun as a commercial excursion, it proved a cultural bonanza. The surge in popularity the series gave the magazine revealed the cultural power of the reconciliation theme. The editors realized that striking out for sectional balance would not be commercially suicidal; quite the opposite. The series signaled to the editors both a new cause to champion editorially and a new route to commercial success. Striking what they believed to be a principled stand in regard to the South, they were able to establish their periodical as both friendly and critical toward the former Confederate states. The Great

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main chance. See King, *Great South*, dedication; Gladden, "Roswell Smith," *Century* 44 (June 1892): 312; Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 96; John, *Best Years*, 39; Drake and Jones, "Introduction," *Great South*, xxvii.

<sup>33</sup> Drake and Jones, "Introduction," *Great South*, xxviii.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in John, *Best Years*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> John, *Best Years*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> John, *Best Years*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Dollar Weekly*, *Petersburg, Virginia, Index and Appeal*, all cited in Drake and Jones, "Introduction," *Great South*, xxviii.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 96.

South transformed *Scribner's* into something of a clearing house for national discussion about the South.

Through the 1870s, *Scribner's* became the leading national forum for all manner of thrust and parry in regard to the South. Other Northern magazines tended to take one of two stands toward the defeated region. Either they continued to wave the bloody shirt, or they ignored the issue altogether.<sup>39</sup> *Scribner's*, instead, fostered intersectional dialogue. It published editorials that excoriated sometimes the North and sometimes the South. Similarly, it attempted to create a forum for the consideration of Southern issues through articles and fiction that took a variety of political and regional stances.

Holland was not a man to be quailed into a party line. Hoping that the frank presentation of views would lead to amicable solutions, he sailed *Scribner's* directly into sectional controversy. He published articles highly critical of the South. One condemned Southern white oppression as the cause of the mass exodus of black agricultural laborers to Kansas.<sup>40</sup> Another, by Southern poet Sydney Lanier, criticized the large plantation system of agriculture. He called instead for a Jeffersonian system of small farms that would, in the new culture of sentimentality, revitalize both the South's agriculture and its literary culture.<sup>41</sup>

Holland also published numerous "pro-South" articles. A Southern white man justified racially segregated but "equal" schools.<sup>42</sup> An article favorably compared Richmond's rebirth from its Civil War fire to Chicago's 1871 rise from the ashes, suggesting that "the wonderful recuperative power of [Richmond's] people" was in fact a basic element of the American national character, not merely a sectional character. Most controversial of all in the 1870s, Holland presented a hagiographic memoir of Robert E. Lee's "noble" offer

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<sup>39</sup>Two magazines did take up the theme of the South, *Lippincott's* and *Galaxy*. But the former, published in Philadelphia, had a smaller circulation and less cultural weight than *Scribner's* and the latter never quite got off the ground, sputtering until its collapse in 1878.

<sup>40</sup>Henry King, "Negro Exodus," *Scribner's* 20 (June 1880): 211-18.

<sup>41</sup>Sydney Lanier, "The New South" *Scribner's* 20 (October 1880): 840-51.

<sup>42</sup>W.H. Ruffner, "The Co-Education of the White and Colored Races," *Scribner's* 8 (May 1874): 86-90. Ruffner was opposed to U.S. Representative Benjamin Butler's Civil Rights bill which attempted to force Southern schools to integrate black and white students.

to resign from the Confederate army after Gettysburg.<sup>43</sup> This article positively dripped with homage to “the generosity, the modesty, the exalted manhood, and the disinterested patriotism of General Lee.”<sup>44</sup>

Holland and his fellow editors couched their decisions in the terms of sentimental culture. Aware that Northern readers might gasp in response, for instance, to the General Lee article, the editors justified their decision to run it in a note: “We publish the foregoing interesting piece of secret history in the language of sectional friendliness in which it reaches us. It will show, at least, how truly and earnestly one side regards as a pure patriot him whom the other side looks upon with condemnation, and will hardly fail to win sympathetic consideration for feelings and motives which opponents are too apt to ignore.”<sup>45</sup> In response to such controversial articles, however, first Northern and then Southern critics howled against the editorial directions *Scribner’s* took toward reconciliation.<sup>46</sup> *Scribner’s* audience, however, continued to grow.

The controversy over these articles often paled in comparison to the sting Holland elicited from his own editorials about the South and the North’s attitude toward it. Relying heavily on Edward King’s Great South opinions, Holland was generally hostile to federal reconstruction policy. He saw it as merely a power grab by the Radical Republicans.<sup>47</sup> Federal reconstruction of the former Confederacy, Holland argued, had become a travesty of commercial potential, political justice, and humane culture. “Has the government a policy,” Holland thundered in July 1874, “in its treatment of the reconstructed States? Has it had a policy since the close of the war? If it has one, and has had one, is it not about time it were

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<sup>43</sup>Charles C[olcock] Jones, Jr., “A Piece of Secret History,” *Scribner’s* 11 (February 1876): 519-22.

<sup>44</sup>Jones, “A Piece of Secret History,” 522.

<sup>45</sup>Editor, [Note], *Scribner’s* 11 (February 1876): 522.

<sup>46</sup>John, *Best Years*, 40-41.

<sup>47</sup>Holland had long been severely critical of Charles Sumner and his radical anti-slavery *idée fixe*. He opposed Sumner’s reelection to the Senate in 1862 in the pages of the Springfield Republican. Holland wanted an anti-slavery man, but one with a wider horizon (George Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles* [New York: Century, 1885], vol. 1, 357-58). He largely repeated this theme in his eulogy of Sumner in *Scribner’s* 8 (August 1874): 493-94.

changed?" Holland had significantly altered his attitude toward the South since his ante-*Scribner's* days. He answered the question of reconstruction policy in sentimental terms. The issue was no longer, he wrote, "whether they [former Confederates] had sinned, and deserved punishment." Immediately after "the military power of the Confederacy was crushed," he admonished, "it was the business of our government, in the kindest, firmest, most sympathetic, and most generous way, to reclaim their affectionate loyalty."<sup>48</sup> Current policies, he complained had led to "a condition approaching absolute anarchy" in several Southern states. The federal government's weak response to this internal turmoil implied that the secessionist's legal justification of state rights had been "a sound one." The folly of federal reconstruction policy made Holland so upset, that he made an extremely rare (and somewhat confused) appeal to a mortal power. He called for military intervention to bring order to the various Southern state polities then in disarray. "Gen. Jackson," Holland concluded, "is the kind of man we want in every department of Federal power."<sup>49</sup>

Holland's pre-*Scribner's* wrath toward the South returned in the late-1870s.<sup>50</sup> Responding to Southern white violence against blacks and their white sympathizers, Holland decried the legal chaos in which "[a]ny man can commit a murder..., if he be in high life, and do it for personal reasons, and bear a white skin...." But his opinion of the South had been transformed. No longer wanting to punish the entire region, he now believed there were two Souths. He called on "the law-loving and law-abiding South" to overthrow the other South of "lawlessness and degraded civilization." He nonetheless threatened both Souths with the concerted action of a "solid North" if lynch law were not repudiated.

Through the 1870s, Holland and his assistant editors Gilder and Johnson developed an increasingly national point of view. They printed Southern and Northern apologists as well as their critics. When criticism of the magazine's project of Cultural Reconstruction

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<sup>48</sup>"The Southern States," *Scribner's* 8 (July 1874): 368.

<sup>49</sup>"The Southern States," 369.

<sup>50</sup>"Southern Civilization," *Scribner's* 18 (June 1879): 306-307.

became intense, the editors stepped back and denied that they had any “sectional spirit.” “We have written,” they prefaced one irate Southern response to Holland’s criticism of Southern lynch law, “as an American, about the South, precisely as we write freely about the North—which we are doing constantly—as an American.”<sup>51</sup> By the time the nation celebrated its centennial in July 1876, the *Scribner’s* editors could believe that “[o]ur nation has become a family.”<sup>52</sup> But the family was not yet cohesive.

The South was now at best a prodigal son. No longer the outcast rebel, the South was nonetheless only imperfectly reintegrated into the national domestic fold. Sectional feelings were still restive, still threatening. The only effective means of quelling the antagonisms and bitterness, these editors believed, would come through literature. The South would have to tell its own story in its own voice in order to produce the sort of truth that could gain Northern sympathy.

### **George Washington Cable: The Career That Exploded**

For all of Edward King’s abilities in painting a balanced portrait of the South, he had one great drawback: He was a Yankee. According to the tenets of the local color aesthetic, King, because he was not a Southern native, could never hope to capture the ineffable essence of Southern life in literature. But he did the next best thing: He discovered an author who could. While collecting material on the New Orleans Carnival in February 1873, King met George Washington Cable, an accountant, sometime newspaper writer, and fledgling short story author. King read Cable’s stories, one of which “rode [him] like a nightmare,” and he instantly became Cable’s conduit to *Scribner’s* magazine.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Editor’s Preface to Dudley G. Wooten, “Southern Civilization—A Southerner’s View of the Situation,” *Scribner’s* 18 (August 1879): 621. Wooten was responding to Holland’s editorial, “Southern Civilization.”

<sup>52</sup>“The Centennial,” *Scribner’s* 12 (July 1876): 429.

<sup>53</sup>Cited in Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 54.

Cable's work charmed the *Scribner's* editors. His colorful stories of Southern life reveled in languorous sensuality, dramatic sentiments of blood relations, effusive scents of tropical flora, and the scornful jousting of Creole and *American* cultures through the racial caste system of antebellum New Orleans. Cable was a Southern pioneer cultivating a new field of literature. More important for the editors at *Scribner's*, he was their first bright literary discovery. After several years of searching for a new route to American literature, these editors had found a vibrant, new, and distinctively American author. That he came from the South, and could contribute to the emerging project of Cultural Reconstruction was a boon. The *Scribner's* editors delighted in Cable's ability simultaneously to depict the South in real terms and to criticize the South's slave heritage with a rare if unpolished artistry. Here was the writer, it seemed to them, who could paint Southern life for Northern readers from the inside. Here was an author, it seemed, who had the potential to balance aesthetics and morality in a dulcet, colorful, and decidedly American fashion perfectly suited to the culture of sentimentality. It was precisely the balance of the moral versus the artistic that Cable would eventually upset, almost driving Cultural Reconstruction into a new sectional conflict over the problem of race.

Cable was born in New Orleans in 1844. His father was descended from a Virginia family and his mother from New England stock, but both were raised in Indiana. Marrying there in 1834, they moved to New Orleans in the wake of the Panic of 1837. His father's early business success made Cable's first years economically comfortable—his household contained eight slaves at one point. This comfort dissipated by the late 1840s. A series of financial reverses dogged his father until his death in 1859. Cable, the family's oldest son at age fourteen, took over his father's clerk position in the New Orleans customhouse. Soon after his eighteenth birthday in October 1863, he joined the Confederate cavalry and served to the end of the war. With the return of the cotton economy, Cable worked as a clerk and bookkeeper for various cotton factors, and took up newspaper writing as a sideline. By 1872, he experienced two portentous changes. He began writing short stories, stimulated by his



subscription to *Scribner's* magazine, and he began to question the received wisdom of the slave regime.<sup>54</sup> Both threads intertwined the moment Edward King met Cable as both reported on the Mystick Crew of Comus during the New Orleans carnival.

Edward King fervently believed in Cable's literary abilities. He waited, as nervous as Cable, for his *Scribner's* editors to pronounce judgment on Cable's work. A first story was rejected, and King and Cable anxiously anticipated word on a second. In July 1873, after two months' delay, King excitedly wrote Cable "The battle is won. 'Monsieur George' is accepted, and will be published in *Scribner*."<sup>55</sup> The story, retitled "'Sieur George'" appeared in the October 1873 issue, one month before King's *Great South* began its run. A flush of Cable stories followed over the next two and a half years: five in *Scribner's* and two in rival New York magazines.

Cable's stories seemed so fresh to New York editors because they strikingly fulfilled the promise of the local color movement in American literature just then taking cultural form in American magazines. His work was redolent of the real world of historical New Orleans. But his literary style was heavily dosed with the excesses of lachrymose sentimentality. King had warned Cable in his July letter that the editors' "main criticism upon your work is that the plot is not always worked out as lucidly as could be desired."<sup>56</sup> The local colorist had to be, as Garland later put it, "vivid and simple and unhackneyed."<sup>57</sup> Cable was vivid and original, but his early work lacked simplicity.<sup>58</sup> It bordered, at times, on obscurantism—something a commercially minded magazine could ill afford.

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<sup>54</sup>On Cable reading *Scribner's* see Kjell Ekstrom, *George Washington Cable: A Study of His Early Life and Work* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), 95. On Cable's changing political philosophy see Turner, *Cable*.

<sup>55</sup>Lucy Leffingwell Cable Biklé, *George Washington Cable: His Life and Letters* (New York: Scribner, 1928), 46; Turner, *Cable*, 54.

<sup>56</sup>Biklé, *Life and Letters*, 47.

<sup>57</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Local Color in [Literary] Art," in *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1894), 66.

<sup>58</sup>Rubin says his best early stories, "'Sieur George'" and "Posson Jones" have least plot complexity, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *George Washington Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 59.

Over the next two years, Gilder pressed Cable to develop a more telegraphic style.<sup>59</sup> He persistently urged Cable to focus on the story beneath his profusion of local color. “You bother me,” Gilder wrote Cable on 31 March 1875. “Your conception of character is strong—artistic—your style is bright and witty—your plots are generally good—your field is all your own—and I consider your stories a great acquisition to the Monthly—but you lack in the capacity to edit yourself. This is the only thing that makes me fear for your literary future.”<sup>60</sup> Gilder suggested that Cable read Turgenev to learn how to condense his work and give it a more realist punch.<sup>61</sup>

If it is true, as one literary critic has argued, that the “art” of Cable’s early stories was “founded upon realistic social observation,”<sup>62</sup> it is equally true that Gilder was greatly responsible. He constantly cajoled Cable. His letters to Cable are peppered with such comments as, “Can you make it clearer?” “May I prune a little...?” Be “more simple and direct.” “Make your stories clear. See Hawthorne.... Nowadays,” the former newspaperman Gilder lamented, “we prefer being cloudy to commonplace.”<sup>63</sup>

Cable stopped writing stories in November 1875, for economic and aesthetic reasons. The cash-strapped Cable unhappily discovered that short-story writing did not pay enough to enable him to quit bookkeeping. Even if it had, Cable felt the pressure of a powerful literary conceit that held short stories in disrepute. Book publishers believed that story collections never sold well. In the absence of an overwhelming demand for a collection of Cable’s work, publishers declined his entreaties to collect his stories in a book until 1879.<sup>64</sup> Real authors,

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<sup>59</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 68, summarizes Gilder’s strategy of editing Cable’s early stories: “an attempt to adapt him to a widely circulated magazine without sacrificing his distinguishing excellence.” Herbert Smith agrees with this assessment (*Richard Watson Gilder* [New York: Twayne, 1970], 68).

<sup>60</sup>Gilder to Cable, 31 March 1875, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>61</sup>See Gilder to Cable, 7 May 1875, Cable Papers, Tulane University. “Tourgueneff is a master worth any artist[’]s study.” Cable read Turgenev almost immediately after this recommendation.

<sup>62</sup>Rubin, *Cable*, 59.

<sup>63</sup>28 May 1875, 31 March 1875, 15 July 1878, 7 April 1876, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Cable seems to have appreciated Gilder’s editorial work. In a eulogy of Gilder, years later, Cable recalled that the editor “was a shaping, guiding, influence, noble, invaluable, and endearing” (*Century* 79 [February 1910]: 635).

<sup>64</sup>First edition published in 1879, 1000 copies, sold 1200 within 6 months, which *Scribner’s* thought exceedingly good for a collection of stories (Ekstrom, *Cable*, 64; Turner, *Cable*, 115; Rubin, *Cable*, 73) But

critics and publishers reminded him, wrote novels.<sup>65</sup> Cable began searching in 1875 for a theme and the time to write.

Cable's stories had been distinguished by a lack of social criticism.<sup>66</sup> Several dabbled in the heartbreak of the octoroon's racial misfortune, but their effect was to elicit tears, not to envision social change. As Cable searched for a theme for his novel through the middle 1870s, however, he experienced a political and moral conversion to a full-fledged sentimentality.<sup>67</sup> The growing clamor for racial separation, the forced segregation of the New Orleans public high school, and Cable's epiphanic realization of how drastic the antebellum Black Codes had been filled him with indignation at the hypocrisy of postbellum whites. Having once suckled at black breasts, these whites now were reinstating racial oppression.<sup>68</sup>

The first short story Cable had submitted to *Scribner's* had actually been an attack against the violence of slavery. "Bibi" was the tale of an enslaved African prince who refused to bow to his Southern white masters, preferring punishment and ultimately death to submission. Gilder had rejected it—most likely for the same reason William Dean Howells

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this was damning with faint praise, because this number was quite below the usual sale of the average book. Moreover, as Pattee pointed out, the collection created "no excitement anywhere, no real enthusiasm." Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1966), 258.

<sup>65</sup>Two contemporary reviews of Cable's first collection, when it appeared in 1879, withheld final judgment on his qualities as a writer until he produced a novel. See Edward Eggleston in *North American Review* 129 (November 1879): 516-17 (in Arlin Turner, *Critical Essays on George W. Cable* [Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1980], 5) and *Atlantic* 45 (January 1880): 44-45 (in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 5).

<sup>66</sup>Rubin, *Cable*, 59. As Rubin observed, "Except for the implied relevance of the plight of the quadroons in 'Tite Poulette' to the plight of the Negro in post-Civil War New Orleans, there is relatively little evidence of the author's desire to protest social inequities" (59).

<sup>67</sup>By the early 1880s, he was a committed social reformer, working assiduously to bring about improvements in prisons and asylums, as well as the civil standing of blacks. The *Century* published one of his most searing attacks on penal abuse, "The Convict Lease System in the Southern States," *Century* 27 (February 1884): 582-99.

<sup>68</sup>See letter of 26 September 1875 to editor of New Orleans *Bulletin* in Arlin Turner, ed., *The Negro Question: A Selection of Writings on Civil Rights in the South by George W. Cable* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1958), 27-33, and Turner, *Cable*, 75-77. Yet even at this time he did not believe blacks to be equal to whites, "Yes, the black race is inferior to the white," he wrote a New Orleans paper. "The Almighty has established inequality as a principle in nature. But," he added in sentimental terms, "the lesson it teaches is magnanimity, not scorn" (Turner, *The Negro Question*, 29).

and other magazine editors did, “on account,” as Howells’s assistant put it, “of the unmitigatedly distressful effect of the story.”<sup>69</sup> In the midst of his growing disaffection from Southern white supremacy, it dawned on Cable how to get the story into print. He would build a novel around it, as if cultivating an oyster around a pearl. Cable erupted with newfound moral ambition and a race theme. In spare moments, before and after work and around his family’s needs, Cable began planning and writing. He wrote to Hjalmar Boyesen, Columbia University professor, Northern advocate of literary realism, and ardent admirer of Cable’s writing, “I will finish the work someday God willing, & pray that it may not only be good in an artistic sense, but do good in a moral sense. Ah! how can a man consent to have a less ambition than the ambition to be useful to his kind, and faithful to the great Master whose service is the only perfect liberty!” Cable was aware that his theme might be contentious. He even seemed to court controversy. But he had the martyr’s faith in the sentimental ideal of truth: “It is very gratifying to me to see how my townspeople watch for the appearance of my first number. It will disappoint everyone of them who does not love the truth above all things else....”<sup>70</sup>

By 1877, the *Scribner’s* editors were aware that Cable was working on a novel.<sup>71</sup> They wanted it badly, seeing it as the natural fruit of their earlier editorial labor. They approved of the novel’s themes of slavery and Creole society. They were ready to work with the author to balance his budding moral purpose with his flowering literary artistry. They did not know until deep into the editing how difficult such a balance would be to attain.

The *Scribner’s* editors could have hardly hoped for a better novel to portray Southern culture as they wanted to do. The *Grandissimes* in the terms of Cultural Reconstruction, was

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<sup>69</sup>Biklé, *Life and Letters*, 48. Biklé notes that the story was rejected even after being substantially rewritten.

<sup>70</sup>Cable to Boyesen, 28 December 1878, cited in Arlin Turner, “A Novelist Discovers a Novelist: The Correspondence of H.H. Boyesen and George W. Cable,” *Western Humanities Review* 5 (Autumn 1951) 343-72.

<sup>71</sup>Ekstrom, *Cable*, 55-58, discusses the first composition and reports to the *Scribner’s* editors, and see Turner, *Cable*, 89.

virtually an ethnology of the antebellum Louisiana Creoles.<sup>72</sup> Cable described the novel's nominal protagonist, Joseph Frowenfeld, almost as an anthropologist whose mission was to study "this newly found book, the Community of New Orleans."<sup>73</sup> This anthropologist was distinctly from the school of sentimental morality: His name translates roughly as "women's field."<sup>74</sup> And Cable took care to describe his "womanly touch, his commanding gentleness, his easy despatch."<sup>75</sup> The book, however, swerved away from traditional sentimental novels in that it essentially had two protagonists, Frowenfeld the cultural stranger and the local color of Creole culture itself. Rather than focus on the trials and tribulations of a sentimental individual, the *Grandissimes* broadened out to an examination of a social formation. And unlike the limited depiction of small scenes in the antebellum literary sketch, the novel portrayed a vast public space. Boyesen called it a "Kulturroman," a novel in which "the struggling forces of opposing civilizations crystallize and in which they find their enduring monument."<sup>76</sup> For the editors, the novel promised to be a magnificent tapestry depicting Southern culture and the social stresses of slavery. On reading the opening chapters, Gilder gushed "They open up a new world to the world of readers, and I have great hopes for the book as a whole." These hopes were bound up in sectional reconciliation. Gilder believed that the South would have a worthy novel at last, and that the South would be able to face the truth of its slavery past. He wrote of Cable's novel: "[B]eing a fresh, strange, & entertaining

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<sup>72</sup>To clarify, "Creole" as used in regard to Cable meant the white Louisianans of French heritage. Before the cession of 1803, these whites were French citizens, though born on the North American continent. In this sense, Anglo Americans of the thirteen colonies were also Creoles until the American Revolution: They were British citizens born outside the British isles.

<sup>73</sup>George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes* (1880, reprint; Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Company, 2001), 144. Edmund Wilson characterized Cable's imagination as "not fundamentally romantic but historical and sociological" (Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1962], 557).

<sup>74</sup>On Cable's care in naming his characters, see Alfred Bendixen, "Cable's *The Grandissimes*: A Literary Pioneer Confronts the Southern Tradition," in Thomas J. Richardson, ed., *The Grandissimes: Centennial Essays* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 30-31. Bendixen notes the translation of Frowenfeld's name, but does not put it in the context of sentimental culture.

<sup>75</sup>Cited in Bendixen, "Cable's *The Grandissimes*," 31.

<sup>76</sup>Boyesen to Cable, 17 March 1877 (cited in Turner, *Cable*, 90; Rubin, *Cable*, 68-69)

as well as a pure & healthful romance, the book will accomplish something, no doubt, to bring about the days of a better understanding and a more cordial feeling.”<sup>77</sup>

When the *Scribner's* editors received the first draft of the entire manuscript, they discovered that it was to be a sprawling novel. *The Grandissimes* was to take place in 1803 and 1804, as the Creoles confronted Yankee immigrants and U.S. administration imposed after the Louisiana Purchase. The plot was set in motion by the arrival of one such Yankee, the young Frowenfeld. Frowenfeld was horrified by the Creoles' racial attitudes: their cavalier oppression of their black slaves as well as their immoral treatment of the free people of color, the mulattos and quadroons. At the heart of the novel were two brothers, both named Honoré Grandissime. The eldest was the child of a Creole squire's liaison with a woman of color. He was thus referred to as Honoré, f.m.c. (or, free man of color). The white Honoré, younger than his brother by only a few months, was the father's legitimate son. The simmering moral question throughout the novel was whether the white Honoré would publicly legitimate his relationship to his older brother. This racial theme was reflected in a subplot that involved several other black characters: Palmyra Philosophe and Bras Coupé in particular. They were involved in a love quadrangle that includes both of the brothers Honoré. But Cable did not want them to be mere plot devices. For him, they had to be central to the novel's moral thematics. For Cable wanted to do something virtually unheard of in American fiction. He wanted to give these black figures fully developed characters with a panoply of human emotions.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Gilder to Cable, 15 July 1878, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>78</sup>In one masterful stroke, Cable depicted the black slave Bras Coupé as a fully realized character. When the character first sees the quadroon Palmyra, Cable rendered his deep feelings by writing simply, “He loved.” This simple phrase did two things. First, it gave Bras Coupé the most human of emotions and painted him as a man rather than a brute. Second, it tied the slave into both the culture of sentimentality and the Christian figure by alluding to the famous two-word sentence in John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” Every church-raised child of the era knew this phrase, for it was the easiest Bible verse to remember for recitation in Sunday school or for family prayers. The verse, describing Jesus' response to hearing that Lazarus has died, is redolent of death. And it is Bras Coupé's love for Palmyra that will lead to his social, if not physical, death.

*The Grandissimes* was indeed a *Kulturroman*. Cable planned to reveal “[t]he Creole character, the Creole society, the philosophy of these things, Creole errors and defects & how to mend them....”<sup>79</sup> He hoped to show their relations to the black slaves and the free people of color. Into the mix, he threw a Yankee representative of the culture of sentimentality. Miscegenation, the lure of the sensual, the evils of slavery, the humanity of people of color, the binding ties of blood, the murderous divisions of caste, the clash of antagonistic cultures—Cable hoped to weave all these themes together into one vivid narrative. It was to be a socially and aesthetically progressive work in a socially and aesthetically progressive magazine.

Two problems beset the editing of the serial. The first concerned how to direct the complex plot and cast of characters. The second complicated the first: Cable’s newfound political conscience did not always jibe with the *Scribner’s* editors’ dictates for telling a good story. A new and jarring note of didacticism seeped into Cable’s writing. He seemed to be reverting to older forms of sentimental writing. The *Scribner’s* editors were deeply concerned over how to work all this material into a serial novel suitable for a popular audience. They disputed with Cable from the first reading of the manuscript right down to the editing of the last galley proofs. For almost two years, manuscript and proof shot back and forth between New Orleans and New York.

Gilder left for a year-long rest in Europe just after officially accepting *The Grandissimes* for serial publication. This left Robert Underwood Johnson in charge of editing the manuscript. Anxious about taking on his first large editorial project, Johnson was keen to follow the editorial precepts laid down by Gilder. Johnson’s editorial burden was made heavier, too, because *The Grandissimes* was to be the first novel by the *Scribner’s* editors’ first great literary discovery. Moreover, the novel promised to be the cornerstone of the *Scribner’s* emerging project of Cultural Reconstruction.

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<sup>79</sup>Cable to Boyeson, 28 December 1878.

To ensure that the novel accurately captured the reality of Southern life as well as its intangible essences, Johnson worked closely with two subeditors at *Scribner's*—both of them Southerners. Irwin Russell was a Mississippian. He had published several “Negro” dialect poems in *Scribner's*, including the famous “Christmas-Night in the Quarters.” Sophie Bledsoe Herrick was the daughter of the redoubtably unreconstructed Albert Taylor Bledsoe, who had edited the *Southern Review* until his death in 1877. Herrick had assisted him in the editing, and had edited the magazine herself for a time. But on closing up the magazine, she emigrated from Baltimore to New York and *Scribner's*. *The Grandissimes* then, was a national production: written by one Southerner, edited by a Westerner assisted by two other Southerners for a New York magazine under the direction of a New Englander.<sup>80</sup>

Johnson, as Gilder had, constantly urged Cable toward a more telegraphic style: “be simple and straightforward in expression,” he often admonished.<sup>81</sup> “Condensation” was his watchword. He pressed Cable to shorten dialogues and scenes to give them “sharper incident.”<sup>82</sup> He encouraged Cable to develop the story through action rather than through conversation.<sup>83</sup> And he praised Cable’s efforts toward conciseness: “many improvements tersely made”; “now full of spunk.”<sup>84</sup> In line with the rising tenets of realism, Johnson asked Cable to heighten the illusion of the narrative by removing all references to “the author,” “the reader,” and “our story.”<sup>85</sup> “To read ‘for the purposes of our story,’” Johnson warned, “is like seeing a piece of scenery fall at the theater.”<sup>86</sup> Johnson’s overriding concern was that the

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<sup>80</sup>Russell left the project after the first several months and returned to the South by November 1879. On Johnson’s close editorial interaction with Herrick, see his letter to Cable, 26 August 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University; and see Turner, *Cable*, 96-97.

<sup>81</sup>Johnson to Cable, 2 October 1879, cited in Ekstrom, *Cable*, 62.

<sup>82</sup>See, e.g., Johnson to Cable, 15 March 1879, 2 August 1879, 2 September 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University; Ekstrom, *Cable*, 62.

<sup>83</sup>Johnson to Cable, 2 August 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>84</sup>Johnson to Cable, 28 July 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Ironically, decades later it was this sort of writing that the aged Johnson would decry among his younger contemporaries (*Remembered Yesterdays*, 149).

<sup>85</sup>Johnson to Cable, 28 July 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>86</sup>Johnson to Cable, 28 July 1879.



serial, particularly because it was the author's first, quickly catch readers' attention.<sup>87</sup> Once caught, the problem became how to keep their attention.

The first major change Johnson wanted concerned the novel's opening. Where Cable had begun with a long, dry family genealogy of the central Creole families, Johnson suggested that he begin with the quadron ball.<sup>88</sup> The ball immediately opened the narrative onto slave culture and what were for Northern readers its weird social manifestations. The local color is quickly established. The major Creole characters are introduced in exotic masks in a mysterious setting. In line with the *Scribner's* editors' cultural desires, this change set a vitally different tone for the novel. *The Grandissimes* would not be a narrow novel of manners or family intrigue. Johnson's change boldly announced the novel's intention to capture an entire social world.

Another major problem concerned the character of Frowenfeld. Critics of *The Grandissimes* have long pinpointed his impervious morality as the novel's fatal aesthetic flaw.<sup>89</sup> He has no self doubts to test, no inner demons to conquer. To a great extent, he is an observer of the action rather than a boldly fulminating participant. As a contemporary critic put it, Frowenfeld is not the hero, but "the chorus; for though he occasionally affects the story, his chief function is to ask the questions and bring out the prior conditions, and... to be the external conscience."<sup>90</sup>

Johnson was perfectly aware of the problem of Frowenfeld's character. His directions to Cable show him urging the author to throw off his old sentimentality and to add stronger touches of realism. "His [Frowenfeld's] goodness is too much assumed," Johnson told Cable, "too little proved."<sup>91</sup> He suggested Cable read Holland's essay, "Goodness as Literary Material," and consider Hugo's Jean Valjean for strategies and models for developing

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<sup>87</sup>Johnson to Cable, 15 March 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>88</sup>Johnson to Cable, 26 March 1879, cited in Ekstrom, *Cable*, 61.

<sup>89</sup>See, e.g., Rubin, *Cable*, 94-95; Bendixen, "Cable's *The Grandissimes*," 31.

<sup>90</sup>*Atlantic* 46 (December 1880), cited in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 14.

<sup>91</sup>2 August 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

Frowenfeld's motivation.<sup>92</sup> He advised Cable to "pare [Frowenfeld's] goodness down to digestible proportions."<sup>93</sup> By chapter 40, Johnson had had enough. He fought valiantly to get Cable to have Frowenfeld lose his temper and punch a Creole character who had insulted him.<sup>94</sup> He pleaded with Cable in five different letters over three months to let Frowenfeld's passion overrun his righteousness—but to no avail.<sup>95</sup> The most Cable would do was let Frowenfeld curl his fingers and raise his fist.<sup>96</sup>

Johnson was on sure ground when he criticized Cable's literary style and technique. But he was less sure about Cable's content. When it came to questions about Southern race relations, Johnson had to rely on Russell and Herrick. In the process, Johnson discovered that slavery had spawned, not one social system, but a variety.

Cable argued in chapter 21 of *The Grandissimes* that the Creole's slave culture "kept the flimsy false bottoms of its social errors only by incessant reiteration."<sup>97</sup> He then had a Creole character rebuff Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. by saying "I t'ink, me, dat hanny w'ite man is a gen'leman; but I don't care if a man are good like a h-angel, if 'e har not pu'e w'ite 'ow can 'e be a gen'lman?"<sup>98</sup> Russell vehemently dissented. He indignantly scoffed on the

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<sup>92</sup>22 August 1879. Holland's essay was in *Scribner's* 16 (September 1878): 743. Holland's essay was a rumination on why good characters so often fell flat in literature, while picaresque ones were more engaging.

<sup>93</sup>22 August 1879.

<sup>94</sup>Ironically, Gilder too had earlier urged Cable to have one of his short-story characters throw punches to show his anger. As Cable portrayed Mossy in "Madame Delicieuse," Gilder wrote, he was *too* "goody-goody" (Gilder to Cable, 28 May 1875, Cable Papers, Tulane University).

<sup>95</sup>See Johnson to Cable, 18 August 1879, 22 August 1879, 19 September 1879, 26 September 1879, 2 October 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>96</sup>Cable himself eventually came to see his protagonist as a failure. Writing to William Dean Howells, 8 October 1881, he lamented "Alas! Poor Frowenfeld; I knew I should never raist that child. The goody-goody die young. But—speaking in earnest—it was my chagrin over my partial failure with him that determined me to write out a character who should be pious and yet satisfactory to the artistic sense; hence Père Jerome in the story of Madame Delphine [serialized in three installments in *Scribner's*, may through July 1881]" (Biklé, *Life and Letters*, 72). It is ironic that many twentieth century critics have unfairly lambasted Cable's editors for supposedly ruining his art (esp. Edmund Wilson, Van Wyck Brooks, and Rubin), yet one of their major complaints is Frowenfeld's woodenness, and Cable's failure to give him life—precisely what Johnson is trying to get Cable to do. Rubin noted that Johnson was aware of this problem, but was too trapped in the sentimental ethos to see that Frowenfeld's actions were "unmotivated" (*Cable*, 96). In fact, as I note here, Johnson was just the opposite. He urged Cable to find a motivation for Frowenfeld.

<sup>97</sup>*Grandissimes*, 177.

<sup>98</sup>*Grandissimes*, 178.

back of one of Cable's manuscript pages that the statement was so true that no Southern white would ever even *conceive* of uttering it. Whites simply did not talk about black inferiority, he claimed. Cable, he implied, was thus wrong about Southern white character.<sup>99</sup> Herrick agreed. Johnson then requested Cable to strike the two passages. But Cable would not. Russell and Herrick were mistaken, he replied on the manuscript: "The old false beliefs of pro-slavery were only sustained by these incessant reiterations. I heard them myself from my earliest childhood, up."<sup>100</sup> Johnson had discovered that the legitimation of slavery, far from a simple question, was in fact a contested issue in Southern culture. Russell and Herrick's South was clearly different from Cable's.

By February of 1880, with the serial already running in the magazine, the two problems of race and style (or, in other words, morality and aesthetics) crashed together. From the beginning, Johnson had warned Cable that, although "superb," his story was "overlaid with too much purpose."<sup>101</sup> A story with no moral point would be, he assured Cable, "an absurdity...."<sup>102</sup> But Johnson griped to Cable that in *The Grandissimes* "you have enough [purpose] for three [novels]."<sup>103</sup> For Johnson, the problem was not that aesthetics and morals had to battle one another for pride of place in the novel. Rather, "it is a question of using the moral purpose with the best art."<sup>104</sup> Cable, Johnson advised, was developing a problem: He had begun to "show a tendency to leave the novel and go pamphleteering..." on the issue of slavery.<sup>105</sup> Johnson clearly had to assuage Cable's fears that his real purpose in raising aesthetic red flags was to drain out the novel's moral intent. "[N]o one can feel more strongly on the subject of slavery and its bad moral past and present than I," wrote the child of abolitionists. "[B]ut if you deal with it at all in the novel it must be dramatically and not

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<sup>99</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 97.

<sup>100</sup>Cited in Turner, *Cable*, 97.

<sup>101</sup>18 August 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University

<sup>102</sup>18 August 1879.

<sup>103</sup>18 August 1879.

<sup>104</sup>2 August 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>105</sup>2 August 1879.

philippically.”<sup>106</sup> Try as he might, Cable could not wholly accept Johnson’s direction. And the fact that the serial was running in *Scribner’s* gave Cable the upper hand in such negotiations.

The clash of morals and aesthetics reached a head in the debate over Cable’s chapter 42, “An Inheritance of Wrong.” There an ancillary character, the black slave woman Clemence, slyly undercut white justifications of slavery in conversation with the Anglo Dr. Keene. When, for example, he attempted to brush her off by saying, “you niggers don’t know when you are happy,” she turned his unthinking logic back on him. “Dass so, Mawse,” she replied, “we donno no mo’n white folks! [we don’t know no more than white folks!]”<sup>107</sup> Such mental agility ran counter to Johnson’s image of the slave character: “it is inartistic for her to reason so about slavery. The slave mind is not subjective or ratiocinative, it seems to me, but rather objective.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a slave discoursing as Clemence does on the problems of the “fixed wuckin’ class.”<sup>109</sup> Johnson, reading the chapter in proof, detested it. It was “a blemish—a load of local color for the stream of the narrative to carry.”<sup>110</sup> It was so much “superfluous baggage.”<sup>111</sup> Again reiterating his full endorsement of the moral and political sentiments behind the scene, it was nonetheless for Johnson ruinously “partisan & so inartistic.”<sup>112</sup> The Clemence chapter was just the sort of didactic pamphleteering Johnson had warned Cable about. It seems highly likely that Johnson’s admonitions flowed from his memory of his father’s story telling, in which the “moralité” was delivered through the action, not a tacked-on sermon. Worst of all for

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<sup>106</sup>2 August 1879. Two weeks later, Cable still seemed unassuaged: For Johnson had to reassure him that he had no intention of removing the *Bras Coupé* story (18 August 1879).

<sup>107</sup>*Grandissimes*, 363.

<sup>108</sup>13 March 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Note that he emphasizes the slave mind, not the black or African mind.

<sup>109</sup>*Grandissimes*, 363.

<sup>110</sup>Johnson to Cable, 11 February 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Here, ironically, he was using “local color” as a virtual epithet.

<sup>111</sup>13 March 1880.

<sup>112</sup>Johnson to Cable, 11 February 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

Johnson, Cable himself seemed unconsciously to agree that Clemence was hardly a suitable messenger for his point: After a few paragraphs of her duel with Dr. Keene, he left them behind and went off preaching in his own voice.<sup>113</sup>

Yet, for all his detestation, Johnson did not act precipitately. He made his thoughts known, but left the final decision whether to omit the chapter with Cable.<sup>114</sup> Cable left it in.

The *Scribner's* editors were immensely satisfied with the moral impact of *The Grandissimes* when the serial was completed.<sup>115</sup> They deeply admired Cable for his moral stand against the evils of the nation's slave past. His work seemed a testament to the power of the South to confront and overcome that past. The generally positive reaction of the Southern press seemed to indicate at least a nascent agreement with Cable's position. There were, however, some strident critics among the Creoles. An incendiary 1880 tract by a Creole critic lambasted Creole as an "unnatural Southern growth, a bastard sprout" with a "lust for gain" who practiced voodoo and fathered mulatto children with various voodoo queens.<sup>116</sup> The Creole-educated Grace King wrote in *The Dial* that the novel was a "travesty of Creole life... as unreal as poor Chatterton's forgeries, and without his genius."<sup>117</sup> By 1881, according to a Northern visitor, Cable was "the most cordially hated little man" among the Creoles.<sup>118</sup> The virulence of these attacks led his New York editors to fear for his safety.

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<sup>113</sup>*Grandissimes*, 364-66.

<sup>114</sup>13 March 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>115</sup>They expressed their appreciation with a \$500 bonus to Cable, which equaled 25% of his original \$2000 payment for the novel (Turner, *Cable*, 105).

<sup>116</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 102; Ekstrom, *Cable*, 162-64; Rubin, *Cable*, 99-101. In response to the attack, Gilder wrote Cable of Roswell Smith's fears for his safety, and added, "if you ever think it wise to come North you know where you will find friends" (Gilder to Cable, 13 January 1881, cited in Ekstrom, *Cable*, 164; Turner, *Cable*, 102).

<sup>117</sup>[Grace King], "A Southern Woman's Views of Mr. Cable's 'Grandissimes,'" *Dial* 1 (March 1881): 240. (Attribution of this anonymous article is made by Anthony J. Adam and Sara McCaslin, in "The *Grandissimes*: An Annotated Bibliography (1880-1979)," in Richardson, *Grandissimes Centennial Essays*, 88.) This letter appeared long before she followed in Cable's footsteps as an author of New Orleans life, sharply contesting the earlier author's impressions, in the *Century* and other Northern magazines.

<sup>118</sup>Joseph Pennell, the artist, in ed. Elizabeth Robins Pennell *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*, (Boston, 1929), cited in Ekstrom, *Cable*, 164. Gilder refused to print one refutation of Cable's supposed slanders of the Creoles because it was malicious. He was aware, he wrote a Mr. Claiborne, that "Cable's fiction has given great offense to a very large part of your people...." But he tried to convince Cable's critic that, beyond New Orleans, Cable's effect had been very much the reverse of what was feared: "Mr. Cable has awakened the liveliest

Holland, Gilder, Johnson, and even publisher Roswell Smith wrote Cable to express their support for him and his antislavery position. Johnson, for instance, gravely appreciated “every word you have said in the *Grandissimes* about slavery & often [thought] about how much it must cost you.”<sup>119</sup>

The *Scribner's* editors believed that *The Grandissimes* had scored a double victory for the project of Cultural Reconstruction. According to their lights, it had significantly advanced both the reconstruction of Southern culture and sectional reconciliation. In late 1880, Holland wrote Cable privately: “You have made a field and are its only occupant. You are doing more to elevate the literary reputation of the South than any other man is.”<sup>120</sup> In September 1881, Holland publicly proclaimed that “a new literary era is dawning upon the South” with Cable in the lead.<sup>121</sup> Johnson, mirroring the sentiments of the Northern press, wrote Cable that “both Mr. Gilder and I feel anew the want of knowledge of the South that exists among us.”<sup>122</sup> Johnson glowingly related to Cable the generous judgment of the usually grudging *Nation*: “This book, it may almost be said, restores the intellectual balance between North and South in fiction.”<sup>123</sup> Such response gave the *Scribner's* editors faith that Cable would be an able field general in the struggle for national unity.

The *Scribner's* editors' faith seemed to be mirrored in national reviews of Cable's work through the early 1880s. Reviewers of Cable's early work were astonished that a Southerner could write so well. It was, the *Nation* reviewer remarked, nothing short of

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interest in and admiration for your city and your people, and it sounds to outsiders like the wildest insanity to charge him with an attempt to pull down the Creole race in the estimation of the world.” Gilder carefully criticized Cable's recent reception in his home town as being inconducive to encouraging original and independent thinking artists. He close by noting, “One is almost led to suppose that the Creoles would never be satisfied with anything but unmitigated compliment and adulation, and this is a thing that genuine literature seldom admits of” (Gilder to Mr. Claiborne, 17 March 1886 [copy], Cable Papers, Tulane University).

<sup>119</sup>20 January 1880. See also, Holland to Cable, 25 September 1880; Gilder to Cable, 13 January 1881; and Smith, 5 March 1881, Cable Papers, Tulane University. Smith, who was becoming one of Cable's closest friends and moral champions, wrote him: “I seriously fear that your life is in danger—when I think of your heroism [in publishing *The Grandissimes*] my petty troubles... seem petty indeed.”

<sup>120</sup>Holland to Cable, 25 September 1880.

<sup>121</sup>“Southern Literature,” *Scribner's* 22 (September 1881): 786.

<sup>122</sup>Johnson to Cable, 13 October 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>123</sup>Johnson to Cable, 1 October 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

“sensational.”<sup>124</sup> *The Grandissimes* confirmed what many reviewers of his stories had suspected: Cable was a “literary artist of unusual powers.”<sup>125</sup> Favorable comparison to Hawthorne was almost a reflex.<sup>126</sup> Reviewers delighted in Cable’s ability not only to describe a real American scene, but to evoke its essence and make the reader feel a part of it.<sup>127</sup> Cable’s hometown paper, the New Orleans *Times*, maintained that he portrayed the Creoles “just as they are, just as you and I and a hundred others have met them on the rue Royale, in the Cathedral, at the French Market and elsewhere in the old town.”<sup>128</sup> The New Orleans *Democrat* agreed, saying “The creations of this novelist are in reality *not* creations. They were and are living, breathing men and women, transferred from actual life to his pages, made immortal by their repeating everyday speech and manners....”<sup>129</sup> Magazine reviewers found *The Grandissimes* to be the product of “years of reflection and acute observation.”<sup>130</sup> It was “historically truthful,” “frank and natural.”<sup>131</sup> *Appleton’s* marveled at how Cable managed to depict “an epoch, a people, an entire social state.”<sup>132</sup> The *Atlantic* held *The*

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<sup>124</sup>William Crary Brownell, “Cable’s *The Grandissimes*,” *Nation* 31 (9 December 1880), in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 17.

<sup>125</sup>Brownell, “Cable’s *The Grandissimes*,” 17.

<sup>126</sup>See, e.g., New Orleans *Times*, 1 June 1879, cited in Turner, *Cable*, 107; Robert Underwood Johnson, “[Review of *Madame Delphine*],” *Critic* (July 1881), cited in Turner, *Cable*, 107; Charles M. Clay, “George W. Cable,” *Critic* 1 (8 October 1881): 270-71; Boston *Evening Transcript*, 30 November 1883, cited in Turner, *Cable*, 147; Turner, *Cable*, 70-71. Indeed, for a while Cable and Hawthorne seemed to share the status of the nation’s only true novelists. Reviewers also placed Cable in the company of Flaubert, Dickens, and Daudet (Turner, *Cable*, 85-86; Turner, *Cable Essays*, xiii).

<sup>127</sup>See, e.g., mention of Cable’s “Belles Demoiselles Plantation,” in *Nation* 18 (26 March 1874), cited in Ekstrom, *Cable*, 153; Turner, *Cable*, 87.

<sup>128</sup>New Orleans *Times*, 1 June 1879, cited in Turner, *Cable*, 86.

<sup>129</sup>New Orleans *Democrat*, 25 September 1880, cited in Turner, *Cable*, 101.

<sup>130</sup>Boyesen, “Cable’s *Grandissimes*,” *Scribner’s* 20 (November 1880), cited in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 10. Nonetheless, one reviewer found the novel to be “steeped in sentiment” (Brownell, “Cable’s *The Grandissimes*,” 17).

<sup>131</sup>“[Review of *The Grandissimes*],” *Atlantic* 46 (December 1880), cited in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 13.

<sup>132</sup>“Some Current Novels,” *Appleton’s* 9 (November 1880): 471. See also Cincinnati *Times* (June 1879?), cited in Turner, *Cable Essays*, xiv: “Here is true art work. Here is poetry, pathos, tragedy, humor. Here is an entrancing style. Here is a new field, one full of passion and beauty. Here is local color with strong drawing. Here, in this little volume, is life, breath, and blood.”

*Grandissimes* to be a paragon of local color. It revealed “how fine a field there is for the American novelist who will give us a local story with national relations.”<sup>133</sup>

Cable’s use of dialect was something new and strange to see in a magazine. Cable pioneered dialect as a device for expressing literary realism.<sup>134</sup> Other American authors had used it before, but as satire or broad caricature, especially when put in the mouth of black characters.<sup>135</sup> Cable, however, intended the Creole and Negro dialects to give literary flesh to his clashing cultures. While one or two critics sympathized with his intention, the vast majority were put off by them. The *Atlantic*’s reviewer haughtily scoffed, “One can amuse himself a little with them [the dialects] if he does not read the book aloud.”<sup>136</sup> Harper’s sniffed at *The Grandissimes* and found the dialect foul and “tedious.”<sup>137</sup> Such reviewers, were not attuned to listening to dialect as an expression of real life. Audience reception seems to have followed the critical response. One literary historian surmised Cable’s stories were “caviar” to Northern readers: “they acquired the taste slowly.”<sup>138</sup> His first two books sold moderately well, but hardly generated enthusiasm.<sup>139</sup> This did not discourage his champions at the *Century*. They urged him to do more for Cultural Reconstruction.

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<sup>133</sup>“[Review of *The Grandissimes*],” *Atlantic*, 15

<sup>134</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 87.

<sup>135</sup>Two other post-war writers also pioneered in the use of dialect, Bret Harte and Edward Eggleston. Harte, however, did not live up to the promise of his early stories, and often put dialect to broadly humorous purposes. Eggleston, in a letter to *Atlantic* editor Horace Scudder, claimed to be the “father of the modern ‘dialect school’ of American provincial realism.” His novel *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, heavily influenced by his reading of Taine, preceded Cable’s first story by two years. But as he admitted, it was “a field into which I drifted by a sort of accident.” Moreover, because the novel did not appear in a magazine, it received relatively little popular attention (Eggleston to Scudder, 17 July 1890, Scudder Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard).

<sup>136</sup>“[Review of *The Grandissimes*],” *Atlantic*, 15.

<sup>137</sup>“[Review of *The Grandissimes*],” *Harper’s* 62 (December 1880): 153, reprinted in Turner, *Cable Essays*, 16.

<sup>138</sup>Pattee, *The American Short Story*, 258. Cable was judged by some American readers to be one of the nation’s preeminent writers. One 1884 poll listed Cable as the country’s twelfth most popular author, ahead of Henry James, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman. But the total number of votes he received was only eighty-seven (“Our ‘Forty Immortals,’” *Critic* 4 [12 April 1884]: 169). On contemporary estimations of Cable’s place among American authors, see Jay B. Hubbell, *Who Are the Major American Writers?* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), 75-114, 248-49, 289-91.

<sup>139</sup>It should be noted that when he took to the lecture circuit, reading his stories and singing Creole songs in late 1883 he was popular. It seems that the disparity between his wide popularity and his disappointing book sales was attributable to the power of the magazines. His 1884 reading tour with Mark Twain was fabulously successful. Cable’s program, recalled promoter [James] Pond, “was a revelation” to Northern audiences. His public performances, however, did not translate into book sales. On Cable’s public performances, see J.B.



Cable, for his part, had little interest in a Cultural Reconstruction aimed at sectional reconciliation alone, without a corresponding push to ameliorate the plight of the freed people. He twice rebuffed Johnson's efforts to enlist him in the cause. Johnson greatly hoped that Cable would write a story that could bring the nation together. He and Gilder strongly felt that the South could be reconciled only if a Southerner wrote such a story. The demands of local color and sectional pride necessitated a Southern strategy. Thus, even while in the midst of editing *The Granddissimes* in late 1879, Johnson wrote Cable what amounted to the battle plan for the project of Cultural Reconstruction. For his model, Johnson looked to Gotthold Lessing's cultural unification of Germany over one hundred years earlier:

The greatness of Lessing in German Literature dates from his *Minna von Barnhelm*, the first German comedy (about 1750). Previously, Prussia and Saxony had been fighting & jealously depreciating each other. After the war, Lessing embodied in this beautiful play two types of character who did more for German unity than Bismarck himself! His hero was a manly Prussian—his heroine a refined Saxon, and he the mediator and conciliator between the two nations. *Minna* is today the most popular German comedy not excepting Goethe or Schiller.

Well the time is soon coming when this sort of a work must be done for us. As long as the conventional types of Yankee and Reb. are kept before the people i.e. as long as politicians have axes to grind—so long will the reunion of the people be delayed. Had I the knowledge and the power I would write a novel aiming to do this: hold up the best side of the South and North during the War of Secession. Here is romance ready made—no great writer—of our great writers of fiction—has touched the war. Northern politicians (& perhaps Southern ones) are teaching the youth of the South to hate the Union worse than their fathers. My novel should work against this current. Preaching & speech-making can do nothing. Fiction can do much. The present generation would read fiction of our war with avidity. Bret Harte once told me that he thought a great literature of fiction would come out of the war and that when it was written all the pathos would be on the side of the invaded and desolated South. Have your plans ever extended in this direction?<sup>140</sup>

Cable refused the commission.

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Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius* (New York: G.W. Dillingham Co., 1900); Fred Lorch, "Cable and His Reading Tour with Mark Twain in 1884-1885," *American Literature* 23 (January 1952): 471-86; Guy A. Cardwell, *Twins of Genius* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State College Press, 1953); Turner, *Cable*, 175-93.

<sup>140</sup>Johnson to Cable, 2 December 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

Johnson then asked Cable in October 1880 to write a review of Tourgée's two Reconstruction novels. The nation, then in the throes of a bitter presidential campaign, was being torn apart along sectional lines by the two political parties. Johnson pleaded with Cable to "write so as to conciliate and impress with the fairness of your statements." He saw the review as a significant means to "help both North and South... to truer views of the South than the two parties set forth."<sup>141</sup> Cable was uninterested. He never wrote the review.

As *Scribner's* became the *Century*, and Josiah Holland retired, Gilder and Johnson seem to have lost focus on the project of Cultural Reconstruction. The first four volumes of the newly christened magazine carried only a handful of articles with Southern themes, such as "A Corn-Shucking in Georgia," Howells on Mark Twain, a brief sketch of a Mississippi steamboat trip, and Henry Watterson's "Oddities of Southern Life."<sup>142</sup> The *Century* editors dabbled with a few new Southern writers, most notably Joel Chandler Harris. Harris's Uncle Remus had made his national magazine debut in *Scribner's* in June of 1881.<sup>143</sup> More of Remus's animal trickster tales appeared in the *Century* in the summer months of 1883.<sup>144</sup> Harris also contributed a two-part story about a poor white, Teague Poteet.<sup>145</sup> But, in the first years of *Century*, Gilder and Johnson maintained their focus on the South chiefly by stoking the magazine with Cable product. Knowing that he had finally quit bookkeeping and was now engaged full time in literature and moral reform, they begged him to write more stories about the Creoles. They also urged him to write histories of the South, essays about Southern topics, and literary reviews of works related to the South. Cable responded. Over

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<sup>141</sup>13 October 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University. The campaign pitted two former Union generals against one another, the Republican James A. Garfield against the Democrat Winfield Hancock. The Republicans devoted much of their campaign to waving the bloody shirt (Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 112-114).

<sup>142</sup>"Corn," *Century* 24 (October 1883); Howells, *Century* 24 (September 1883), steamboat trip, *Century* 25 (January 1883); Watterson, *Century* 23 (April 1882). One article on the new realist depiction of American life in literature devoted a column and a half to Cable and to no other Southern author (James Herbert Morse, "The Native Element in American Literature," *Century* 26 [July 1883]: 368.)

<sup>143</sup>"A Rainy Day with Uncle Remus," *Scribner's* 22 (June, July, August 1881).

<sup>144</sup>"Nights with Uncle Remus," *Century* 26 (July, August, September, 1883). The magazine also published some minor pieces of Harris's plantation poetry: "Two Plantation Songs," *Century* 24 (May 1882); "Uncle Remus's Christmas Dance Songs," *Century* 25 (January 1883);

<sup>145</sup>"At Teague Poteet's: A Sketch of the Hog Mountain Country," *Century* 26 (May, June 1883).

the next four years, Gilder and Johnson published something by Cable in the *Century* twenty-three times—serial novels, stories, reviews, histories, and essays. The New Orleans author appeared, on average, in every other issue of the magazine through 1884.<sup>146</sup>

Cable, however, was increasingly restive in the South. As his commitment to moral reform grew, he lost patience with the conservatism coalescing into repressive segregation throughout the region. When Johnson forwarded Cable an 1881 magazine article that questioned whether Cable was truly Southern, since his parents were not native Louisianans, he querulously asked the native Indianan: “Well, what is a *Southerner*? Are there any Northerners? Are people treated as recreants because they do not subscribe themselves ‘Northerner?’”<sup>147</sup> He then barbed Johnson’s beard with the editor’s own unionism: “*You* are an American, I presume; or do I mistake?— maybe you are proud to be a Westerner, and are always true to the West as distinguished from the E[ast,] N[orth,] or S[outh].

Notwithstanding which, you do implore the E[ast,] N[orth,] & S[outh] to have done with sectional feeling!”<sup>148</sup> A year later, during a commencement address at the University of Mississippi, he lambasted literary sectionalism and implored the graduating class, “Let us hasten to be no longer a unique people.”<sup>149</sup> And soon he was writing to his wife while on an extended speaking tour of the North and West, “The South makes me sick, the West makes

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<sup>146</sup>Other Northern literary figures also began to see Cable as the founder of a school of Southern literature. On the strength of this opinion, Charles Dudley Warner, editor of Houghton Mifflin’s American Men of Letters biography series, commissioned Cable to write a biography of the only Southern writer anyone could think of who might deserve a place in such a pantheon: William Gilmore Simms. Cable never delivered, and the biography was eventually written by William Peterfield Trent.

<sup>147</sup>Cable to Johnson, 16 February 1881.

<sup>148</sup>Cable to Johnson, 16 February 1881. Apparently exasperated by the topic, Cable then added, “Ah! Alas! O! Oh! fie! fudge! pish! tush! zounds!”

<sup>149</sup>“Literature in the Southern States,” in Turner, *The Negro Question*, 43. This largely echoed Joel Chandler Harris’s sentiments of 1879. Harris had written in an Atlanta *Constitution* editorial, “In literature, art and society, whatever is truly Southern is likewise truly American, and the same may be said of what is Northern. Literature that is Georgian or Southern, is necessarily American, and in the broadest sense. The sectionalism that is the most marked feature of our modern politics can never intrude into literature. Its intrusion is fatal and it is this fatality that has pursued, and overtaken, and destroyed literary effort in the South. The truth might as well be told: we have no Southern literature worthy of the name because an attempt has been made to give it the peculiarities of sectionalism rather than to impart to it the flavor of localism” (“Literature in the South,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 November 1879, cited in Paul M. Cousins, *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968], 110).

me tired, the East makes me glad. It is the intellectual treasury of the United States. Here is cultivation, & refinement, & taste.”<sup>150</sup>

Perhaps because of this restiveness toward the South, Cable’s tendency toward pamphleteering grew more pronounced. In 1883, in a commencement address at the University of Louisiana, he called on Southerners to use literature as a cudgel against the heritage of slavery.<sup>151</sup> “Literature,” he proclaimed, “is almost a religion.” As such it was a vital force for social reform: “It must be free,” he thundered, “free to study principles for themselves; to present and defend truth; to assert rights; to dissolve and sublimate and re-crystallize all that is best of old or new; to rectify thoughts, morals, manners, society, even though it shake the established order of things like an earthquake.”<sup>152</sup> But even as he called for a more morally robust literature, Cable was becoming increasingly dubious about fiction’s ability to effect racial and moral progress. The more he wrote, the more the South seemed to march toward racial oppression. His fiction seemed impotent to halt segregation. His racial message seemed to have little effect in the South by 1883, creating neither followers nor a significant opposition. By 1885, all that changed.

Cable had escaped Southern censure about his racial views largely because he had set them in the antebellum era. As literary slices of history, they did not threaten the constricting social formation of the South’s post–Civil War racial caste system. But with *Dr. Sevier*, Cable’s serial novel which ran in the *Century* from November 1883 to October 1884, his criticisms began to turn to the current order. The novel was one long tract against all manner of urban woes (corruption, poverty, disease) lightly dressed in literary garb.<sup>153</sup> Although *Dr. Sevier* was not about sectional reconciliation or race, one brief passage electrified Southern critics. Cable stepped out of the narrative and addressed Union soldiers as “saviors of the

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<sup>150</sup>April 1884, cited in Turner, *Cable*, 152.

<sup>151</sup>The university was soon thereafter renamed Tulane (Turner, *Cable*, 142).

<sup>152</sup>In Turner, *The Negro Question*, 48.

<sup>153</sup>On the intense battle between Cable and Gilder over the soul of the novel, see Turner, ch. 12, and Rubin, ch. 9. The serial novel for the *Century* was saved from being a didactic screed only by the strenuous exertions of Gilder and Johnson.

union.” He told them, “your cause is just. Lo, now since nigh twenty-five years have passed, we of the South can say it!” The admission caused a minor sensation. The *Century* published three responses from Southern correspondents, one denying that Cable spoke for other Southerners, and two claiming that he did.<sup>154</sup> The response in the Southern press was more intense. Southern newspapers, incensed by Cable’s political capitulation, piled high their editorial tinder boxes with rebuke. They warily admitted Cable’s right to make such statements, but put him on guard that any further such statements would be met with derision.<sup>155</sup> Cable only raised their suspicions by moving his family to Connecticut in the summer of 1884.<sup>156</sup>

Then, in January 1885, Cable lit the match that exploded the tinder boxes. In that month the *Century* published his essay, “The Freedman’s Case in Equity.” This was a full frontal assault on the growing white Southern consensus in favor of racial segregation. The essay was published with the full endorsement of Gilder and the *Century*’s publisher Roswell Smith. They knew it was “likely to stir up the dry bones.”<sup>157</sup> But they saw it as test case for how open the South was to criticism. For in publishing the essay, the editors realized that they were no longer speaking to the dead past of slavery, but the intense present of racial oppression.

Cable’s *Century* essay called on Southern whites to give up the twinned false beliefs that Negroes constituted an alien race and that their moral shortcomings were innate, God-given, and immutable. Taking care to lay the blame for slavery at the foot of the entire nation, Cable pointed out that the whites’ racial antipathy toward blacks was a cultural and

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<sup>154</sup>See Malcolm McKay, “*Dr. Sevier: A Protest*,” *Century* 28 (October 1884): 957; “A Southern Democrat—Old Questions and New,” *Century* 29 (January 1885): 471-72; C.N. Jenkins, “The Blue and Gray,” *Century* 19 (March 1885): 797. Cable replied to the first of these in a letter entitled, “We of the South,” *Century* 29 (November 1884): 151-52.

<sup>155</sup>Cable’s comments, warned the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, amounted to the South admitting that secession was an act of treason. The *Century* received several letters from Southerners over the controversy, both pro and con (Ekstrom, *Cable*, 160; Turner, *Cable*, 169-70).

<sup>156</sup>A year later, the Cables moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, where Cable would live out the rest of his life.

<sup>157</sup>Johnson to Cable, 17 December 1884, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

not a natural response. He appealed to class consciousness to sweep away racial segregation. Forced separation, Cable argued, did not sift the better sorts from the vicious. Rather, “It prompts the average Southern white [railway] passenger to find less offense in the presence of a profane, boisterous, or unclean white person than in that of a quiet, well-behaved colored man or woman attempting to travel on an equal footing with him....”<sup>158</sup> Such an argument may have appealed to the Northern middle-class readers among the *Century*’s audience. But among Southern whites, race trumped class.

The Southern press seethed in indignation at his essay. Although Cable maintained that civil quality would not bring about social equality, critics could only see him as advocating a full-tilt program of racial amalgamation.<sup>159</sup> Papers and critics called him a traitor to the South. They reviewed his older works and imputed anti-Southern sentiments to them. They raised up his mother’s New England heritage to show that he was in fact no Southerner at all. No paper was more vituperative than Cable’s own former hometown daily and employer, the *Times-Democrat*. The paper gave free reign to Creole historian Charles Gayarré, who accused Cable of writing “with the raving imprecation, the howlings and maniac gesticulations of an Orlando Furioso....”<sup>160</sup> Across the South, newspapers, periodicals, and intellectuals formed a common cause to demonize George Washington Cable.

Cable was utterly shocked, as were his editors, at the vituperative and seemingly unanimous response of the Southern press. Cable, Gilder, Johnson, and numerous Northern critics had been exhilarated by the election of the Democrat Grover Cleveland to the presidency in 1884. They thought it would be a significant step toward sectional reconciliation. Northerners would discover that Democrats were not agents of the devil, and

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<sup>158</sup>“The Freedman’s Case in Equity,” *Century* (September 1885), reprinted in Turner, *The Negro Question*, 65.

<sup>159</sup>“Freedman’s Case,” 71; and see Turner’s “Introduction,” *The Negro Question*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>160</sup>Cited in Charles Roberts Anderson, “Charles Gayarré and Paul Hayne: The Last of the Literary Cavaliers,” in *American Studies in Honor of William Kenneth Boyd* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940), 230.

Southerners would lay to rest any lingering Southern fears about the Negro vote.<sup>161</sup> The *Century* editors expected some negative response to “The Freedman’s Case,” but nothing like the avalanche of criticism it produced. Johnson calmly wrote Cable from the eye of the editorial storm on 26 January 1885, “As to ‘The Freedman’s Case’ no article we have had of late years has been so thoroughly discussed in the press. You have accomplished exactly what you aimed at. The concentration of thoughtful Southern minds upon this question.”<sup>162</sup> Through March, at least, the *Century* editors considered the debate to be positive. Perhaps, they suggested it was even a sign that the South had finally come to moral terms with the heritage of slavery. “The reception of [‘The Freedman’s Case’] in the Southern States,” read a *Century* editorial, “(though not unaccompanied by some amusing reminders of the good old-fashioned bowie-knife fire-eating days) would seem to be a new proof that the Southern people admit of the honest and free discussion of the burning questions in a manner which has not always been characteristic of that section. Not only does the south admit the distasteful opinions of thinkers from other sections, but, what is still more noticeable, it is increasingly tolerant of differences of opinion among its own writers.”<sup>163</sup> As the controversy raged on, however, it became increasingly clear that the rhetorical knives were cutting against Cable, and the *Century* as well.

Gilder and Johnson, while they were in accord with Cable’s political stand, nonetheless continued their magazine’s tradition of treating controversy in a forum fashion. They were inundated with letters attacking Cable, and felt it incumbent upon them to present

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<sup>161</sup>Gilder and Johnson were hearing such things from their contacts in various parts of the country. For instance, Southerner Joel Chandler Harris wrote Johnson before the election, “I should like for the Democrats to gain [the White House] if only to show the North that the new generation at the South is really and thoroughly devoted to the Union and to the vast interests of the American republic. There is nothing sinister down here at this day” (Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 383). Northern Republican stalwart Thomas Nast equally believed that Cleveland’s election augured well for reconciliation. His 22 November 1884 political cartoon on the cover of *Harper’s Weekly* showed a black man and a Southern white reaching to shake one another’s hand, watched over by a solemn Cleveland. See also Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 270-72.

<sup>162</sup>Johnson to Cable, 26 January 1885, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>163</sup>“Freedom of Discussion,” *Century* 29 (March 1885): 789-90.

the argument against Cable.<sup>164</sup> Instead of publishing all or a sampling of them, however, they chose Henry Grady, the pugnacious but eloquent editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, to write a rejoinder to Cable. They also urged Cable to respond in the same issue.<sup>165</sup> But the matter was too important to hurry through, and Cable's original four page response, became a seventeen-page diagnosis of the Southern problem. It did not appear until September 1885.<sup>166</sup> Cable's reply, written in virtual collaboration with Gilder, Johnson, and Smith, continued his theme of progress.<sup>167</sup> Segregation, he argued, was merely the lingering social habit of an outmoded political and economic system. The essay thrilled Cable's Northern supporters and his handful of Southern friends, but it did nothing to sway the legion of his Southern detractors.<sup>168</sup>

In publishing the "Freedman's Case" essay and its sequel, Cable and his New York editors had severely set back the project of cultural Reconstruction. They had produced a solid white South arrayed against Cable's increasingly strident calls for black civil rights. And they had potentially set the South against the magazine itself.

The controversy seriously altered the *Century's* attitude toward the Southern problem. Through the early 1880s, they had believed that telling the "truth" about antebellum slavery would adequately address the problem of the postbellum freedmen. Gilder and Johnson continued for years to express faith that Southerners were letting go of the old prejudices. Yet, with Cable's two 1885 essays, they realized that they had crossed from the literary expression of Southern culture into the politics of race. As Southern critics increasingly

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<sup>164</sup>Gilder sent out a form letter in response to these respondents: "If the South wishes to defame and persecute its brightest literary ornament and leading writer, it is welcome to do so, but the persecution cannot be carried on within our columns" (cited in Smith, *Gilder*, 71).

<sup>165</sup>The editors did, however, put Cable's history of New Orleans in the late antebellum days right after Grady's essay, as a sort of rejoinder.

<sup>166</sup>Gilder limited this forum to only these three articles, Cable's original essay, Grady's rejoinder, and Cable's second essay. There were, however, several other pieces that appeared in the magazine's "Open Letters" department.

<sup>167</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 215. Gilder was extremely pleased with the essay, paying Cable twice the magazine's going rate of \$250 for essays (Rubin, *Cable*, 147).

<sup>168</sup>On the response of Cable's friends, Turner, *Cable*, 217.



ridiculed Cable through the mid 1880s, Gilder and Johnson seem to have realized that this politics threatened the *Century* as a commercial enterprise. Much of the criticism began to turn on the perception that Cable had sold out the South to Northern ideologues for a few pieces of silver. Cable's politics, no matter how wedded to them Gilder and Johnson were, threatened to separate the sections and lose the *Century* its readers.

Gilder ran into the problem head on when he made his first trip to the South during the height of the Cable controversy in April 1885. In letters to his wife, Gilder groaned that the Cable affair was "very complicated."<sup>169</sup> "The whole town is on fire concerning Cable."<sup>170</sup> "Cable is the great bone of contention here."<sup>171</sup> He reported that "[I]f you want to hear eloquence-- just mention his name in New Orleans-- you are in for an hour's oration-- sometimes two talking at once & perhaps both on their feet."<sup>172</sup> Gilder could find only one citizen who sided with Cable's politics.<sup>173</sup> It all reminded the New York editor of the antebellum South's repression of free discussion in the defense of slavery. Yet, even in the face of such controversy, he was confident that great change had reached the South. He confided to his wife that the forces of progress had already brought Southerners so far toward liberalism that any remaining conservatism "should neither surprise nor alarm any one." Gilder was delighted to discover that, on the main point, the Southerners he met actually agreed with Cable's pro-Union remark in *Dr. Sevier*. "They almost without exception rejoice," he reported, "in the death of slavery...."<sup>174</sup> Gilder thus left the South with two key conclusions. First, the South's sectionalism was not based on a defense of slavery or a desire to return to the Old South's social system based on forced labor. Second, Cable could no

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<sup>169</sup>16 April 1885, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>170</sup>16 April 1885.

<sup>171</sup>14 April 1885, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>172</sup>14 April 1885.

<sup>173</sup>16 April 1885.

<sup>174</sup>16 April 1885.

longer be the *Century*'s sole, or at least primary, exponent of Southern culture. He was ruined as a Southerner.

Cable's work had become an anomaly in the terms of Taine's literary theory. He could no longer speak as a representative of his native land; his writing could no longer be a cultural expression of Southern life. It was now *litteratura non grata* in the South. He would continue to write on Louisiana for the *Century*, but thereafter he could only write as an outsider. Living in the North, his fervor for attacking segregation subsided. After two brief letters in 1886, Cable wrote nothing more on race in the *Century*.

Gilder's 1885 discovery of the depth of white Southerners' hatred of Cable led him to believe that the project of Cultural Reconstruction needed to change tracks. Cable's open attack was a failure. The white South might have come to terms with the death of slavery. But it was clearly not open to "truth" and free discussion when it came to the issue of racial equality. And yet the *Century* editors fully subscribed to Cable's assertion at the beginning of his essay, that "The greatest social problem before the American people to-day is, as it has been for a hundred years, the presence among us of the Negro."<sup>175</sup> The problem of reconciliation now turned on a delicate question: how to separate the current, post-Reconstruction politics of race out from the condemnation of antebellum slavery while simultaneously drawing in the white Southern audience? Two things seemed clear to Gilder and Johnson. First, they had to return to the first principles of sentimentality. They had to find a literary expression of the white South that could simultaneously satisfy white Southerners and foster Northern sympathy with the problems and longings of Southern culture. Second, the Negro was, somehow, the key to the problem.

Building on Gilder's faith that Southerners no longer venerated slavery and that Southern conservatism could no longer be alarming, he and Johnson began to promote the

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<sup>175</sup>In Turner, *The Negro Question*, 51.

work of another Southern discovery. The themes and characters of Thomas Nelson Page's South could in no way be mistaken for those of Cable.

### **Thomas Nelson Page: Inventing the Old South**

The year 1884 was a crucial moment for the project of Cultural Reconstruction. There was a presidential election in November, and the *Century* editors required no reminders of the bitter wrangling over sectionalism during the previous election. But they had let the project lag somewhat since rechristening the magazine as the *Century*. The theme of the South had been present, but it had been carried chiefly by one author who was increasingly antagonistic toward the South. Moreover, a Southern challenger to Cable had burst through in the pages of a rival magazine. Mary Noailles Murfree (under the pseudonym Charles Egbert Craddock) was causing a sensation in the *Atlantic* with her stories of the Appalachian mountaineers of east Tennessee. Her first collection of stories published by Boston-based Houghton Mifflin in early 1884 met with an immediate popularity that neither of Cable's books had achieved.<sup>176</sup> Numerous magazine editors chased after her for contributions. *Harper's*, which had paid little attention to Southern topics in the 1870s, courted her. Even Gilder solicited work from her.<sup>177</sup> Murfree's rise signaled to the *Century* editors that Cultural Reconstruction was no longer an editorial project of their own: It was becoming a commercial imperative.

Under such pressure, the project of Cultural Reconstruction became searingly intense. Gilder and Johnson made it the centerpiece of the *Century*. Several articles on Civil War themes proved popular. A Southerner and a Radical Abolitionist gave differing accounts of

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<sup>176</sup>Murfree's collection *In the Tennessee Mountains* went through fourteen editions in two years (Edd Winfield Parks, *Charles Egbert Craddock: Mary Noailles Murfree* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941], 108). Sales of *The Grandissimes* disappointed its New York publisher. Scribner reported that it sold only 2900 copies in its first five months (Turner, *Cable*, 116). It was not reprinted again until 1884, when Cable revised much of the dialect. Thereafter, it had a steady sale and stayed in print until the 1920s (William H. Roberson, *George Washington Cable: An Annotated Bibliography* [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982], 22-23).

<sup>177</sup>Gilder to Murfree, 24 October 1884, Murfree Papers, Emory University.

John Brown's raid.<sup>178</sup> Burton Harrison, Jefferson Davis's personal secretary, detailed the Confederate president's capture in order to correct popular misconceptions of the event.<sup>179</sup> Gilder and Johnson balanced this article with two on Union generals Sheridan and Sherman.<sup>180</sup> These articles gave way to one of the most influential publishing events in the nation's history. The *Century* editors began planning in early 1884 their massive series on the Civil War, in the spirit of the Great South series which had appeared a decade earlier. It was to open a second front of Cultural Reconstruction. The *Century* editors declared at the outset, the aim of the series was "better understanding of each other."<sup>181</sup> The series, Gilder enthused to Roswell Smith, would counter charges of the *Century*'s supposed "aestheticism or cant." It would prove the magazine to be "stalwart" in the cause of Union, and would be "a good platform against demagogism in all parties and all sections, and in all fields of thought."<sup>182</sup> "I would rather have one article by [Ulysses S.] Grant on a battle won by him," Gilder wrote another correspondent, "I would rather read it—print it—publish it than twenty articles by Daudet on Mistral."<sup>183</sup> The series was to be a forum, with rival participants, Confederate and Union, paired to write about all aspects of the war, from Mark Twain's "History of a Campaign That Failed" to Grant's poignant memoirs of Shiloh, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and the Wilderness. Slated to begin in November 1884 and originally scheduled for twelve months, the series was wildly popular. It eventually ran over three years and doubled the *Century*'s monthly circulation to 250,000.

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<sup>178</sup>*Century* 26 (July 1883): 399ff.

<sup>179</sup>On these, see Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, ch. 1, "Intemperate Men and Spiteful Women." Silber does not discuss the article, which was written by Burton Harrison. Harrison was by then a lawyer in New York City, and his wife Mrs. Burton Harrison had begun a career as a writer of Southern stories.

<sup>180</sup>*Century* 27 (January 1884): 450-62; *Century* 27 (February 1884): 497-511.

<sup>181</sup>*Century* 28 (October 1884):

<sup>182</sup>Gilder to Smith, 21 August 1884, in Rosamond Gilder, ed., *Letters of Richard Watson Gilder* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1916) 395.

<sup>183</sup>Gilder to Edmund Gosse, 1 July 1885, in Paul F. Matthiesen & Michael Millgate, eds., *Transatlantic Dialogue: Selected American Correspondence of Edmund Gosse* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 174. Gosse, the *Century*'s British agent, worried that too many articles on the American Civil War would repel European readers. Gilder admonished him, "Don't let literature and art make dilettantes of us!" (ibid., 175).

Gilder and Johnson also greatly increased the number of articles and stories about the South in the fifth volume of the *Century*. The April 1884 issue alone carried seven pieces by Southern authors or with Southern themes.<sup>184</sup> A portrait of Southern poet Henry Lanier was the issue's frontispiece, and a eulogy paid homage to his cut-short life.<sup>185</sup> There was an installment of Cable's *Dr. Sevier*. A former slave owner described changes in the freedmen's lives since emancipation. Another article described the escape of John Wilkes Booth. But the last story in the volume, minuscule in comparison to the eventual size of the Civil War series, was to have an immediate and lasting effect on American culture as great as that massive series. Thomas Nelson Page's "Marse Chan" opened the floodgates for the national production of Southern culture.

Page's South was far different from Cable's. Born in 1853, he was the scion of once prestigious planters (his great-grandfather Thomas Nelson had signed the Declaration of Independence). His parents were conservative Episcopalians who strictly observed all religious formalities, including thrice-daily family prayers.<sup>186</sup> Their prayers were not enough, however, to reverse the family's declining fortunes, which had been diminishing since the Revolutionary War era. Too young to fight in the Civil War, Page could only watch as the conflict devastated his modest patrimony.<sup>187</sup> Moreover, rural isolation and the vagaries of war left Page with only an irregular education. Two years at a local "academy" in 1867 and

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<sup>184</sup>This represented six of fourteen article-length works, and one of four poems. The poem was by Southern educator William Preston Johnson, son of Confederate general Albert Sydney Johnson, although it was not on a Southern theme. There was also J.A. Macon's brief Negro dialect piece "Aphorism's from the Quarter" in the issue's "Bric-a-Brac" section. This compendium of supposedly Negro sayings appeared several times in the *Century* in the 1880s.

<sup>185</sup>He had recently died at a young age of tuberculosis.

<sup>186</sup>Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page, 1884-1910* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1947), 5.

<sup>187</sup>Since the Revolution, the family's fortunes had gradually diminished. Thus, one Page biographer could describe their antebellum circumstances as "meager," while Page's brother could wax nostalgic about the family's two Hanover County plantations and sixty slaves (which included numerous house servants). In a sense, these two views are not contradictory, in that the heyday of the Virginia plantation had passed decades before the war, and even a large plantation such as the Page's was unlikely to be prosperous. The soil-exhausting methods of planting that had ruined much Virginia land were still in use at Oakland and Mont Air in the 1850s. See Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 5; and Rosewell Page, *Thomas Nelson Page: A Memoir of a Virginia Gentleman* (New York: Scribner, 1923), 14.

1868 allowed him to matriculate at Washington College in 1869 during Robert E. Lee's tenure there.<sup>188</sup> Performing, he later admitted, with a "damnable mediocrity," he left college a year short of graduation.<sup>189</sup> A year later, he entered the law program at the University of Virginia.<sup>190</sup> Courting physical breakdown, he raced through the two-year law program in only one year, hoping to halve his expenses. He received his law degree in 1874 at the age of 21. Two years later, in the midst of the economic bust of the seventies and the lingering privations of the Civil War's aftermath, Page took up lawyering in the Virginia capitol. The state of the economy combined with his lack of reputation and his tendency to procrastinate added up to only a modicum of success through the 1870s. With time on his hands, a need for income, and a desire for fame, Page wrote "Marse Chan" and sent it off to *Scribner's* in 1880.<sup>191</sup>

"Marse Chan" almost never saw the light of day. The *Scribner's* editors promptly accepted it.<sup>192</sup> But various reservations militated against immediate publication and it lay in the magazine's manuscript safe for years.

The story seemed unreadable at first. Told almost entirely in a cacography of "Negro dialect," some reviewers complained that it was "unintelligible."<sup>193</sup> The *Scribner's* editors themselves had trouble with it.<sup>194</sup> It was certainly not the first work of purported Negro

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<sup>188</sup>The College was soon renamed Washington and Lee. Lee was also on Page's family tree.

<sup>189</sup>Cited in Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 13n29.

<sup>190</sup>During the year between college and law school, Page tutored the children of a distant relative in Kentucky. His brief tenure as a teacher apparently left him embittered. His first law partner and close friend Armistead Gordon recalled that "He seldom recurred in conversation to this experience, save to deplore the necessity of any youth of eager ambition and energy having to teach school" (Armistead Gordon, "Thomas Nelson Page: An Appreciation," *Scribner's* 73 [January 1923], 75–80, quote is on 78).

<sup>191</sup>On the period when Page wrote his story, see the note attached to the manuscript in the Alderman Library.

<sup>192</sup>A *Scribner's* editor (most likely Johnson) wrote to accept the story on 12 January 1881 (*Scribner's* to Page, Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University). He indicated that there was some extraneous material to be cut. A week later the same editor at *Scribner's* informed Page that the story would appear in the October 1881 issue. The only sticking point would be having several accompanying illustrations completed in time ([Johnson?] to Page, 19 January 1881 [Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia]).

<sup>193</sup>Even Hamlin Garland, one of the foremost champions of vernacular literature, recalled listening to Page read a story "which was so filled with negro dialect that I could not follow it..." (Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* [New York: Macmillan, 1930], 103).

<sup>194</sup>L. Frank Tooker, *The Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York: Century, 1923), 202, 206. They were still worried about readers' ability to read an entire story in dialect when Page submitted to them a second story.

dialect the *Scribner's editors* had seen. They had published Russell's and other dialect verses, and even Page's own dialect poem, "Uncle Gabe's White Folks."<sup>195</sup> Readers had little difficulty with such works, assisted by meter and short scannable lines. "Marse Chan," however, was a long prose work—too long, the editors decided. Page after page was filled with mutilated words and innumerable apostrophes. Moreover, the story's narrator, Sam, was utterly unheard of in American letters. He was an old, black sharecropper, a freedman, emancipated but still living on the plantation where he had been enslaved. This ex-slave's tale was unusual too: He wistfully recalled the glorious bygone days of his former masters. Sam longed for a return to the grandeur of the plantation when these masters "Live' mons'ous high" and "Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do—jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an cleanin' de hosses, an' doin' what de marster tell 'em to do.... Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin'."<sup>196</sup> Relations between antebellum Southern blacks and whites in this story were warm and tender, their feelings freely and mutually given. This was hardly the fire-breathing South that Union forces had battled against for four bitter years. But by 1884, with Cable's literary flame out, it was the sort of South the *Century* editors felt compelled to address.

They could not have been comfortable with publishing a paean to the plantation. But they had offered readers depictions of blacks, Creoles, and Georgia "crackers," or poor whites. And they risked losing the white Southern audience due to Cable's pro-Civil Rights articles. It became increasingly evident to Gilder and Johnson that they would have to include the planter elite in the *Century's* emerging iconography of the Civil War and the sectional issue.

The plantation proved a difficult issue for Northern magazine editors. How could the *Century* sympathetically portray the old slave masters while, as one *Century* editor put it, at

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Gilder wrote Page, after publishing the story, "I was a little fearful concerning 'Meh Lady' on account of its length and the unbroken columns of dialect. I know that it was a hard nut for many to crack for this reason" (Gilder to Page, 1 July 1886, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia).

<sup>195</sup>*Scribner's* 13 (April 1877): 882.

<sup>196</sup>The first quotation is from Page's first magazine-published work, the dialect poem "Uncle Gabe's White Folks." The second is from the dialect story "Marse Chan."

least “tacitly barr[ing] any expression of the old hostility”?<sup>197</sup> Would readers see it as condoning the slave régime or as disputing the outcome of the Civil War? By 1884, the *Century* editors believed that Page’s story offered a possibility worthy of tentative experimentation. Thus, they slipped it into the back of the last issue of volume 27.

This story, which they published under the guise of regionalism, turned out to be, in hindsight, a racial Trojan horse. Anxious to appeal to the South across sectional lines, the *Century* editors turned a blind eye to the racial implication of the story. The problem, at heart, was that they did not believe themselves to be racists. Johnson was the child of abolitionists and had broken bread with Frederick Douglass. Yet, these experiences did not prevent him from enjoying the blackface minstrel theater. Gilder had been somewhat enthralled by blacks his whole life, particularly the servant who had been a fixture among his family even before he was born. Gilder, in what would become a classic middle-class attitude, romanticized the simple life of blacks, as in this 1872 statement: “I have turned with a sense of infinite relief from the whole world of expression, and the whole universe of critics, to the old colored woman who comes to our house on Mondays to help with the week’s washing—because she is a picture of no school, a poem whose verses may not be scanned; because her unselfish, womanly life, and saintly presence and conversation have essential beauties and nobilities beyond the touch of art or the impertinence of *Kames’ Elements*.”<sup>198</sup> Such beliefs reveal Gilder’s and Johnson’s cultural inability to see the social limitations they imposed in aesthetic terms. To some extent this inability was due to the fact that the concept of “racism,” as we know it today, was unavailable to them.<sup>199</sup> In considering why they could publish a story that is now so identifiably racist, an important clue is

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<sup>197</sup>Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations*, 41.

<sup>198</sup>“Old Cabinet,” *Scribner’s* 4 (October 1872): 767.

<sup>199</sup>The term “racism” was not coined until the 1930s. Nor was the concept made coherent until the 1910s when Madison Grant published his racist tract, *The Passing of the Great Race* (John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 157). Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) also demonstrates how the concept of race was in flux throughout the late 1800s.



Johnson's argument to Cable against including the Clemence section in *The Grandissimes*. He could not believe a *slave* thought in a sophisticated way about such issues as social class. Thus, it seems likely that he and Gilder were not thinking of Sam, the freedman of "Marse Chan," in race terms (that is, solely as a black man), but in *class* terms.

Page presented a vision of Southern blacks that was distinctly at variance with those of Cable's stories. Page had grown up among plantation Negroes. He had played with them as a child and revered numerous of the house servants. Page saw little of the violence of slavery. Virginia plantations in the 1850s had far less of the horrific regimen of the rapidly expanding plantation regions of the southwest. And Page, still a young boy at the time of emancipation, had little experience with the field slaves whose labor was often compelled by vicious force. He recalled in later years how his mother combed the countryside during the war to find food for the plantation's slaves.<sup>200</sup> After the war, Page developed a sense of noblesse oblige toward the ex-slaves, at least toward certain valued individuals. He pensioned several of his family's former house servants well into the 1900s, and loaned or gave others money for the purchase of household items or for travel to visit distant family members.<sup>201</sup> Through the 1880s, Negroes would be ever present in Page's writings about the South, but they would also appear only in their relations to whites.<sup>202</sup> Page could barely conceive of Negroes outside their servile status.

This conception of the Negro was intimately tied to a battle that raged within Page. He was simultaneously devoted to the ancien régime of antebellum days and dedicated to American union. Page's father had been a Whig preceding the war, and had stood against secession. Although he went out with Virginia and fought in the Confederate army, he

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<sup>200</sup>See letter by Page's aunt to her daughter, reprinted in Rosewell Page, *Thomas Nelson Page: A Memoir of a Virginia Gentleman* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 87.

<sup>201</sup>See Rosewell Page, *Thomas Nelson Page*, 135-46; Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 103-104. Holman also notes that he sent clothing and flour to many of the former bondsmen at the Page's two plantations every Christmas.

<sup>202</sup>After about 1890, Page took a decidedly different tack. His black characters ceased to be loyal house servants, and increasingly became comic Jim Crow types or, especially in his post-1900 essays, menacing shadows (Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 102).

continued long after Appomattox to blame Virginia Democrats for the war's devastation.<sup>203</sup> While sharing his father's assessment, Page desperately desired to see the Old South vindicated. "The New South," he grouched to a fellow Southern writer, "is only the Old South with slavery gone, and the fire of exaction on its back."<sup>204</sup> He was deeply irritated by Harriet Beecher Stowe's image of the slave South which still reigned in Northern popular and political culture after Reconstruction.<sup>205</sup> The "old Southern life," he confided to a cousin in 1881, was "a beautiful and untried field" of literature.<sup>206</sup> After the *Century* published "Marse Chan" in 1884, the Old South became Page's passion.

Page was unusual. He was stridently unreconstructed in regard to the social system built on slavery. But he was thoroughly in accord with the Civil War's outcome and the basic tenets of reunion.<sup>207</sup> The conflict between these two positions showed through clearly in the process of editing "Marse Chan" for publication in the *Century*.

Gilder and Johnson must have appreciated the central "argument" of "Marse Chan." The first half of the story depicts the antebellum slave society of Virginia. The scion of a Whig planter, Master Channing (or "Marse Chan" in the emancipated story-teller's dialect) displays his courage and honor in a series of events. Sam is his constant companion throughout a mostly idyllic childhood. Strife enters when Marse Chan falls in love with Anne, the daughter of the arch Democrat, Colonel Chamberlain. Chamberlain is clamoring for secession, and Master Channing's father, much as Page's own father, leads the anti-secession sentiment. The second half of the story is dominated by the Civil War. As the war begins, the two lovers quarrel. Marse Chan joins the Confederate cavalry believing their relationship is finished. They eventually reconcile in a series of letters, but the two never

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<sup>203</sup>After the war Page's father blamed the Democrats for secession and for starting the war (Robert L. Scribner, "In Ole Virginia," *Virginia Cavalcade* 3.1 [Summer 1953]: 4).

<sup>204</sup>Page to William Hamilton Hayne, 13 December 1887, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>205</sup>Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 58.

<sup>206</sup>Page to "Cousin Tippy," 13 April 1881, Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.

<sup>207</sup>Note that this assessment is somewhat at odds with Holman and Herbert Smith who simply see Page as unreconstructed—period. Smith called Page "[p]robably the least reconstructed of the southern writers" published by *Scribner's* and the *Century* (Smith, *Gilder*, 56).

physically reunite: The young master dies in battle. Soon, after Sam brings home his master's lifeless body, the devastated maiden dies of heartache, as do the elder Channings. In effect, the Old South becomes history.

The story as originally written, however, was less history than romance. Page clearly used as his models the lachrymose sentimental works of the 1850s and Sir Walter Scott.<sup>208</sup> On their first reading of the story, the *Scribner's* editors conceived it as a romance. They took the main theme to be the "relations of the young couple."<sup>209</sup> An editor (most likely Johnson) proposed shortening the first part of the story. This, he suggested, would "add to the unity and force of impression of the whole."<sup>210</sup> The cuts, it seems, were made by the Southerner on the *Century* staff, Sophie Bledsoe Herrick.<sup>211</sup>

The main concerns, as with Cable, were to inculcate a telegraphic style, to remove author interjections, and to heighten the illusion. Ironically, given the editors' seeming concern over the amount of dialect, one of the most significant deletions excised several sentences in standard English on the story's first page. In this section, Page prosaically described the Negro character he hoped to delineate, as well as the recondite Southern intimacy of black slave and white master. "I made a chance acquaintance with an 'Ole fam'ly nigger,'" Page wrote in the deleted passage, "who exemplified well the close union of the comical and the pathetic which is so striking a characteristic of his race.... His narrative, which I have endeavored to reproduce in his own language, illustrates strikingly the loving fidelity to his old master so inexplicable to the outside world, and so touching to those who alone know and appreciate the negro at his true worth."<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup>Regarding Scott as an influence see letter to "Cousin Tippy," 13 April 1881.

<sup>209</sup>[Johnson?] to Page, 12 January 1881, Duke.

<sup>210</sup>[Johnson?] to Page, 12 January 1881.

<sup>211</sup>See Herrick to Page, 29 August 1885, Duke.

<sup>212</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 1. The extant copy of the manuscript is the copy used to set type. It is unclear how much editing occurred to the manuscript when it was first submitted. Unfortunately, the original manuscript and record of first and apparently extensive edits seems to be lost. The first letters from *Scribner's* clearly suggest that much needed to be cut. Johnson, writing to Page in 1906, recalled that the story was far too long when first submitted. He recalled it would have been about eighteen pages long when set up in type (Johnson to Page, 5 December 1906, cited in Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 24 n54) This

The editors knew that deleting such passages heightened readers' subjective identification with the story, its narrator, and its subject. They were also likely motivated by a desire to make the story more national in its implications. The phrase "those who alone know and appreciate" implied a hermetic culture unknowable by outsiders. For a project aimed at intersectional knowledge, such an admission could be fatal. The editors were probably also attempting to remove Page's suggestion that relations between blacks and whites had not changed since slavery. It was one thing to offer a "historical" vision of master-slave relations, but quite another to imply those same relations still obtained, albeit with the legal status of slavery removed.

Several other deletions sliced away at the manuscript's rank sentimentality. One deleted passage filled two pages with Sam's description of Anne's letter of contrition.<sup>213</sup> The *Century* editors knew that the letter's lachrymose contents could be easily surmised by readers. The editors also reduced the melodrama, particularly when they deleted a scene in which Anne falls on the floor by Marse Chan's coffin and sobs "I killed him."<sup>214</sup> They also cut the standard crying scene in which Anne and Mrs. Channing shed tears together as they clutch one another beside the coffin.<sup>215</sup>

While these changes were made for stylistic reasons, another change significantly altered the romantic nature of the story. In Anne's dying scene, Page originally had her to speak in tritely sentimental and religious terms (through Sam's dialect of course): "He *knowed* I loved him,—he will meet me." But the editors altered this line to read, "and she died jes' fo' de folks wuz sot free." This change turned the story from romance to history. It

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would have required the unpalatable option of dividing the story in half and running it in two consecutive issues. (It is possible, to complicate matters further, that Johnson was confusing "Marse Chan" with Page's second *Century* story, which *was* eighteen pages long and was originally slated to run in two consecutive issues.) "Marse Chan," as it finally appeared, was nine and a quarter pages long. By 1884 the *Century* was using a larger text block on each page and so could force more material into a smaller number of pages than the old *Scribner's*. Still, it seems that much was cut from the original manuscript. The copy manuscript is in the Page papers, Clifton Waller Barrett collection at the University of Virginia.

<sup>213</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 42-44.

<sup>214</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 50.

<sup>215</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 50.

placed the Old South in the context of emancipation. And it transformed Anne from stock sentimental character into an allegory of the Old South's doom. Anne was to have borne the old society's future as mother to Marse Chan's children. But his death and then hers signified that the old civilization would be barren. When the elder Channings follow Anne in death, the Old South's past is laid to rest as its future already has been with the deaths of Marse Chan and Anne. Without the change, "Marse Chan" is overwhelmingly a story of the old school. With it, two vital things happen mutually: The story ironically comes alive as a vibrant memory. It simultaneously puts a historical cap on the Old South civilization—for emancipation was its death knell.

The *Century* editors enforced their ban on "the old hostilities" in two key changes to "Marse Chan." When Union forces kill the cavalier, Page's ardor for vindication overtook his regard for sectional reconciliation. Where Page referred to the soldiers of the North as "dem Yankees," his editors, sensitive to the still roiling power of the war's epithets, changed the reference to "dem on 't'other side."<sup>216</sup> The editors also diminished the brutality of war that welled up in Page's account. Originally, Sam discovers Marse Chan's body has been savaged by the Yankees. "He war stone dead," Sam says, "Dey had done kill 'im twice, fur dar wuz a bay'net stabbed right in 'is side, de bullit in he breas'."<sup>217</sup> Murder in magazines of the 1880s, as in the theater, was supposed to take place off stage and out of sight. Such an image as a twice killed Southerner would offend all sorts of sentiments, moral as well as political. Taking it out allowed Northern readers to acknowledge the pain of war, without being forced to confront the wanton violence of combatants.

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<sup>216</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 47.

<sup>217</sup>"Marse Chan" manuscript, 47. A similar dilemma occurred when Page submitted his largely autobiographical children's serial *Two Little Confederates* to *St. Nicholas*. Based on his wartime experiences, the story sometimes depicted Union soldiers in a harsh light. In accepting the story, *St. Nicholas* editor Mary Mapes Dodge requested that "changes suggest themselves—notably the account of the Yankee raid which must necessarily be pruned for *St. Nicholas*. To leave it in entire, as it now reads, would quite prevent the story, I fear, from being the olive branch you desire it to be. True though it may be in every detail the full recital would serve to stir up old animosities in all parts of the country. Still enough may be left in, I trust, to keep up the present interest of the chapter" (Dodge to Page, 12 October 1887). *St. Nicholas* was, of course, owned by the Century Company, and Dodge was Gilder and Johnson's fellow editor.

Although the *Century* editors buried “Marse Chan” in the back of their magazine, it became an immediate sensation. Southerners thrilled to it, and Northerners were swept away by its pathos. The *Overland Monthly* of San Francisco remarked that Page had achieved a rare accomplishment: He “g[o]t himself a place in the memory and interest of the reading public by a single short story.”<sup>218</sup> He received letters from all parts of the country inviting him to come and read his story.<sup>219</sup> The story sent a sentimental shock wave through American culture.

The immense popularity of “Marse Chan” and Page’s sudden celebrity throughout the South and the nation persuaded Gilder and Johnson that it was time to strike a decisive literary blow in favor of reconciliation. In 1884, Johnson traveled to Richmond to meet with Page. The *Century* editor revived his plan, once suggested to Cable, of adapting Lessing’s *Minna von Barnhelm* to the problem of American sectionalism.<sup>220</sup> Page was certainly open to the idea. But his natural slowness prevented him from getting to it right away. By March of 1885, almost a year after “Marse Chan” had appeared, he had developed only a sketch of the story.<sup>221</sup> Gilder and Johnson were impatient. Thus, Gilder, on his way to New Orleans in April 1885 dropped by Richmond to encourage Page.

Gilder and Page hit it off quite well. Page gave the New York editor a supper at a well-appointed Richmond hotel. They stayed up past midnight, and, according to Page, “got wildly inebriated, told each other a great many of our virtues and swore eternal friendship.” They bonded over Gilder’s claim, again according to Page, to have “not a drop of Yankey blood in me Sir....”<sup>222</sup> The following day, most likely nursing hangovers, the two new friends toured the Civil War sights at Petersburg and the Crater. The hang-over apparently

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<sup>218</sup>*Overland Monthly* 10 (July 1887): 104-105.

<sup>219</sup>Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius*, 521.

<sup>220</sup>Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, 121–22; Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations*, 203.

<sup>221</sup>Page to Gilder, 31 March 1885.

<sup>222</sup>If Gilder did say this, he must have been referring to his Huguenot ancestry and to the his family’s residence in the Delaware and Pennsylvania region.

was worth it. For by August, Page had written a draft of the reconciliation story the *Century* editors craved.<sup>223</sup> He called it “Meh Lady.”

If “Meh Lady” was to be a master-stroke for the project of Cultural Reconstruction, it had to do two things. It would have to tell the story of the privations of Reconstruction from a Southern point of view, but it would also have to admit the necessity and the responsibility of the South to knit the nation back together. With so much riding on the story, from political, cultural, and commercial standpoints, the *Century* editors were chagrined when they read the first draft. Sophie Bledsoe Herrick wrote Page to tell him that, although individual events were managed well, the overall form was inferior to his earlier story “Marse Chan.” The story lacked balance and a unity of effect. Suggesting that Page was swept away with his theme, she warned that the story was “panoramic.” Apparently, it took much work for Herrick and Page to bring the story into focus.<sup>224</sup>

“Meh Lady” is strikingly similar in some respects to “Marse Chan.” It centers on two lovers and the political barriers to their relationship. A freeman, Uncle Billy, who has remained loyal to the family that once owned him, narrates the story in purported Negro dialect. The setting is a plantation and the time spans the Civil War and Reconstruction. But instead of two Southern lovers, Page has a Southern girl (Uncle Billy’s “Meh Lady”) fall in love with a Union officer, Captain (later Colonel) Wilton. They meet when he gallantly fends off Yankee renegades from her plantation home, and later she nurses him when he is wounded in battle. She is torn between her affection for him and her filial piety to her mother, who she erroneously believes disapproves of her loving across national boundaries. Meh Lady spurns Wilton’s proposal of marriage as he returns to active service. The war

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<sup>223</sup>Johnson did not specify when he suggested that Page write the story.

<sup>224</sup>Herrick to Page, 29 August 1885, Duke. It is difficult to determine just when the editing of the story was completed. Herrick uses the past tense in her discussion of the manuscripts problems, implying that the story was finished by mid 1885. Yet, the story did not appear for almost another year, June 1886. This suggests that, given the ardor of the *Century* editors to publish such a story, there must have been a large number of significant problems. I have been unable to find either the edited manuscript or any other letters pertaining to the editing of “Meh Lady.”

having taken her brother (her father had died long before), Meh Lady struggles virtually alone during the privations of Reconstruction to keep the plantation together. She and her mother have wasted the family fortune in supporting the Confederacy. She takes to teaching Negro children to make money. Meh Lady's mother dies of heartbreak, but before dying she secretly entrusts Uncle Billy with both her wedding jewelry and her blessing on Meh Lady's marriage to Wilton. With the mother's death, the plantation's debtors initiate foreclosure proceedings. When Wilton hears that Meh Lady has lost her mother and is about to lose the plantation, he returns. Uncle Billy and his wife Hannah are instrumental in bringing the couple together. Uncle Billy and his wife act as guardian angels. They overcome Meh Lady's sectional sentiments by revealing her mother's blessing of the union and they rectify Wilton's lack of emotional insight. At the climactic wedding, the old retainer resolves an awkward moment. When the preacher asks who will give Meh Lady away, the former slave, realizing she is all alone in the world, steps forward and says, "Ole Billy."<sup>225</sup> The story ends with the happy couple naming one of their sons Billy.

The story, in the end, was a masterful (in both senses of the word) blend of the sentimental love tale and the political theme of Civil War and reunion. The story gave Page a chance to display, in the many pages devoted to the downfall of Meh Lady's family fortunes, the devastation wrought on Southern households by both Yankee marauders and the privation of political Reconstruction. Page was able to demonstrate, even as he focused on Meh Lady's Old South sensibility, the familial relations of North and South. He made his Union officer, Captain Wilton, a cousin of Meh Lady. (Wilton's father was a relation to Meh Lady's mother, had once courted her, and emigrated to New York when she decided on another suitor for her husband.) Thus, Wilton was transregional. Johnson wanted Wilton to be a pure Yankee.<sup>226</sup> But Page allegorized the brother-against-brother theme of the Civil

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<sup>225</sup>"Meh Lady," *Century* 32 (June 1886): 204. Significantly, Page altered this in the Plantation edition of his collected works. There, Uncle Billy steps forward and says, "Gord [God]" would give Meh Lady away (*In Ole Virginia*, Plantation Edition [New York: *Scribner's*, 1908]: 166).

<sup>226</sup>Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations*, 203.



War then becoming a major component of reconciliation.<sup>227</sup> He wrote of reunion not only as a marriage of sections, but as the forgiveness of familial transgressions. In doing so, he drew on the conventions of sentimentality's conception of society as family. Page also built on the class connotations of sentimentality to link romance and history. Use of the sobriquet "Meh Lady" drew a direct link to the feudal world of peasants and lords made famous by Walter Scott. This is clearly a Scottian history, yet, it dealt with the past of living memory and presented it in purportedly realistic dialect. As such, "Meh Lady" cinched together romance, realism, and history into a magnetic narrative that elicited deep sympathy from readers across the nation.

"Meh Lady" did everything Gilder and Johnson had wanted it to do, and was perfectly in line with the aims of Cultural Reconstruction. Moreover, the story was greeted with praise in the North and the South. Here seemed to be a triumph for the *Century's* reconciliationist project. But something unexpected happened when the story appeared in print. While the two sections both lauded the story, they read it in strikingly different ways.

### **Truth as Fiction: The North Misreads the South**

With the appearance of "Marse Chan," Thomas Nelson Page shot to national fame and quickly became white Southerners' defender at the bar of history.<sup>228</sup> White Southerners reveled in "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady." For them, these stories broke through the deceit of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A Georgian wrote Page that he cried over "Meh Lady," "not so much

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<sup>227</sup>Some critics (Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations*, 203) have thought Page made Wilton half Virginian in a spate of sectional loyalty. It seems safer to say that Page added the Virginia twist in order to make the connection between him and Meh Lady more organic. It is the family connection that first spurs Meh Lady and her mother to take in the wounded soldier. Moreover, because he is a cousin, he serves in some respects as a replacement for the brother who was killed fighting for the Confederates early in the war. This relation is reinforced in the story by Meh Lady's mother putting the wounded Yankee in the dead brother's bed (*In Ole Virginia*, 122).

<sup>228</sup>Before April 1884 was out, Page began receiving letters from Southerners praising his stories. See, e.g., Ind. A. Elder, who wrote on 11 April 1884 commending Page's "artistic composition of the highest mirit [*sic*]" (Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University).

because there were points in it so deeply touching, but because it was so deeply *true*.”<sup>229</sup> He was ecstatic, for the story represented “the first time I have seen justice done this side of the question in a Northern magazine—i.e., the genuine attachment of the negroes to their masters and their slowness to welcome ‘the Yankees’ as their deliverers.”<sup>230</sup> Page received similar letters from across the white South.<sup>231</sup> A letter that must have touched Page deeply came from Sara Agnace Pryor, wife of the former fire-eating Virginia secessionist and Confederate General Roger A. Pryor, from the home they now made in New York City. She reported that the General had “given them [Page’s dialect stories], freely, the eloquent tribute of laughter and tears. Never have I seen him so much moved!.... You preserve from oblivion the dear old life just as we remember it—I cannot say you awaken memories—for they have never slept....”<sup>232</sup> Other Southerners saw Page’s stories as salvos in a cultural war. Robert Burns Wilson, disgusted by a critical essay in the *Critic* (signed “A Southerner”), wrote Page that the South needed another story of the caliber of “Marse Chan.” “We *must* keep the line from sagging. They are after us. All of them.”<sup>233</sup> Vanderbilt University gave institutional imprimatur to these sentiments in August 1887. Professor William Baskervill invited Page to speak there “to cultivate and to arouse enthusiasm in Southern literature....”<sup>234</sup>

Page’s fellow Southern writer, Grace King, summed up the region’s white sentiments.

Pointedly ignoring Cable’s pioneering work in Southern scenery, she wrote in her memoirs:

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<sup>229</sup>L[ouis] B[eauregard] Pendleton to Page, 9 July 1886, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia. Pendleton’s father had been an editor of Southern magazines. Born in the historically significant month of April 1861, Pendleton was educated in the North and settled there. Although he wrote numerous novels with Southern settings, he lived out his adulthood north of the Mason Dixon line. See Edwin Alderman et al., *Library of Southern History*, vol. 15: *Biographical Dictionary* (New Orleans: Martin & Hoyt, 1910), 338.

<sup>230</sup>Pendleton to Page, 9 July 1886, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>231</sup>See, for example, letters from various correspondents in Clifton Waller Barrett Special Collections of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia and Perkins Library at Duke. Virginian living in Kentucky, 24 January 1885, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia; William Armstrong to Page 27 June 1887, Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University; John R. Procter to Page, 4 June 1886, Duke University. Procter was a geologist for the Kentucky Geological Survey and a friend of naturalist John Burroughs.

<sup>232</sup>3 June 1886, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>233</sup>August 1886, Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, handwritten notation on the ALS]; emphasis in original. Wilson, then a Kentucky poet of some promise turned out to be a distant cousin of Page’s.

<sup>234</sup>“[B]ut not,” he added, “in any narrow or sectional sense” (Baskervill to Page, 22 August 1887, Page Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University).

“It is hard to explain in simple terms what Thomas Nelson Page meant to us at that time [the mid-1880s]. He was the first Southern writer to appear in print as a Southerner, and his stories, short and simple, written in Negro dialect, and, I may say, Southern pronunciation, showed us with ineffable grace that although we were sore bereft, politically, we had now a chance in literature at least.”<sup>235</sup> If politics had proved to be a field of defeat, King and her fellow white Southerners felt confident that victory could be had in the arena of literary culture. They were spurred to join in the *Century*’s project and writer after writer deluged Northern publishers with Southern work.<sup>236</sup>

Northerners also saw Page’s work as true, but in a distinctly different way. (One of the striking things about Northern reviews of Southern dialect is the level of reviewers’ pretended expertise on Southern speech—as if they were enacting a modern variant of an old tale: the Emperor had no dialect.) Northern reviewers, fawning over his dialect, believed Page was a social psychologist of the “old time darkey,” rather than a mythologizing proponent of the antebellum Southern civilization. Where white Southerners saw “Marse Chan” and “Meh Lady” as evocations of white Southern culture, Northern reviewers focused on Page’s Negro characters and the purported integrity and accuracy of his Negro dialect. For it was the dialect, the critics claimed, that captured the essence of Negro character. The *Independent*, for example, commenting on “Meh Lady” even before it was collected in a book, found “the dialect is admirably perfect.” It infused the story with “pathos and realism.”<sup>237</sup> Another *Independent* reviewer, writing about *In Ole Virginia*, referred to Page’s stories as “studies of plantation life, and of plantation character and dialect.” But the aspect

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<sup>235</sup>Cited in Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 605. King began her writing career precisely to oppose Cable’s depiction of New Orleansians. Her first story grew out of a challenge to her from Gilder, during his April 1885 visit to her city. In response to complaints about Cable, the New York editor asked her, “Why, if Cable is so false to you, why do not some of you write better?” She reports that she immediately set about the task (King, *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters* [1932, reprint; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971], 60).

<sup>236</sup>John, *Best Years*, 155. See also Tooker: “With the attention of all readers drawn to the South... dialect stories of a strong local color blossomed everywhere in that richly endowed region with the luxuriant growth of its own Cherokee rose” (*Joys and Tribulations*, 210).

<sup>237</sup>“Literary Notes,” *Independent* (10 June 1886): 726.

of that life the *Independent* focused on was black character. The reviewer praised Page's "graphic vignettes" for their "fidelity to nature in the personifying of humble narrators" and the "accuracy of the Negro dialect."<sup>238</sup> Reviewers at the *Epoch*, the *Boston Literary World*, the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, and *Harper's* all concentrated on Page's exceptional handling of dialect.<sup>239</sup> Dialect signaled truth: The key point in judging Page was the faithfulness of his portrait. As the critic for the *Overland Monthly* of San Francisco, put it, "Those who knew old Virginia testify to the truth of Mr. Page's work...; and any reader can appreciate its dramatic vividness, its feeling and intelligence."<sup>240</sup> By 1895, the *New York Times* digested all these expressions into a simple phrase: Page's Negro dialect was "the real thing."<sup>241</sup>

Page's handling of dialect was so strong that reviewers could hardly see him as a literary artist. The reviewer for the *Critic* made this point quite clearly.<sup>242</sup> Dialect was essential to Page's work, the reviewer wrote, because "in no other way [than through dialect] could the charming and piquant sides of negro life be represented." The *Critic's* reviewer saw these stories as investigations of the "psychology and dialect of the negroes..." And while he or she praised Page for "weaving out of them true poems of character and faith," the critic baselessly asserted that the author was merely reproducing what he had heard. For to produce the stories of *In Ole Virginia*, all Page had to do, the credulous reviewer claimed, was "be a faithful 'recording angel,' to open a sympathetic and retentive ear, to reproduce in firm outlines what everyday life in Virginia abundantly provides, and to clothe the whole in a humorous dialect which is to the psychology [of the Negro] what the salt is to the soup." Indeed, Page's chief fault, according to the reviewer, lay in trying too hard to present the

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<sup>238</sup>*Independent* 39 (1 September 1887): 1102.

<sup>239</sup>See quotes from reviews in George C. Longest, *Three Virginia Authors* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978), 69-71.

<sup>240</sup>*Overland Monthly* 10 (July 1887): 104-105. George C. Longest's annotated bibliography of reviews of Page's work has been invaluable in tracing the opinion of reviewers for the popular press. See his *Three Virginia Authors*.

<sup>241</sup>*New York Times*, 13 October 1895, 27:2.

<sup>242</sup>*Critic* 8 (9 July 1887): 14-15.

Negroes as more than they actually were: “the dramatic climax is occasionally too conscious and intentional for the unconscious and unintentional nature of the [Negro] narrators.” And in matters of dialect, he sometimes erred in lifting “his ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ linguistically above themselves.” That is, if anything, Page the white author himself sometimes disturbed the Northerner’s preconception of the “true” picture of the old-time slave by allowing white inflected speech to spoil the “native” dialect.

Northern readers’ focus on the character of his Negro narrators seems to have disturbed Page. He had had no intention of plumbing the “old time darkey’s” psychology. He could only think of blacks as a shining mirror for white Southern life. As Southern critic Edwin Mims recognized as long ago as 1907, “The negro is always an accessory to the white man” in Page’s stories.<sup>243</sup> Though they might narrate the story, Page’s negroes were never the narrative’s subject. They are signs of social relations determined by the whites they serve. The community they speak about is that of Southern whites—Page did not portray a community of blacks.<sup>244</sup> White Southerners were thus able to read Page’s stories as literary excavations of *their* Old South life. The Negro dialect was as invisible to white Southern readers as was the black community.

Page moved to clarify his white supremacy in the fiction he wrote after his first flush of success. His first three published stories had each been narrated in black dialect. After 1887, Page virtually ceased to hand stories over to emancipated narrators. He reverted to telling his stories in standard English, allowing blacks to speak only, in a sense, when spoken to. Moreover, after 1889 he sheared away the endearing characteristics of his first black narrators as he left the *Century* and moved to other magazines such as *Harper’s* and

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<sup>243</sup>Mims, “Thomas Nelson Page,” *Atlantic* 100 (July 1907): 113. Mims did not turn this realization into a critique of Page’s racism. Rather, he immediately sought to assuage any white ruffled feathers by adding, “It is futile to deny that the great majority of negroes on the best Virginia plantations were supremely happy in their bondage, or that even now some of them survive, unable to adjust themselves to new conditions.... It is difficult for a Southerner of this day to realize the intimate tie that bound together the household slaves and those who lived in the Big House” (115).

<sup>244</sup>There is in “Meh Lady” a mammy who cares for the white mistress, but she hardly exists outside a shadowy mention or two.

*Lippincott's*.<sup>245</sup> They no longer embodied faith, loyalty, duty, humility, affability. Page, now nationally popular due to his reading tours, had his Negro characters jump Jim Crow, shuck and jive, or menace white heroes and heroines. To emphasize his white supremacy he attempted to repress the dialogical nature of his Negro dialect, caring little that this stereotyped them into stilted stultifying figures.

Within a few years of Page's first success, the *Century* and its competitors were inundated with dialect work. Plantation Negroes, free blacks, Tennessee mountaineers, Georgia crackers, Creoles, Howells's Mr. Woodburn and his daughter, and of course every character in *Huckleberry Finn* spoke in Southern dialects. Southern literature had become a "craze" in American popular culture. The *Century* searched out new Southern authors, publishing dialect work by Ruth McEnery Stuart, Harry Stillwell Edwards, and Virginia Frazier Boyle. They published Southern local color by Maurice Thompson, Grace King, Richard Malcolm Johnston, "Matt Crim," Viola Roseboro', "Octave Thanet," "Charles Egbert Craddock," James Lane Allen, and John Fox, Jr. They serialized the quixotic exploits of F. Hopkinson Smith's Southern-dialect speaking Colonel Carter of Cartersville, a former Confederate tilting through the foreign territory of New York City with his faithful Negro Sancho Panza. Other magazines, once largely deaf to the rising Southern voices, now competed vigorously with the *Century*. *Harper's* began to cram its pages with Southern stories.<sup>246</sup> Editor Henry Mills Alden wooed Page and won two stories from him.<sup>247</sup> The *Harper's* editor soon became both professionally and personally enchanted with the South.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup>Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 102.

<sup>246</sup>*Harper's* had dabbled in Southern issues, but largely avoided them until the success of Page's "Marse Chan" (Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 224-25).

<sup>247</sup>"Unc' Edinburgh's Drowndin'" and "Ole 'Stracted."

<sup>248</sup>Alden made his first visit to the South in January of 1887. On 29 January 1887, he wrote to Charles Dudley Warner that he had visited the family home of Virginia author Amelie Rives: "I have had a delightful Virginia trip since I saw you, spending most of the time at Col. A.L. Rives's place at Cobham, near Charlottesville. It was on account of a special invitation from the Rives family that I undertook the trip. As it was the first time I had been South of the Potomac (inland), you can imagine how thoroughly I enjoyed this taste of life in one of the oldest of Virginia mansions" (Warner Papers, Watkinson Library, Trinity College). Alden made his second trip only six months later. He then became a frequent guest at other Southern homes, particularly Thomas

In November and December 1886, Harry Harper and Charles Dudley Warner led a party of Northern writers and artists on a tour of the South which yielded much Southern material for the magazine, including the series *The New South*.<sup>249</sup> Harper's joined the Southern literary juggernaut at full speed in early 1887, publishing a long article detailing the recent rise of Southern literature.<sup>250</sup> By mid year, Alden had to refuse a Negro dialect story he much admired because he was already "overabundantly supplied with negro sketches."<sup>251</sup>

The *Atlantic* followed suit. Warner had already written a series of articles for the magazine (July to September 1885) about his travels on horseback in the Southern Appalachians.<sup>252</sup> Soon, the South became an integral theme for the periodical that had once led the intellectual attack on slavery. By 1892, it seemed perfectly natural that a bastion of Boston culture would publish Confederate veteran Basil Gildersleeve's apology for the bygone ways of the defeated region, "The Creed of the Old South."<sup>253</sup> The rising counterrevolutionary wave of Southern culture finally crashed on Boston when, in 1898, the *Atlantic* appointed Southerner Walter Hines Page as its editor-in-chief.<sup>254</sup>

In 1890, Gilder proclaimed victory for the project of Cultural Reconstruction. "We are all Americans," he told the Nineteenth Century Club of New York City, "all now and for

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Nelson Page's Washington, D.C., home (Holman, *Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page*, 217). Eventually Alden married into the South. His second marriage in 1900 was to a Virginia widow.

<sup>249</sup>Warner became a major conduit of Southern themes to the magazines. He also became intoxicated by Southern women. He made one, Ida Cabell a house guest for extended periods of time, and became so closely identified with his protégé, Grace King, that rumors spread of an illicit romance. See the notes at Columbia University taken toward a biography of Warner by Louis Trilling. Warner mused in one early letter to King, "Is it not queer that most of the friends I have made in the last two years are of the people who tried to destroy the best government that ever was[?]" (Warner to King, 28 November 1885, Trilling Notes, Columbia University).

<sup>250</sup>George W. Coleman, Jr., "The Recent Movement in Southern Literature," *Harper's* 74 (May 1887): 837-55.

<sup>251</sup>Alden to Warner, 28 July 1887, Warner Papers, Watkinson Library, Trinity College.

<sup>252</sup>Warner had already returned South even as these articles were appearing. He was Gilder's traveling companion for the Deep South leg of the *Century* editor's New Orleans trip in April 1885.

<sup>253</sup>Basil Gildersleeve, "The Creed of the Old South," *Atlantic* 69 (January 1892): 75-87; Buck, *Road to Reunion*, 225. Gildersleeve's theme was that "the cause we fought for and our brothers died for was the cause of civil liberty, and not the cause of human slavery..." (87).

<sup>254</sup>Page was, of course, no unreconstructed rebel. Yet, as a Southerner in the seat of Brahmin power, his ascension was momentous.

the first time truly fellow-countrymen.”<sup>255</sup> In his proclamation, Gilder explained how the culture of sentimentality itself had triumphed. Not the old purely lachrymose sentimentality that focused on the private, domestic scene—this was a new form oriented toward public life. It employed local color, regionalism, realism, and truth to forge a national unity built on mutual sympathy among the sections. Gilder’s address laid bare the strategy of Cultural Reconstruction. More important, it revealed how Gilder and his fellow editors had become mesmerized with the success of Page and, in consequence, suppressed their earlier support for what Cable had called “the freedman’s case in equity.”

Gilder uncritically diagnosed the cultural problem of the Old South just as numerous white Southern authors had.<sup>256</sup> He ignored the violence done to the slaves and the freedmen. The institution of slavery, he maintained, had shackled *white* Southern thought. Thus shackled, his theory went, the white South could be neither free nor integrated into the union because every cultural act had to be yoked to defending the peculiar institution. Truth became the first casualty in the war to defend slavery. The subversion of truth fatally handicapped Southern literature, Gilder maintained, because the Old South was exiled from “the intellectual current of the age.” It was historically stunted. “The instincts of civilization, the literatures of civilization,” Gilder explained, “were against the institution that [Southern

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<sup>255</sup>Gilder, “The Nationalizing of Southern Literature,” *The Christian Advocate* (New York Edition; 3 July and 10 July 1890): 442. Gilder wrote this essay sometime in the middle of 1888 it seems. A manuscript version in the New York Public Library suggests that he gave at least an early version of the speech in April 1888 (Gilder Collection, New York Public Library). And in January of 1890, Gilder mentioned that “a year or so ago I got up a little talk on ‘Southern Literature,’” presumably the same one (Gilder to James Lane Allen, 28 January 1890, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library). It seems unlikely he had written the essay earlier than 1888. In January of 1888 Vanderbilt professor William Baskervill invited Gilder to speak in Nashville. Although encouraged by Cable, Page, and Maurice Thompson, Gilder declined to speak. It thus seems unlikely he had gotten the essay together at that time (Gilder to Baskervill, 6 January 1888, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library). Gilder was slated to present the paper to the Nineteenth Century Club in early 1889 with Thomas Nelson Page and others presenting, but the event was postponed when Page’s wife died (Page to Brander Matthews, 25 October 1888, 12 November 1888, 28 January 1889, Matthews Papers, Columbia University). Gilder finally presented it to the Nineteenth Century Club in early 1890. It was then published by the *Christian Advocate*. Why he chose this venue for publication is unclear.

<sup>256</sup>Page, “Authorship in the South Before the War,” *Lippincott’s* 44 (July 1889): 105-20.



writers] must defend.”<sup>257</sup> Thus contorted, Southern culture could produce neither a bona fide sentimentality nor moral progress. In a world where progress meant an ever greater social connection to the nation, Gilder suggested that Southern writers had been incapable of expressing human sympathy.

In Gilder’s opinion, the destruction of slavery gave the white South a stunning opportunity for cultural redemption. “Southern life and manners,” Gilder wrote, “were open for the first time to a full and free report and criticism.”<sup>258</sup> The destruction of slavery meant that it could be mythologized. Gilder’s myth was that Southern whites no longer had a reason to lie, to warp, to willfully misinterpret. The North, Gilder thus believed, could now trust the South to tell responsibly about itself and to critique its past mistakes. The Cables could criticize and the Pages could historicize and Northerners need not fear that the South would revert to its old delusions.

The limits of sentimental realism became painfully clear in Gilder’s address at this point. The New York editor artlessly argued that realism reigned in the states of the former Confederacy. Due to its new, supposed capacity to “criticize life without reserve,” Southern literature displayed “the reality that the old lacked. It is fond of dialect, and nice in its use; it has humor; it has dramatic action and a warmth and color of its own.”<sup>259</sup> This ersatz realism was thoroughly in accord with the new sentimentality. It was not a crass “literary photography.” Rather, for Gilder, it was “true, robust, decent, just, artistic.”<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>257</sup>“Nationalizing” (3 July): 425; emphasis added. Gilder was not the only Northern intellectual to hold this view. Charles Dudley Warner expressed similar views, for example, in his “Society in the New South,” *New Princeton Review* 1 (January 1886): 1–14. See also Emerson’s 1862 comment at the White House: “Why cannot the best civilization be extended over the whole country, since the disorder of less-civilized portion menaces the existence of the country?” (cited in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951]: 142). For a discussion of American desires for an aristocratic heritage in the context of the development of high cultural attitudes, see Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988), ch. 5.

<sup>258</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (10 July): 441.

<sup>259</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (10 July): 441. This last phrase Gilder apparently delivered with no hint of irony.

<sup>260</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (3 July): 426.

The “essence of literature,” for the sentimental Gilder, was that it be not only universal, but also “many-sided in its sympathies.”<sup>261</sup> In the works of Cable, Page, and so many others, he found that “The new Southern literature is sympathetic with the slave, with the freedman, with the old slave-owner, and with the white man of the New South, who is building the prosperity of the Southern States with new methods under new conditions. It is sympathetic with the mountaineer, sometimes with the illicit distiller.”<sup>262</sup> In saying this, Gilder was shockingly blind to black reality. His belief in the power of sympathy robbed him of the ability to criticize the white South.

The increasing offenses of Southern segregation in the 1890s revealed a debilitating structural defect at the heart of Gilder’s sentimentality. Truth and sympathy were not easily compatible. Truth required criticism and the willingness to refuse to sympathize with those one criticized. Sympathy urged a restraint from criticism. It suggested a willingness to trust, to nurture, to wait. It required a faith in progress born of an instinctive humanism. If Southern whites all seemingly rejoiced at the death of slavery, and saw freedom as a universal truth, they certainly did not accept Cable’s racial equalitarianism. As the *Century* editors gave historical voice to Page’s Old South in a fit of sympathy, they simultaneously gave rise to a perplexing neonationalism in the South. The cultural *e pluribus unum*, the *Century* editors discovered, could run in two directions. It could include very different American regions into one great whole, but it could also lend national legitimacy to regional differentiation. For Page and his ilk, American nationalism consolidated the white “solid South.” The effect on Southern blacks was devastating. Cultural Reconstruction simultaneously nationalized white Southern racial bigotry and legitimated the construction of quasi-nationalist regional culture to produce and preserve that bigotry.

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<sup>261</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (10 July): 442

<sup>262</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (10 July): 442. In a perfect expression of sentimentality, Gilder could not help but add, “Yes, literature must be sympathetic with the law-breaker, with the sinner—not with the sin.”

### **Disuniting Unity: The Dialogics of Dialect**

Dialect became central to the project of Cultural Reconstruction because of its ability to function dialogically. Dialect literature did different things for different audiences. When white Southern writers employed dialect it served to embody a regional spirit. Dialect delivered in the voice of a purportedly faithful former retainer signified for these whites the reputed social stability of the antebellum slave system. Yet, simultaneously, because the dialect appeared in a nationally circulating magazine it became national speech. To be sure, when white writers employed Negro or ethnic dialects, or middle-class writers employed yeoman or working-class dialects, they were not expressing the racial or class spirit of these subject peoples. But for the white regional writers *themselves*, dialect allowed them to speak a language within the national culture that was simultaneously hermetic and “open” (hermetic as actual lived experience, and open as realist literature). For white Southern authors, it allowed them to reclaim a unique, even a separate regional identity, while its production in a Northern magazine simultaneously proclaimed their allegiance to national culture.

The act of reading realism’s dialect, to judge by the responses of New York culturists, continued to produce a dialogical experience, but one that had as little to do with the lived world of Southern blacks as the minstrel stage did with the realities of the slave plantation. Dialect was a mode of sympathetic incorporation of distant and different Americans. When Cable and Page took to the lecture platform and sang or spoke their respective dialects, Northern and Western audiences were mesmerized. Twain, Howells, Holland, Johnson’s wife, the *Century* staff all enthusiastically took up the Creole dialect after reading Cable’s short stories.<sup>263</sup> After reading *The Grandissimes* with his wife, Howells wrote Cable to tell him that “[w]e speak nothing else now but that dialect.”<sup>264</sup> Soon Howells and Twain were

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<sup>263</sup>Johnson to Cable, 26 September 1879, Cable Papers, Tulane University; Johnson to Cable, 13 October 1880, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>264</sup>Howells to Cable, 2 October 1881, in in George Arms et al., eds., *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, vol. 2: 1873-1881 (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 297.

speaking Creole to one another.<sup>265</sup> Literary dialect was portable and transferrable. By speaking it, Americans took part in the performance of the representative democracy of culture.

Negro dialect had a similar effect. It seemed to infect many who read and heard it with a desire to reproduce it with their own tongues. Twain was known to break out into black songs and avidly appreciated the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Cable and opera diva Clara Kellogg spontaneously traded Negro and African melodies during an evening at the Gilders' salon.<sup>266</sup> Numerous white youths who read the cultural magazines also took up the Negro dialect—much to their mothers' consternation.<sup>267</sup>

The fascination of those who performed the dialect they had read in magazines did not grow out of disdain for an alien or lower class. Twain, Howells, and the *Scribner's* editors believed that their own personal roots were in the lower classes. Dialect was for them the living history of their own stories while standard English was the expression of their current social status. In the same way that blackface minstrelsy hypostasized a happy and orderly slave plantation to ease workers transition from farm to factory, dialect literature covered over the wrenching social costs of social mobility and posited a largely peaceful coexistence between classes and among regions. Literary dialect was the historical voice of the self-made man and his family.

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<sup>265</sup>Howells to Cable, 7 March 1882, in in George Arms et al., eds., *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, vol. 3: 1882-1891 (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 11.

<sup>266</sup>Turner, *Cable*, 136-37.

<sup>267</sup>Gavin Jones also conceives of dialect as an enterprise fraught with ambivalence. For him, it was a "contamination" of an elite hegemonical control for language (*Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999]). I agree with his basic assertion that dialect created ambivalence as different ethnic groups used it to assert other identities into American culture. But I would like to go farther. A focus on readers and on editors gives a different picture of the role of dialect in American culture. For it was hardly a subaltern "contamination" if the major cultural magazines of the day encouraged it. Moreover, if readers themselves are incorporating dialect into their own sense of American identity, there is a normative, democratic aspect to dialect that is less about destabilizing a purported hegemony, more about negotiating the tensions of an open society. In this sense, dialect could be therapeutic for some, while "contaminating" for others.

Dialect also had a social function for readers. It was ambivalent in a way that allowed readers both to confirm their class solidarity and gain release from it. Dialect was almost always limited to quoted speech. That is, dialect was rendered within the context of a frame tale rendered in standard English. On the one hand, this allowed readers of different sections to learn to speak the same language, that of the frame tale even as they learned multiple dialects. This uniformity of standard English ironically functioned to suggest that no dialect author actually spoke dialect. Until the 1890s when a handful of black and immigrant authors experimented with reappropriating the dialect they purportedly spoke, almost always worked to reveal what an author was *not*. An author, like Howells, who had characters speak in a Southern drawl (as in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*) indicated he was not from the South. An author, like Page, who had characters speak Negro dialect indicated he was not black. The same with hillbilly, Irish, and working-class dialects. Readers thus assumed that authors were white, middle class investigators of the nation's regional cultures. Readers then could either confirm their own middle class status, or aspire to it if they came from the lower classes, by reading the standard English among the dialect.

Readers could also take flight from the demands of middle class status through reading dialect. Dialect was about breaking literary rules. For white audiences of Negro dialect, reading it was akin to Negro election day or the lower class's Christmas saturnalia of earlier decades, times when the lower orders inverted the social hierarchy to relieve the pressure of living under oppressive conditions throughout the rest of the year. The oppressive conditions readers of the *Century* and similar magazines experienced, however, were not those of other classes, but of the middle class's own demands for rule-bound linguistic and social order.<sup>268</sup> When middle class readers, such as Twain, Howells, and the *Scribner's* editors read and spoke dialect, they took part in a phenomenological process of

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<sup>268</sup>On the importance some nineteenth-century Americans placed on correct speech, see Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Jones, *Strange Talk*.

identifying with dialect speaking characters.<sup>269</sup> The reader of dialect stories in magazines practiced at being the different types the diverse American nation embodied. Magazines gave readers the vicarious experience of being others.<sup>270</sup> When Twain, Howells, the *Scribner's* editors, and thousands of magazine readers spoke Creole they were playing at different subjectivities. While readers read Negro dialect they became the Negro type. This is why parents might be aghast at their children reading dialect: Their children were no longer their racial selves. In the fluid racial and class ethos of the late 1800s, such cultural unmooring could be dangerous to incipient middle-class identities. The process of reading dialect and local color created subjectivities that allowed a reader to open out to experience beyond the self. This process was, ultimately, the individual's incorporation of a culturally complex nation. In that process, readers did not treat fictional Creoles, Negroes, Southern gentry, and mountaineers as exotic others. They experienced the dialect speaker as exotic *self*.<sup>271</sup> That is, in performing dialect they became a member of the other chimerical culture represented by dialect, transcending in imagination the limits of their white, middle-class structure of feelings. Cultural Reconstruction's inventions of the nation's regional cultures thus found expression in the performing self. This self was the reading subject of American magazine culture.

Dialect was the language of America for magazinists who advocated Cultural Reconstruction. It was controversial because it challenged conservative notions of the purity

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<sup>269</sup>On the phenomenology of reading, see Georges Poulet's "The Phenomenology of Reading," Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*, and Norman Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Experience*.

<sup>270</sup>I do not, of course, mean others in their actual lived experience. I mean others in the highly mediated sense of fictional characters.

<sup>271</sup>For Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1989); Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993); and others, dialect and local color had just the opposite effect. They allowed white elites to differentiate themselves from others in a process of class cohesion and exclusion. This process no doubt explains the adverse reaction of conservative *critics* of dialect and local color. But sentimental sympathy called for a different sort of experience: including rather than excluding. This is not to say that Gilder and his readers were interested in the *actual* experience of the Americans depicted in dialect and local color literature. Indeed, the experience of meeting living, breathing mountaineers had proved disappointing to Charles Forster Smith and Charles Dudley Warner. Rather, the sympathy of realist sentimentality concerned an imagined community, not an actual one.

of language, univocal conceptions of American speech, and the neo-aristocratic attitudes of certain middle- and upper-class fractions. The *Century* editors were ready to fight such conservatism. Dialect, for them, was realism because it evinced the democratic nature of American culture. If dialect literature were banned, the editors protested, “the variety and flavor of democracy would largely disappear from fiction, and the color would almost fade out of it.... to object to dialect is to object to the types it represents, and to deny them the right to speak in their natural voices.”<sup>272</sup> Dialect wedded democracy, joy, and beauty. It added “humor,... raciness,... tang” to our national culture.<sup>273</sup> It was “social history.”<sup>274</sup> Above all, it was the sign of the nation’s cultural *e pluribus unum*. Dialect literature “compose[d] a gallery of American characters so various as to accentuate the political homogeneity of a land that holds them all.”<sup>275</sup> Yet, this statement masked a bitter irony. The very inclusion of Negro dialect served not to include blacks in the nation’s mythical political homogeneity. Rather, it had come to signify how desperately impossible it was for blacks to speak to and in the American polity.

From the *Century* editors’ point of view, Reconstruction had been a regional issue. If Page, Cable, Twain, and other Southern authors could speak Negro dialect it was because the Negro voice was a sign of regional color, not of racial authenticity. Emancipation, for Cultural Reconstruction, was something other than the freeing of the slaves. Emancipation, in Gilder’s perspective, had freed the South’s regional culture. Emancipation, Gilder declared, had freed “the white intellect.”<sup>276</sup> And because Gilder blindly supposed the white intellect no longer had to defend slavery, he believed it had no reason to lie or contort black experience. Thus, if Page could depict the pathos of white slave owners truthfully, so Joel Chandler Harris in stories like “Free Joe,” truthfully revealed “the pathos of the black man’s

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<sup>272</sup>“Our Obligations to Dialect,” *Century* 63 (February 1902): 636.

<sup>273</sup>“Our Obligations,” 635.

<sup>274</sup>“Our Obligations,” 636.

<sup>275</sup>“Our Obligations,” 636.

<sup>276</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing” (July 3): 425–26, (10 July): 441–42, quotations are from 3 July, 425.

bondage.”<sup>277</sup> The *Century* editors did not need actual blacks to write of their own “long absence in bondage,” nor for that matter of their current battle against a new bondage. Gilder’s faith in progress led him to ignore the growing signs of racial segregation in the South. These he wrote off as periodic recrudescences of a withering Old South.

After 1890, with the seeming victory of Cultural Reconstruction, Gilder largely turned his attention away from national issues. He was taken up in all manner of civic improvement issues: city parks, tenement house reform, the free kindergarten movement. But Southern blacks were increasingly hemmed in by white Southern oppression. With political means of redress largely closed off to them, some blacks turned to culture. They used the very tools the white Southern magazine writers had forged. The tools were strange to them, and required all manner of adaptation.

As blacks grappled with their own realism in the American magazine, they would discover regionalism to be a severely delimited form of truth. Negro dialect invented a mythological character that made a mockery of the feelings of sympathy it attempted to invoke. In the process, dialect took on a double valence. It retained its regional connotation, but it increasingly became a language of racial difference. This was clear by the 1890s for white authors who employed Negro dialect. The question then became whether black writers such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt could break into the *Century* and other magazines to wrest control of the dialect that was supposed to mirror their character.

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<sup>277</sup>Gilder, “Nationalizing,” (10 July): 441.



## Chapter 8

### **From Local Color to Racial Color: The *Century* and African American Authors**

In 1892, Frederick Douglass and other leaders of the African American community took a turn toward culture. Douglass, Alexander Crummell, T. Thomas Fortune, I. Garland Penn, and AME Bishop Daniel Payne thus made a natural move in the era of sentimentality: They turned to culture to redress their grievances against white America. They issued “A Call for Afro-American Authors” to meet in Wilmington, North Carolina, during the coming winter. They wanted to examine why black writing had failed to “make its way among our white fellow-citizens to anything like a desirable extent, and not even to a degree which our literary merit deserves.”<sup>1</sup> Their call to literary arms arose from deep frustrations over their worsening political disfranchisement and social ostracism in America. Where politics had failed, the “Call” suggested, literature might have a chance to blunt the worsening tide.

Just at the time the “Call” was issued, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, were in the process of taking up just such a project. But, if the two budding authors then living in Ohio read the “Call,” it is unlikely they got much from it. The pamphlet did not consider the immense practical problem facing any black author attempting to address a white audience. How could he or she write in ways that appealed to white readers while simultaneously limning, within the tenets of sentimental realism, black life? This difficult

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<sup>1</sup>“A Call for Afro-American Authors of America” (1892), in the Frederick Douglass Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

task was complicated by the fact that black speech had become codified in the nation's magazines as the mythological "Negro" dialect. Thus, when Dunbar and Chesnutt first appeared in the magazines, readers had no easy way of discovering their black heritage. Their words alone, set in cold type on a magazine page, did not connote blackness. Neither did their names. Much of their work was in standard English which white readers read as white speech. Readers, familiar with Page and his white imitators, simply assumed that the Negro dialect Dunbar and Chesnutt frequently employed was the product of white authors. A reader's discovery, then, that Dunbar and Chesnutt carried black blood in their veins could be jarring. W.E.B. Du Bois reported in 1903 the shock of a white Texas woman who claimed "I used to read Dunbar quite a lot until I found out he was a nigger."<sup>2</sup> Lest this story be considered wholly apocryphal, Du Bois himself later admitted to his own surprise upon meeting Dunbar around 1899: "I had known his work but was astonished to find that he was a Negro."<sup>3</sup>

Gilder and Johnson published Dunbar and Chesnutt knowing full well that the former was black and the latter a mulatto. But twentieth-century critics have, for the most part, derided them as racists nonetheless. They claim that the *Century* editors limited Dunbar's aesthetic to idyllic evocations of the white Southern plantation myth, which is true—except for at least one important exception. It is true too that the *Century* published few literary works by blacks. There was Dunbar's score of poems over ten years, Chesnutt's one 1901 story, and a few poems by other black authors. And of course there was the editors' Faustian pact with white Southern writers of Negro dialect to ensure the success of Cultural Reconstruction. But the story of Gilder and Johnson's relations with black authors is more

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<sup>2</sup>Du Bois, "Possibilities of the Negro: The Advance Guard of the Race," *Booklovers Magazine* 2.1 (July 1903): 3.

<sup>3</sup>Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), 57, cited in Petesch, *A Spy in the Enemy's Country: The Emergence of Modern Black Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 248n85. As many as six years after Dunbar had achieved widespread fame, some newspapers could still marvel that many readers did not know he was a Negro: "It is perhaps not generally known that Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose charming poems in the African dialect are attracting such widespread attention, is a genuine, full blooded Negro" (Topeka, Kansas, *Capital*[?], 23 September 1900); see, also Chicago *Times Herald*, 29 April 1900; Charleston, South Carolina, *News and Courier*, 16 January 1902; all clippings from the Dunbar Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

complicated than these facts suggest. Gilder and Johnson were prepared to publish a black author in the 1890s. Gilder asked Cable to report any likely candidates and Johnson readily published Dunbar's first submissions knowing full well that he was black. Gilder and Johnson's advocacy for Russian Jews, Italians, and Irish Roman Catholics, in a day when these groups' racial status was unsettled, strongly suggests that race was not in any way holy writ to them. Johnson's abolitionist heritage, too, should temper any quick charge of anti-black sentiments. Moreover, there is the fact that Gilder and Johnson published Dunbar and negotiated often with Chesnutt over the possibility of publishing his work. Gilder in fact worked closely with him to shape the story that eventually became *The House Behind the Cedars*. What the paucity of black literature in the *Century* indicates is that there were deep ambivalences over the mission and methods of a black literature among not only the magazine's editors, but also among black authors.

The prime cause of these ambivalences was dialect. Differing expectations about dialect caused white editors and black authors to speak past one another. For Gilder and Johnson, dialect was a form of truth. It was an unmediated, unrhetorical form of expression that spoke directly from the sentimental heart. The word most associated with Negro dialect in literary criticism was pathos. Negro dialect was the medium par excellence for eliciting a reader's sympathy. (In the mythologizing practice of its white literary production, of course, the pathos of Negro dialect redounded as much to white Southerners, as to the Negro narrators of their tales.) Thus, even as Gilder and Johnson searched for a black author to include in their regionalist pantheon, they were unable to hear black speech. Unwittingly, they had locked themselves into a sentimental box.

Sentimental realism required the production of literary figures who elicited sympathy. Such figures had to be, for the most part, helpless or "actionless." That is, they functioned either as victims to whom action was done or as observers whose role was to report events, not take part in them. Cultural Reconstruction had created an impossible literary subjectivity for black authors to inhabit. The very act of writing outside of Negro dialect would figure

them as active, and hence beyond the bounds of sympathy. And in a world of rapidly increasing racial enmity, blacks found it ever more necessary to act.

For black writers, standard English was the language of truth. When Dunbar, for instance, wanted to turn his poetry to political or social commentary (as in his famous poem, “We Wear the Mask”), he almost always wrote in standard English. But Northern magazine editors and reviewers seemed incapable of hearing it. For them, standard English, even when written by a black man, could not *visibly* connote black cultural expression. That is, it could not take for them the realist form of dialect. Eventually, the *Century* editors would learn to hear and comprehend the standard English of Dunbar and Chesnutt, but too late. In the meantime, however, the two authors found that, if they were to establish any sort of literary career, much less produce black literary culture that could speak to whites, they would have to confront Negro dialect. The question they faced was: How, in the context of Cultural Reconstruction, could a black author wrestle Negro dialect away from whites to talk black in a way that signaled “real” black experience?

The goal of this chapter is not so much to answer that question, as it is to suggest why the false dichotomy of “authentic” versus “inauthentic” representation which has dominated so much twentieth-century criticism of Dunbar and Chesnutt does not capture the dynamic of their literary production. Dunbar and Chesnutt were writing in a period of great cultural flux. Emancipation had tremendous effects not only on the Southern slaves, but also on black Northern culture. It created an ambiguous relationship between the freedpeople and the free blacks of the North, especially as the former began to immigrate north in larger numbers toward the end of the century. By the 1890s, white supremacy had undermined both black political participation and the black political leadership of figures such as Frederick Douglass, while the “civilizationist” argument of Alexander Crummell and others was taking hold.<sup>4</sup> The locus of black cultural leadership was in constant transition: “As politicians gave

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<sup>4</sup>William Toll, *The Resurgence of Race: Black Social Theory from Reconstruction to the Pan-African Conferences* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), viii, 41-45; Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the*

way to educators, and educators to urban intellectuals,” one historian has written, “the ideologies to rationalize a Black destiny became the subject of intense debate.”<sup>5</sup> Central to this debate was the question of the black middle class.

The classic statement of the formation of the black middle class at the end of the nineteenth century is W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>6</sup> Few if any blacks had risen above the economic and cultural equivalent of the white middle class because white racism essentially barred them from becoming what Du Bois termed the “captains of industry.”<sup>7</sup> But the “talented tenth” did not, as a result, fall back into racial solidarity with the lower ranks of black Philadelphians. They were “not the leaders or the ideal-makers of their own group [i.e., African Americans] in thought, work, or morals.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, both the black middle class and the black lower ranks had an ambiguous relationship with the larger American culture. The black urban middle class largely adopted the program of culture advanced in magazines such as the *Century*. And the lower ranks of black Philadelphians, as Du Bois put it, “look[ed] to the whites for ideals and largely for leadership.”<sup>9</sup> Du Bois’s

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*Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 514.

<sup>5</sup>Toll, *Resurgence of Race*, viii.

<sup>6</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899, reprint; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup>Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 318.

<sup>8</sup>Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 317.

<sup>9</sup>Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 317. If the white middle class is difficult to identify theoretically (see, e.g., chapter 5, above), the problem of locating and defining the black middle class is even more acute. Equally, if relatively little work has been done on the development of the white middle class at the turn of the twentieth century, even less has been done on the black middle class. To a great extent this is because historians have been intently focused in the post-Civil War decades on the transition from slave to “free” labor in the South. The few works on the black middle class between 1877 and 1915 include August Meier, “Negro Class Structure and Ideology in the Age of Booker T. Washington,” *Phylon* 23 (3d Quarter, 1962): 258-66; idem, “The Development of Negro Business and the Rise of a Negro Middle Class,” in *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White “Better Classes” in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Vicki Howard, “The Courtship Letters of an African American Couple: Race, Gender, Class, and the Cult of True Womanhood,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 100(1996): 64-80; Adele Logan Alexander, *Homelands and Waterways: The American Journey of the Bond Family, 1846-1926* (New York: Pantheon, 1999); Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation’s Capital, 1880-1920*

provocative claim need not be taken as a statement of sociohistorical fact, but it strongly suggests the unsettling fluidity of black class and cultural development in the late 1800s. There remained, even into the 1890s, alternatives to racial segregation in both the North and the South.<sup>10</sup> The literary careers of Dunbar and Chesnutt highlight those alternatives and the ways they were closed off by the early 1900s. In this context, the question of what traits marked an identifiably black culture took on increasing urgency.

For a black artist, this ambiguous relationship to American culture—desire for middle-class status in the face of Southern segregation and increasingly virulent white racialism in the North—created numerous aesthetic problems. The aesthetics of sentimental realism called for a literature that embodied a history, signaled that history through the use of local color, and spoke in a regional dialect. The project of Cultural Reconstruction had made slavery an American cultural problem and had attempted to resolve that problem first through calls for black civil rights and then through the figure of the dialect-speaking former slave. But the urban black middle-class of the North had little interest in embracing the slave as an integral element of its history. The slave had long been figured as a classic victim of the sentimental dynamic. The one aesthetic possibility for turning the slave into a positive symbol of the race—the slave winning his freedom through military action on the Civil War battlefield—was largely proscribed by the basic tenets of sentimental culture which eschewed the literary portrayal of the violence of warfare.

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(Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999); Ernest Obadele-Starks, "The Black Middle Class, and Organized Protest Along the Upper Gulf Coast, 1883-1945," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 103 (1999): 52-65; Titus Brown, "The African American Middle Class in Thomasville, Georgia, in the Age of Booker T. Washington," *Journal of South Georgia History* 15 (2000): 55-75. See also the citations listed under "Color and Class," in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, ed., *The Harvard Guide to African-American History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 474.

<sup>10</sup>C. Vann Woodward, of course, argued that the post-Reconstruction decades were a time of "forgotten alternatives" to the system of racial segregation imposed by whites (*The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3d ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974]). Woodward's thesis concentrated on the South, but its implications for the North have rarely been examined. His thesis has been the subject of intense debate among historians of the post-Reconstruction South, but, due to the dearth of adequate analysis of black class development mentioned above, the same sort of essential debate has not been taken up for the urban North. The lives of Dunbar and Chesnutt, with their moves to large cities and out of the South, respectively, offer telling case studies for such a debate. Unfortunately, the discussion here is narrowed to their literary careers and brief biographies and can do no more than suggest a future study.

Dunbar and Chesnutt wrestled long and hard with the way sentimentality structured their relations to white culture and to other blacks. They saw authorship as one of the very few avenues to middle-class security open to blacks. But the flood of Negro dialect written by white authors severely complicated their attempts to become professional authors. If they were to make a living at authorship, they would have to forge a wide audience. But then, how could they invent a literary language that would simultaneously speak to whites and blacks? What was the best medium for that language? What would be the proper subject of that language? The dire racial situation of the 1880s and '90s that would push Frederick Douglass and his associates to issue their "Call for Afro-American Authors" imposed a constant political necessity onto Dunbar and Chesnutt. "The object of my writings," Chesnutt proclaimed in a youthful journal, "would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites...."<sup>11</sup> But, as Cable had discovered, magazine editors disdained writing tinged with social and political didacticism. The careers of Dunbar and Chesnutt would hinge on their ability to discover a literary voice that could speak to and through a bewildering array of cultural exigencies.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the *Century* magazine's attitudes toward blacks before Gilder and Johnson "discovered" Dunbar. It will then closely examine the lives of both Dunbar and Chesnutt to demonstrate their ambivalences toward different sources of identity. The goal is to place their aesthetic choices of writing in dialect or standard English in the confusing, oppressive context of the nation's racializing culture at the end of the century.

(One of the oppressive features of that culture is the very word "Negro." Throughout this chapter I use the term to refer to a phantasmal creation of whites. It should be read as if in quotation marks to signify the extreme terms of its cultural invention and work. It in no way refers to the actual lived lives of late nineteenth-century African Americans. Although

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<sup>11</sup>Chesnutt, journal entry, 29 May 1880, in Richard Brodhead, ed., *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 139.

the term was commonly used then by both whites and blacks to refer to descendants of African ancestors, it has since become, deservedly a term of moral opprobrium. It was controversial then, too. In the late 1800s, Booker T. Washington and others lodged a campaign to have the word spelled with a capital “N” to afford blacks the same status as Indians and Anglo-Saxons.)

### **Gilder, Johnson, and the *Century*’s Attitude Toward the African American**

Gilder and Johnson were eager to include a Cultural Reconstruction article in the first issue of the *Century*. They turned to Frederick Douglass as the leading black activist of the day. Johnson presumed on his grandfather’s friendship with the noted abolitionist to solicit a contribution. Douglass, recalling Johnson’s grandfather warmly, eventually agreed. That first issue of the *Century* featured a new Douglass memoir of his life as a slave. But this initial inclusion of a black author in the *Century* was not a harbinger of future magazine policy. In the two years following the Douglass memoir, the *Century* editors virtually ignored the plight of the ex-slaves.

It is difficult to cipher Gilder’s and Johnson’s personal racial opinions by reading the pages of their magazine.<sup>12</sup> Viewing their magazine in general and their editorial column in particular as a forum rather than Holland’s old soap box, they published a wide variety of opinions. In a sense, it serves as a catalogue of the range of prevalent opinions about race in its day. Between 1883 and 1887, the *Century* became a source of intense argument over the black capabilities and civil rights.

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<sup>12</sup>Care should be taken in attributing the opinions expressed in the *Century*’s “Topics of the Time” column to either Gilder or Johnson. They wrote relatively few of these, relying instead on others, either experts or partisans to supply copy. This has created misconceptions among some historians about Gilder’s personal attitudes. Paul Buck (*Road to Reunion* [Boston: Little Brown, 1938], 221), for example, used a “Topics” quotation that condoned Northern accommodation of white New South racism and disparaged blacks. This column is not listed among those Gilder wrote in the accessions list of his papers at the New York Public Library, and so was likely written by someone else. Yet, Buck attributed it to Gilder with no corroborating evidence. Ray Ginger, in his *Age of Excess* ([New York: Macmillan, 1965]: 74) later used this quotation, without attributing it to either Buck or “Topics” in order to brand Gilder as a typical racist of the time.



The nation owed nothing to the freedmen, one 1883 editorial suggested. “The extinction of negro slavery and the conferring of the right of suffrage on the emancipated slaves,” the editorial declared, “were the final steps... in the long-continued struggle for freedom and human rights....”<sup>13</sup> There were no more battles to be fought, the editorialist proclaimed, and it was up to individual blacks to make their own way. (It seems likely that this editorial was written by *Nation* editor E.L. Godkin, or someone emulating him.) Another patently racist editorial feared that blacks lacked the political experience necessary to resist corrupt politicians. “[T]he negroes,” warned the editorial, “constitute a peasantry wholly untrained in, and ignorant of, those ideas that constitute the birthright of every white voter.” Blacks, the editorial continued, “are gregarious and emotional rather than intelligent, and are easily led in any direction by white men of energy and determination.”<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, both Gilder and Johnson (particularly Johnson) had known African Americans and had imbibed antislavery in their youths.<sup>15</sup> In the mid 1880s, they strongly backed Cable’s attack on Southern white supremacy. Although Gilder encouraged Henry Grady to reply to Cable’s “Freedman’s Case” essay, the *Century* editor expressed his disdain for Grady’s position in no uncertain terms. Gilder told Grady that any argument against civil equality based on the fear of “miscegenation is a humbug and a fraud.”<sup>16</sup> Gilder fully believed that the Jim Crow laws would soon lose their significance. Blacks would inevitably evolve socially and politically and attempts to delay that evolution only served to create a worse racial tension. For Gilder, the problem of black poverty and social degradation was now to be solved as any problem of culture would be: through education and cultural uplift. “Can there be,” he asked Grady, “any true peace with any other solution?”

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<sup>13</sup>“The New Political Era,” *Century* 25 (March 1883): 787.

<sup>14</sup>“A New Kind of Boss,” *Century* 23 (April 1882): 445–46. Although thoroughly racist, these sentiments occurred in a particular context that bears mention. The author was discussing the problem of the Mahone machine in Virginia politics. The “negroes” he refers to were thus ex-slaves, and his rhetorical thrust is thus against the neo-feudalism of the South as much as it is against Southern blacks. That is, the statement is as much about class as it is about race.

<sup>15</sup>See chapter 5 of this dissertation for more on these experiences and opinions.

<sup>16</sup>Gilder to Grady, 15 May 1885, cited in Smith, *Richard Watson Gilder* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 71.

In the uproar over Cable's Southern articles, the *Century* editors clarified their position on the problem of black enfranchisement. They attempted to conceive the problem in holistic terms, as an issue that affected whites as much as blacks. Giving the freedmen the right to vote immediately following the war, an October 1885 editorial suggested, had been injurious to the cause of black suffrage because it had embittered Southern whites against them. Whites suffered because they were contorted with anger over the raising up of what was in their eyes an unworthy political class. Blacks suffered from those whites who resorted to all sorts of extra-legal means to prevent that class from retaining its political hold on state power. A better policy, the editorial maintained in a sentimental vein, would have encouraged the whites to see blacks as entitled to the franchise *first*, before actually giving blacks the vote. This attitude followed closely on Gilder's belief that white Southerners almost universally rejoiced at the demise of slavery. It was the politics that followed, he believed, which turned them against blacks.

This editorial hinted at an explanation for why Northerners had turned away from the support for black rights in the aftermath of the war. The Radical Republicans had thrown away the opportunity to encourage white Southern sympathy for blacks just after the war.<sup>17</sup> Instead of pulling off a cultural coup, they had turned the freedmen into a political force. At the very moment of the late 1860s and early 1870s when magazines were making sentimentality the cultural law of the land, the radical attempt to punish Southern whites by enfranchising blacks had both politicized the freedmen and transformed them, as a group, into a political symbol. But this process had turned the "Negro" into a cultural pariah. For as a political symbol, the former slaves became emblematic of the politics sentimentality abhorred. They were thus blocked from the power to elicit sympathy, either from their white Southern neighbors or their Northern conationals. By rendering the freedmen unsympathetic,

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<sup>17</sup>Several Northern authors in 1866 (including Andrews, Trowbridge, and Dennett) testified to a distinct pliability among white Southerners in the first months after the war. The rejection of Lincoln's generous terms for reentering the Union, however, quickly embittered white Southerners. This idea that Reconstruction from 1866 on had been a massive mistake was quite prevalent in the North by the mid 1880s.

the Radical Republicans had unwittingly prevented Southern blacks from finding a cultural place within the nation.

Now, in the midst of Cable's powerful arguments in favor of black civil rights, the magazine's editors seemed to believe that Southern blacks could again be made the object of sympathy. The *Century* urged Northerners to be patient with Southern attempts at ameliorating the race problem. New white Southern voices seemed to be calling for a revised attitude. Citing several former Confederates, such as W.C.P. Breckinridge and L.Q.C. Lamar, the *Century* editorialist ardently believed that public sentiment in the South was coming into line with that of the North. Patience was crucial: The *Century* reminded its readers of how recently Northerners themselves had been virulently opposed to abolitionism in attacks on W.L. Garrison, Elijah Lovejoy, and Marius Robinson. If Northerners could alter their opinions of blacks within a generation, the new voices for moderation in the South needed time to be felt. "It is clear," the editorial concluded, "that the cause of the negro may safely be left to such champions as those who have now risen up on Southern soil to defend his rights, and it is equally clear that the people of Connecticut, and New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania, and Ohio, may well remember their own former attitude, while they are throwing stones at their neighbors across the Potomac and the Ohio."<sup>18</sup>

Here the *Century* editors made a fateful mistake. Optimistically believing that Cultural Reconstruction was generating both Northern sympathy for Southern whites and Southern white sympathy for Southern blacks, Gilder and Johnson could not see the distending power of segregationism. Their understanding that "well-dressed and well-behaved people of color occup[ied] without protest the first-class cars" in much of the South was for them proof that segregation was an isolated, aberrant, and temporary phenomenon. They mistook Southerners' rebuke of slavery as acclaim for civil rights.

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<sup>18</sup>"Prejudice and Progress," *Century* 30 (October 1885): 967.

The virulent spread of segregationism in the 1890s revealed the *Century* editors' mistake. Refusing to give up their faith in progress, they retained their optimism about white and black relations. But they published little about African Americans beyond dialect stories and a stray "open letter" or two about their material and cultural advances.<sup>19</sup>

At most in the early 1890s they took defensive actions. They refused, for instance, to publish Thomas Nelson Page's incendiary essays on Southern race and politics.<sup>20</sup> Turning against his own characterization of the old time "darkeys," Page began to disparage the modern-day Negro in such diatribes as "The Negro Question."<sup>21</sup> This was too much for self-proclaimed cultural democrats and anti-slavers such as Gilder and Johnson. They could not stomach Page's mawkish yearning for the Lost Cause when it was translated into the forms of history rather than literature. They left it to other magazines, particularly *Lippincott's* and *McClure's*, to publish Page's white supremacist essays.

An incident in early 1891 reveals how Gilder and Johnson had lost the stomach to fight against white Southern criticism. In 1890, the *Century* editors agreed to publish Elizabeth Phelps Stuart's anti-Ku Klux Klan story, "Fourteen to One." But they quickly got cold feet. Worried that white Southerners would turn against the magazine, Gilder went back to Stuart several times to ensure the historical authenticity of her sources. Stuart chastised Gilder for his timidity: "Is the *Century* [sic], which publishes its terrible War papers, and its soul-sickening records of Andersonville—the *Century*, which has done more than any periodical in our country to expose the barbarities of the South in our civil war (and God

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<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Charles Forster Smith's glowing report "The Negro in Nashville." Visiting Negro homes and institutions, Smith discovered ample "proof of the progress in civilization of the negro race," and enthusiastically exclaimed, "I have never had so much hope for the future of this region..." (156).

<sup>20</sup>By the early 1890s, Page had strayed beyond the literary task of evoking Northern sympathy for Southern slave holders. He now claimed the mantle of historian and became the old South's apologist before the bar of history. For Page the eulogist, the South had become "[a] civilization... more unique than any other since the dawn of history..." ("The Want of a History of the Southern People" [1889], collected in *The Novels, Stories, Sketches, and Poems of Thomas Nelson Page*, vol. 12: *The Old South: Essays Social and Political* [New York: Scribner's, 1908], 349-50). In this romanticized world, the Negro was an irritant.

<sup>21</sup>In the early 1900s, Page expanded this essay into a series published in *McClure's*. The series was then collected into a book, the title of which summed up the new race regime established by white Southerners, *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem* (New York: Scribner, 1904).

bless you for it!)—is the Century uncomfortable over one little Ku Klux story?— The Century, which is forbidden to enter Russia because of Kennan? The boldest bravest magazine in America?— Impossible.”<sup>22</sup> But it was possible.

By the mid 1890s, Gilder and Johnson seem to have adopted Booker T. Washington’s program of industrial and practical education for Southern blacks. In September 1895, they praised Washington’s work at Tuskegee. In January 1896, they hailed the Atlanta Exposition as “the formal birth of the new South, founded on free labor, and the burial forever of the old south and negro slavery.” Washington’s famous exposition speech was the high point of the fair, for he aroused such “enthusiasm and delight” that “[h]is color was forgotten, and the race which had been his oppressor avowed itself not merely his equal, but his hearty and frank admirer.”<sup>23</sup> The *Century* editors believed that the Atlanta fair was a new beginning. They foresaw that “[t]he day is not far distant in the South when the negro will be judged not by his color, but by what he can do.”<sup>24</sup> A year later, in March 1897, Washington accepted Gilder’s invitation to lunch.<sup>25</sup>

Gilder’s memories of Cable’s battle for black civil rights likely inspired him to discover an African American author worthy of the *Century*’s pages. He accomplished the feat, but blindly, as he discovered through Cable. The former New Orleans author traveled to Dayton, Ohio, in the spring of 1895. In a conversation about the plight of American blacks with his hostess there, Cable mentioned Gilder’s search. She informed Cable that the

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<sup>22</sup>Phelps to Gilder, 29 January 1891, *Century Papers*, Huntington Library. George Kennan had written a series of articles for the *Century* that exposed the Tsarist practice of banishing political dissidents to hard labor Siberia. The series caused a popular sensation, and much consternation among Russian officials.

<sup>23</sup>“The Jubilee of the New South,” *Century* 51 (January 1896): 470.

<sup>24</sup>“The Jubilee of the New South,” 470.

<sup>25</sup>Washington to Gilder, 24 March 1897, *Gilder Papers*, New York Public Library. Washington and Gilder may have met earlier, but this is the first sign in the *Century* magazine archives of their meeting. Johnson was an admirer of the Tuskegee Institute, visited there with James Bryce in the 1910s, and gave a speech to the students comparing the educational opportunities available to them as versus the meager days of his own youth (chapter 5, above). See Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), 33. In 1900, the *Century* editors published two articles by Washington: “Signs of Progress Among the Negroes” (*Century* 59 [January 1900]: 472-78) and his report of the Montgomery Race Conference, a group of progressive Southern whites dedicated to “free and open discussion of the race problem...” (*Century* 60 [August 1900]: 630).

*Century* already had its black writer. She proudly picked up the current April 1895 issue of the *Century*, handed it to Cable, and directed his attention to page 960. There Cable saw the Negro dialect poem, “Negro Love Song,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar.<sup>26</sup>

### **Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Dialect of Race**

Paul Laurence Dunbar burst into American literature in the middle 1890s largely because two magazine events. The *Century* first published his work in April 1895, and would continue to do so until his untimely death a decade later.<sup>27</sup> In June of 1896, less than a month after the Supreme Court enshrined the separate-but-equal doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, William Dean Howells used his exalted place as reviewer for *Harper’s Weekly* to advance the career of the young black author. Dunbar’s dialect poems, Howells enthused, “are purely and intensely black,” they “show a direct and a fresh authority” because “they are expressions of a race-life from within the race.”<sup>28</sup> These two events in two of the nation’s pre-eminent magazines catapulted Dunbar out of obscurity. The combined imprimatur of publication in the *Century* and Howells’s review established him not only as “America’s first black literary celebrity,” but as one of the nation’s most popular poets.<sup>29</sup> Following the leads of the *Century* and Howells, magazines and newspapers across the country began publishing and

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<sup>26</sup>Charlotte Reeve Conover, “Paul Laurence Dunbar,” in *Some Dayton Saints and Prophets* (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1907), 182; Virginia Cunningham, *Paul Laurence Dunbar and His Song* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1947, reprint; New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1969), 122; Butcher, “Mutual Appreciation: Dunbar and Cable,” *The Free Lance* 4.1 (1957): 2.

<sup>27</sup>The *Century* was not the first nationally circulating magazine to publish Dunbar. *Munsey’s* published his poem “The Land o’ Used to Be” two months before his first poem in the *Century*. It is possible that he published one other poem before this in a national magazine. He reported in a letter of 29 November 1892 that he had received two dollars from “a child’s publication in New York” for a poem. Eugene Metcalf, however, in his extensive bibliography of Dunbar’s work, listed no such publication (*Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography* [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1975]). It is possible the magazine in question bought the poem, but never printed it.

<sup>28</sup>While admiring the works in standard English, Howells drew a parallel between the unknown poet and the Scottish folk poet Robert Burns: “I do not think one can read his negro pieces without feeling that they are of like impulse and inspiration with the work of Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant. Burns was least himself when he wrote literary English,” and this young poet “writes literary English when he is least himself.” Dunbar would soon become known as the Burns of his race.

<sup>29</sup>Dickson Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 57.

republishing Dunbar's poems. If Dunbar's career seemed assured in the summer of 1896, however, his very success in the magazines would soon become an albatross flopped across his writing desk.

The defining dilemma of Dunbar's life was having been born and raised an urban black in the then Western state of Ohio. In the project of Cultural Reconstruction, a writer's legitimacy to speak sprang from his or her association with a regional culture. But race disturbed and complicated Dunbar's "Westernness": Blackness, in Cultural Reconstruction, was Southern and rural, not Western and urban. Dunbar's Westernness complicated his blackness: It put him in close contact with numerous whites and allowed him to develop close contacts across the color line. These disturbances and complications led him constantly to confront the question of the source of his identity. What defined him more, his race or his Westernness? Dunbar's "marginal" status would cause him to struggle with the question of his identity throughout his short life, both personally and professionally. It forced him simultaneously to employ and reject the regionalism of Cultural Reconstruction. Dunbar could not speak with the regional authority required by Taine's literary theory. He also lacked any natal experience of the black South. He could hardly speak with racial authority—that is, as a bona fide representative of the black race. Not because of his blackness, but because of the ways Emancipation and white racialism had unsettled any nascent black identity forged by Northern free blacks over the nineteenth century. The formation of a black cultural identity in the 1890s, within the context of sentimental culture, faced a difficult dilemma. The black middle class largely disdained a heritage built on rural roots, and thus had to search beyond regional sources for identity. Black intellectuals such as Du Bois began searching, in the context of white oppression, for racial traits (rather than regional ones) on which to create a positive black identity.<sup>30</sup> But this shift from the regional

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<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races [1897]," in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Holt, 1995), 20-28; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

to the racial was fraught with ambiguities for an artist like Dunbar. Racial authority did not arise from the soil. It was not dependent on the evocation of fauna and geography. As a literary ideology in the mid 1890s, it was inchoate. For Dunbar, the struggle between regional and racial identity would rage within him throughout his decade of literary fame.

The *Century's* editors helped and hindered Dunbar's racial development. On the one hand, publication in the magazine was crucial to Dunbar's popularity. But such popularity meant addressing a largely white audience. On the other, the strictures of local color initially forced Dunbar to position himself as the Southerner which he was not. The literature of black life, in the domain of Cultural Reconstruction, perforce had to be simultaneously Southern. As he alternately accepted and kicked against this regional identification, Dunbar inaugurated a painful transformation of local color into racial color literature. Race and region would clash in Dunbar's magazine career, leaving him trapped in a prison house of dialect.

Dunbar was unlike most children of the freedmen and women. He was Western and urban, though the child of former Kentucky slaves. His father, a plasterer, apparently escaped slavery to Canada in the 1850s, only to return to fight in the Civil War in the 55th Massachusetts.<sup>31</sup> His mother, Matilda, had been owned by several masters and was frequently hired out for household chores. After the war, Dunbar's parents met and married outside the South in Dayton, Ohio. Dayton, once a terminus for the Underground Railroad, had a relatively large black population of about 5,000 out of a total population of 60,000. Paul was born there in 1872, and lived in the city until adulthood. His father and mother separated before their son was two, and divorced two years later. After a brief reunion, Joshua Dunbar left the home for good although he remained in Dayton and saw his son from time to time

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<sup>31</sup>This was the second black regiment formed by the Union army, after the 54th Massachusetts headed by the ill-fated Robert Gould Shaw. The evidence for Joshua Dunbar's escape is the recollection of his wife late in life. See Cunningham, *Dunbar*, 5-6; Eleanor Alexander, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 23. See also Dunbar's fictional account of a slave, named Josh, who escapes to Canada, "The Ingrate."



until his death when Paul was twelve. His departure put a tremendous strain on Dunbar's mother who had to raise not only Paul but two older sons from a previous relationship.<sup>32</sup>

Living in Dayton separated Paul Dunbar from the rural community of freed Southern blacks. There were stories. Dunbar's father told of his escape to Canada and of his war experiences. Dunbar's mother told of slavery days, sometimes revealing the dark sides of the plantation world but more often recalling the lighter moments and happier events of her antebellum life. If she sometimes confided to him the separations, bitterness, and sorrows of her bondage, she told him many times about life in the quarters, about the Aunt Dosheys and Uncle Ikes, Christmas celebrations, and dancing to fiddles and banjos. These stories were as close to the South as Dunbar got until he was almost thirty.

Perhaps the most important legacy of slavery for Dunbar was his mother's determination, shared by so many other freedpeople, that her baby would go to school. Here again, Dunbar's experience was vastly different from that of his black Southern contemporaries. They attended mostly segregated schools with inferior buildings and supplies. Dunbar attended integrated schools. Even though he was a minority of one in his high school, he experienced very little ostracism. He gained the respect of his white classmates by demonstrating a facility with words. His poetry won him a place in his high school's debate society, and he was even made its president. Dunbar counted whites among his friends, particularly Orville and Wilbur Wright with whom he published a newspaper briefly in his senior year. They remained friends throughout Dunbar's life.

Dunbar's education and early love of poetry caused the *Century* magazine to figure largely in his youth. In the years when dialect literature was such a vogue, Dunbar avidly read the *Century* magazine. He admired it above all others. He dreamed of publishing a

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<sup>32</sup>Matilda Dunbar formed a relationship with another slave in Kentucky, but it is unclear whether they officially married. This man left Matilda sometime around the end of the Civil War. Some sources claim he was killed in the war, but this is unsubstantiated. Moreover, interviews late in Matilda's life indicate he survived the war, but abandoned Matilda and his two sons.

poem there one day. At the age of fourteen in 1886, he began submitting poems to the New York monthly.

Dunbar's high school education and his friendship with a number of whites did not guarantee him a leg up the employment ladder. The best work he could find after graduation was as an elevator operator in a downtown Dayton office building. Yet the *Century* was ever present. He kept a copy in his car, along with a dictionary and paper, and read and wrote poetry during down times.<sup>33</sup> He placed some poems in a number of regional periodicals, made a splash at a meeting of the Western Association of Writers, and self-published his first book of poems, *Oak and Ivy*, in 1892. Dunbar gained a local reputation in the early 1890s and began to widen his field, giving recitals as far away as Detroit. He worked briefly for Frederick Douglass at the Haytien Building during the Chicago World's Fair. At the fair, he attended the Literary Congress and saw speakers Gilder, Charles Dudley Warner, George Washington Cable, Hamlin Garland, and Walter Besant. He met a number of other young black authors, artists, and activists: James Corrothers, Harry Burleigh, James Campbell, Will Marion Cook, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell. He followed Frederick Douglass on the program for Colored People's Day at the fair and his recital was a hit. His success was reported in the *Chicago Tribune* and beyond.<sup>34</sup> In 1895, the New York *Independent* accepted a short story, his first nationally published poem appeared in *Munsey's* in February the same year, and then the *Century* accepted three of his poems.<sup>35</sup> By the age of twenty-three, on the eve of Howells's famous review, Dunbar was progressing toward a literary career. That career would heighten Dunbar's crisis of identity as it drew him further into the web of American national culture.

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<sup>33</sup>James Newton Matthews, for instance, discovered Dunbar "glancing at the July *Century*, and jotting down notes on a handy pencil tablet" (cited in Jay Martin, "Foreword," in Jay Martin, ed., *Singer in the Dawn* [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975], 14). Matthews's statement is from a letter he wrote to the Indianapolis *Journal* in 1892 which was reprinted in papers across the country.

<sup>34</sup>Dunbar to Douglass, 30 December 1893, Frederick Douglass Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>35</sup>Dunbar to Douglass, 7 September 1894, Frederick Douglass Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Cunningham, *Dunbar*, 112; Metcalf, *Dunbar Bibliography*, 32, 76.

Dunbar's literary career was significantly advanced through his connection to numerous whites. Several of his white teachers mentored him and encouraged his poetic development. One of these teachers arranged for the nineteen-year-old Dunbar to make his first major public presentation before the Western Writers Association in 1892. Dunbar gained several white patrons and friends along the way, particularly James Newton Matthews and Henry A. Tobey. Other friends included such eminent Ohio politicians as Brand Whitlock and "Good Will" Jones. Later, of course, there was Howells, who not only wrote his fateful review but entertained Dunbar in New York City and provided him with numerous important contacts in publishing and society. Dunbar was comfortable in white middle-class and cultured society.<sup>36</sup> He certainly felt constrained by the bonds of the color line in certain aspects of life, but he was able to forge relationships with whites through his acquisition of the habits and characteristics of middle-class American life.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps because of this relationship to whites, and certainly because of his growing sense of gentility, Dunbar experienced both a regional and a social distance from the mass of rural and lower-class blacks. He alluded to this alienation in his first letter to Tobey, written in the summer of 1895.<sup>38</sup> Dunbar hoped to study "my own people" to prove that "we are more human than African." But this was not a project of speaking for the black race from personal knowledge. Rather, Dunbar sensed he did not know black people as a race.<sup>39</sup> He

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<sup>36</sup>He attended parties at the home of Dayton socialite Charlotte Conover and spent the night at Tobey's home from time to time.

<sup>37</sup>In a 1902 article, Dunbar offered a revealing story. The article, "The Negro as an Individual," calls for public praise of exceptional individuals as a means for "uplifting the race." Dunbar wrote, "What I mean by the value of individual success may be illustrated in a measure by the story of a man now resident in Chicago who has grown from a well kept, decent boyhood to a strong, far seeing, well to do manhood. As a boy, and his mother, a woman past eighty, tells the story, he was the only Negro with whom the white boys played. When asked the reason why one of the little Caucasians replied: 'Well, you see, Rufus—it's different with Rufus—he's colored, but he ain't a nigger!' There was a world of significance in the explanation, but the moral point of it is that as Rufus had shown them the difference under a black skin they became able to recognize it when they should again meet it under similar disguising circumstances" (in Jay Martin & Gossie H. Hudson, eds., *Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader* [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975], 49).

<sup>38</sup>To Dr. Henry A. Tobey, 13 July 1895, in *Dunbar Reader*, 431.

<sup>39</sup>Dunbar's sentiments were very close to those of his character, Howard Dokesbury, in the story "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope." Dokesbury, a minister of Southern black parentage, goes South to help "his people" but experiences an acute alienation from the rural folk. In a moment of crisis he asks himself questions that could easily have been Dunbar's own: "did he know his own people? Was it possible that they could be so different from what he

knew he would have to travel South eventually in his quest, but for the moment he wanted money and time to explore the great northeastern cities “where I might see our northern Negro at his best, before seeing his brother in the South....”<sup>40</sup> The language here is that of an anthropologist, not that of a man thoroughly at home with a racial identity. Although he used the inclusive pronoun “we” in referring to black people, it is evident that he felt distant from the centers of the black race. Moreover, in his personal life, Dunbar frequently traveled socially back and forth across the color line with strong and intimate connections on both sides. An intense affair brought Dunbar to propose marriage to a white woman, Maud Wilkinson, in New York in 1896. But the affair soon fizzled.<sup>41</sup> When he did marry in 1898, his wife, Alice Moore of New Orleans, was both exceedingly light skinned and highly disdainful of darker-hued blacks (among whom, ironically, Dunbar was counted).<sup>42</sup> The flip side of Dunbar’s alienation from the various black communities was that he felt comfortable writing about all manner of characters. He wrote not only “black,” but “white” as well. Some of his works, particularly his novels *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry*, have no black characters.

Dunbar’s conception of rural life was the romantic vision of the city-bred middle class. The city was an evil place: “O cosmopolitan Chicago thou makest me sick,” he wrote

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had seen and known? He had always been such a loyal Negro, so proud of his honest brown; but had he been mistaken? Was he, after all, different from the majority of the people with whom he was supposed to have all thoughts, feelings, and emotions in common?” (in *Dunbar Reader*, 72-73). Significantly, Dokesbury spoke standard English, as did Dunbar, while the Southern characters speak in dialect.

<sup>40</sup>In at least one period of his life Dunbar also felt an emotional alienation from the black community. His success at the Chicago World’s Fair had given rise to resentment back home: “Especially since I returned from Chicago,” he wrote one of his patrons, have I been bemoaning the fact that my own people were growing away from me, that they watched not for my success but for my failure, that they saw in my efforts no worth, only presumption” (to James Newton Matthews, 23 December 1893, in *Dunbar Reader*, 425). Dunbar’s distress was such that he wrote to Douglass on 30 December 1893 asking for “a few words of refutation that I can publish in the daily papers here.”

<sup>41</sup>Dunbar to Maud Wilkinson, 24 October 1896, Dunbar Papers, Schomburg Library. See also accompanying letter to Jean Blackwell of the Schomburg Library by James Covington, the husband of Wilkinson’s great niece, 11 June 1956. Covington reports that Wilkinson was white and later married a man who was “partly colored.”

<sup>42</sup>On Alice Dunbar’s dislike for dark-skinned blacks see Alexander, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*, 62-67. See also her letter to Matilda Dunbar 17 June 1902, in which she bitterly complains of gossip tearing apart her marriage (Dunbar Papers, Ohio Historical Society [hereafter given as “OHS”]). She calls the gossip “nigger mess.”

only half mockingly on his first visit there in 1893. One of his earliest poems, “Goin’ Back,” described an aged freedman’s joy at returning to his old Kentucky home after a decades’ long sojourn in the city.<sup>43</sup> The city “blossoms noxiously into license” he later wrote the *New York Sun*.<sup>44</sup> Blacks would do well to put up with “the restrictions” of Southern life and avoid emigration from the safety of their farms, warned the urban Dunbar. On the farm, blacks experienced “purity, simplicity, and the joy of life.”<sup>45</sup> Until they could “show greater capabilities for contact with a hard and intricate civilization,” Dunbar advised, “I would have them stay upon the farm and learn to live in God’s great kindergarten for his simple children!”<sup>46</sup>

Dunbar was also regionally alienated from the South. The South Dunbar knew into early adulthood was an imagined South. The rosier stories of slavery Dunbar’s mother told him meshed quite easily with the plantation portraits by Thomas Nelson Page, which Dunbar read in the *Century* magazine. In his first letter to his future wife written in April 1895, Dunbar asked her “whether or not you believe in preserving by Afro-American—I don’t like the word—writers those quaint old tales and songs of our fathers which have made the fame of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Ruth McEnery Stuart and others! Or whether you like so many others think we should ignore the past and all its capital literary materials.”<sup>47</sup> Five years later, like millions of American magazine readers he still considered Page an

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<sup>43</sup>Originally in *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar did not include the poem in any later collections, perhaps too aware of the poem’s similarity to the Stephen Foster song. He repeated the formula in a later poem, “To the Eastern Shore.” This poem in Negro dialect relates the thoughts of an old Negro who is “tiahed of de city” and hears “de ol’ plantation’s calln’ to me, Come, oh, come....” When he strikes out to his old plantation home, his “hea’t begins to sing.” There is a deeply cutting irony that Dunbar should have known about but makes no reference to: The Eastern Shore of Maryland was the site of Frederick Douglass’s enslavement. Both poems are in Braxton, ed., *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 202-203, 316-17.

<sup>44</sup>“The Negroes of the Tenderloin,” reprinted in the Columbus[Ohio] *Dispatch*, 19 December 1898, in OHS collection.

<sup>45</sup>“The Negroes of the Tenderloin.” Dunbar repeated his warnings to stay on the farm in “The Hapless Southern Negro,” *Denver Post*, 17 September 1899, in OHS collection.

<sup>46</sup>“The Negroes of the Tenderloin.” Dunbar explored this theme of rural blacks moving to the city in his finest novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902).

<sup>47</sup>In *Dunbar Reader*, 428. There is reason to believe, however, that as Page increasingly became an apologist for the New South racial regime after 1900, Dunbar soured on his work, though not that of other white writers of Negro dialect.

objective historian of the Old South. In an article for *Harper's Weekly* on "Negro Life in Washington," Dunbar blatantly referred to Page to describe an aged Negro gentleman: "he moves briskly along, like a character suddenly popped out of one of Page's stories. He waves his hand in salute, and I have a vision of Virginia of fifty years ago."<sup>48</sup>

Early in his career, Dunbar was hardly inspired to take up the South as a literary subject. Southern speech did not come naturally to him. He did not speak dialect personally, nor did his mother.<sup>49</sup> There were few if any of the "old-time southern darkies" then in southern Ohio.<sup>50</sup> He was a Westerner. Fully absorbed in the regionalism popularized by the project of Cultural Reconstruction, the region the young Dunbar identified with was *the West*, not the South. He bonded with Matthews, his first important supporter, over the fact that they were Western writers. He hoped to be part of "the development of a distinctly Western school of poets, such as [James Whitcomb] Riley represents."<sup>51</sup> As an aspiring writer with an eye to the literary marketplace, and as a Westerner, Dunbar was far more interested in the white Hoosier dialect. Before 1892, he labored as assiduously on his Hoosier poems as those in Negro dialect. Indeed, of the six poems he presented at his first two recitals before the Western Writers Association, four were in Hoosier dialect, two were in standard English, and none was in Negro dialect.<sup>52</sup> But the literary marketplace of the 1890s already had its fill of Hoosier dialecticians—Riley was still producing, as were others. Searching for marketable poetic wares, Dunbar listened carefully when, in February 1893, Matthews urged him, as Dunbar paraphrased it, "to work into stories the old tales of the south that I have been hearing

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<sup>48</sup>*Harper's Weekly* 44 (13 January 1900): 32. Dunbar was ambivalent about Page, as with so many other things. A year before the *Harper's Weekly* article he disparaged Page. In an 1899 interview, he named the white writers who best represented the negro race in literature: "Joel Chandler Harris shows the most intimate sympathy—Mrs. [Ruth McEnery] Stuart, too." When the reporter noted that Dunbar had not mentioned "the one who is perhaps most popular," Dunbar scoffed, "You mean Page? Yes, I left him out with intention. His attitude is condescending, always" (New York *Commercial Advertiser*, 14 February 1899, in the Dunbar Papers, OHS).

<sup>49</sup>Conover, "Dunbar," 182, 186.

<sup>50</sup>Conover, "Dunbar," 186.

<sup>51</sup>Dunbar to Matthews, 26 July 1892, in *Dunbar Reader*, 410. Matthews was vitally important in giving Dunbar the confidence to pursue a literary career. Dunbar referred to Matthews as "the Moses that led out my enslaved powers" (Dunbar to Matthews, 12 December 1893, in *Dunbar Reader*, 424).

<sup>52</sup>All six were enthusiastically received.

since early childhood.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, this South was not his. It was merely one he had heard of from his mother and read of in the *Century*. When he turned to the South for literary material, Dunbar’s sources, until 1900, did not come out of personal experience. He did not visit the South until 1899. In that year, recognizing his imagined relationship to the region, he called himself, at best, “a quasi Southerner.”<sup>54</sup>

The project of Cultural Reconstruction virtually demanded that, if Dunbar hoped to “study” his people or become a black poet, he would have to do it as a Southerner. Negro stories, by the mid 1890s, had little literary legitimacy for readers if they were not of *and by* Southerners as well.<sup>55</sup> Dunbar’s turn to Negro dialect and Southern black folk settings demonstrates he understood this. He acquired Negro dialect “second-hand,” as one Ohio associate recalled, “it was an accrescence, not an original possession.”<sup>56</sup> But he intuited that a black Southerner, rather than being dismissed, might be eagerly welcomed by the literary establishment as well as by other African Americans. Through Southern Negro dialect, Dunbar explained to James Weldon Johnson, he could “gain a hearing” in the national magazines.<sup>57</sup> And he got his hearing: For it was the Negro dialect poems that attracted both Howells and the *Century* editors to his work.

In the midst of proliferating white attacks on blacks and the invention of culturally demeaning racial stereotypes, Dunbar discovered he could use his blackness as a marketing device.<sup>58</sup> He was encouraged to do so by his white patrons in Ohio. A black poet would

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<sup>53</sup>Dunbar to Matthews, 7 February 1893, in *Dunbar Reader*, 417.

<sup>54</sup>Dunbar, “The Hapless Southern Negro,” *Denver Post*, 17 September 1899, clipping in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, throughout Dunbar’s career, even when he discussed black experience in the urban North, his black characters virtually always were Southerners who set out from the South. Moreover, after the publication of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896, Dunbar published only two more Hoosier dialect poems in his next volume of poems and none thereafter.

<sup>56</sup>Conover, “Dunbar,” 187.

<sup>57</sup>James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking, 1937), 160.

<sup>58</sup>He saw blackness as a marketing device for his future wife also. He suggested to Alice Moore in 1897 that she submit some of her poems to the *Ladies’ Home Journal* because “the work of colored women might prove an entering wedge for you” (Dunbar to Moore, 26 March 1897, in *Dunbar Reader*, 442). On “the nadir,” see Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1965). Also note that Aunt Jemima, the archetypal commercial black mammy, was introduced to the U.S. public at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.

challenge the growing white consensus that Negroes were incapable of intellectual thought and the aesthetic-moral rigors of sentimental culture. Other black leaders to be sure offered evidence against a racial divide in cultural capabilities. But men such as Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois were tainted by white blood. White supremacists pointed to this taint as the reason for their superior talents. Paul Laurence Dunbar, however, was “the real thing.”<sup>59</sup>

“Thank God, he’s black,” Henry Tobey exclaimed when he first met Dunbar in the flesh in 1895.<sup>60</sup> Tobey knew that Dunbar was black from their first correspondence, having heard about him through mutual friends.<sup>61</sup> But he was fearful that Dunbar might be part white or appear light skinned. Dunbar’s deep black tone was a relief to Tobey because no one could accuse the poet of being a racial fraud, a mulatto on the one hand or a white writer of Negro dialect on the other. Early on, Dunbar had avoided confronting his blackness, worried any attention he gained would be merely due to “the novelty of a black face associated with the power to rhyme.”<sup>62</sup> But his supporters wanted him to write black as an argument against white racism. Although Dunbar soon came to see there might be advantages to proclaiming his blackness, the great question was how?

Dunbar’s solution was to break one of the cardinal rules of late nineteenth-century authorship. He set a photograph of himself as the frontispiece to his self-published poetry collection *Majors and Minors*.<sup>63</sup> The effect was electric. The first thing Howells remarked on in his famous review was “the face which confronted me... the face of a young negro, with the race traits strangely accented; the black skin, the woolly hair, the thick, outrolling lips, and the mild soft eyes of the pure African type.” The photograph, another critic remarked,

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<sup>59</sup>On the American shift from a culture of imitation to a culture of authenticity, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). He argues that the culture of authenticity was a realm in which artists “attempt[ed] to get beyond imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of works that are themselves real things” (xx).

<sup>60</sup>Lida Keck Wiggins, *The Life and Work of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Naperville, Ill.: Nichols, 1907), 48.

<sup>61</sup>Tobey admitted to this knowledge in his first letter to Dunbar, 6 July 1895 (Dunbar Papers, OHS).

<sup>62</sup>Dunbar to Matthews, 19 October 1892, in *Dunbar Reader*, 412.

<sup>63</sup>See Orvell’s discussion of Whitman’s use of a daguerreotype of himself as the frontispiece to *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 (*Real Thing*, 8ff.).



“can leave no one in doubt, that whatever Mr. Page may be, he, Mr. Dunbar, is a male being of the coloured race.”<sup>64</sup> The photograph instantly gave Dunbar’s work a gravity it could not have otherwise had. The photograph seemingly did away with all questions of artifice. Page’s Negro dialect could no longer speak for Southern blacks; for the Negro in the person of this young Ohio man was speaking and singing for himself. When the important publishing firm, Dodd, Mead (at Howells’s insistence) published a collection of Dunbar’s poetry in 1896, they saw the sensation of underscoring Dunbar’s blackness and, again against tradition for an author’s first major book, included Dunbar’s photographic portrait as the frontispiece to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*.

The emphasis on blackness made Dunbar uncomfortable. He was ambivalent about his black identity. On the one hand, he vehemently defended his race in articles attacking outrages against blacks such as the turn-of-the-century Wilmington, North Carolina, riots. Writing of the latter he charged that “the Constitution has been trampled under foot to re-enslave the Negro. We hear every day of hangings, burnings, and outrages against blacks... yet we [commemorate July 4 and] sing ‘my country this of thee’ and celebrate what we are tearing down....”<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, his Negro identity was difficult to maintain. When feted in 1897 by high society in London where the strictures of the color line were altogether different from those of the U.S., Dunbar enthused to his mother, “I am entirely white!”<sup>66</sup> It seemed that the Negro identity, for Dunbar, was a shell to escape from rather than a noble goal to aspire to. He had little black culture to build on. The Negro cultural repertoire was barren in Dunbar’s eyes. He turned to the English canon as well as American luminaries such as Whittier and Riley for inspiration. He disliked the Negro identity when it suggested limitation. He railed against the intellectual restraints of Booker Washington’s program of

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<sup>64</sup>*Bookman* 4 (1896): 19.

<sup>65</sup>“The Fourth of July and Race Outrages,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1903.

<sup>66</sup>Dunbar to Matilda, 28 February 1897, in *Dunbar Reader*, 439. This is just after informing her he has met an old Dayton friend, Henry F. Downing who has married a white woman.

industrial education.<sup>67</sup> He often wanted to light out for the cultural territory where race had no force.

When Dunbar came to write for the *Century*, then, he was almost completely alienated from the rural black community. He identified himself as a Westerner, not a Southerner. His photograph proclaimed his blackness even as he maintained a deep ambivalence about racial identity. And he was determined to scratch his way into the middle-class through the literary trade. In embarking on a career as a *Century* contributor, a new question arose: What would the magazine's editors make of him?

It is not recorded whether the *Century* editors exclaimed "Thank God, he's black" on discovering Dunbar. They left no clear evidence of their opinions of him. There are no extant manuscripts showing how they edited his work, nor are there any surviving letters explaining their editorial reasons for accepting some types of work from him and not others. But there are numerous clues.

Johnson and probably Gilder knew that Dunbar was black before they published his first poem in April 1895 and before Howells announced it to the world the following year.<sup>68</sup> They were certainly pleased with his work. After publishing three of his poems in 1895, they accepted four more for 1896. So proud of his growing reputation, particularly with Howells's review, the entire staff feted Dunbar in the *Century*'s offices in August 1896. Gilder and Johnson both made speeches acclaiming Dunbar's work, and Dunbar in turn recited a number of his poems.<sup>69</sup> Gilder sent him a gift the following month, most likely a volume of his own

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<sup>67</sup>Dunbar was especially angered by an article by Charles Dudley Warner, in support of the Washingtonian gradualist program, implying that African Americans were fit to an industrial education, but nothing higher.

<sup>68</sup>In a standard procedure required by an era in which imposture was easily practiced, Johnson requested that Dunbar provide references. One of the items Dunbar sent was Matthews's widely reproduced newspaper letter that clearly describes him as black. Dunbar later claimed (Dunbar to A.S. Lanahan, 17 February 1898, Dunbar Papers, OHS) that Gilder discovered he was black only after Howells's review appeared (Howells's review of course came out over a year after the *Century* had first published Dunbar). This is difficult to imagine, but it is conceivable. Gilder left for a fifteen-month European trip in May 1895. In the months leading up to that he had been under severe strain with his work for the Tenement House Commission. It is thus possible that he had turned over the review of all poetic work to Johnson.

<sup>69</sup>Advertising Program from about 1901, Dunbar Papers, OHS; W.S. Scarborough, "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race," *AME Review* 31 (October 1914): 143; Cunningham, *Dunbar*, 153-54. The event, apparently was not a formal occasion, but something of an impromptu affair organized by Dunbar's publicist, Major Pond.

poems.<sup>70</sup> A year later, Dunbar warmly wrote Gilder, “I have grown to look upon you not only as an editor but as a friend.”<sup>71</sup>

Gilder and Johnson surely appreciated Dunbar’s poetry. It was extremely difficult for poets to impress either of them, as they were both published poets themselves. They published no poet more than Dunbar in their ten-year association. It is highly unlikely that they published his work as a sideshow novelty. That simply was not their editorial bent. Their history with Cable and the defense of black civil rights in the 1880s would have predisposed them to looking favorably on the rise of a black literary talent. Moreover, Gilder’s hopes, in particular, may have been quite high for Dunbar. In the 1890s, he began despairing of the public’s seeming distaste for poetry, even as he increasingly saw verse as an antidote to the “vulgar luxury” fomented by “the increasing number of new fortunes.”<sup>72</sup> Johnson, it seems fairly certain, was the editor who actually accepted Dunbar’s poetry in the first place. The Indiana-born editor was ever more enamored of poetic formalism as the first rumblings of modernism were heard. He may have considered the breezy poetic mastery of a Western black man to be an ideal melding of aesthetic form and cultural democracy.

The *Century* played a dominant role in Dunbar’s use of Negro dialect poetry. Its approval of dialect verse by a black writer gave other white editors the courage to print work by a known black author. Of the thirteen poems Dunbar published before his first *Century* poem (in various periodicals, from local newspapers to *Munsey’s*), none was in Negro dialect. Ten were in standard English, two were in Hoosier dialect, and one was in German dialect. What is more, none of the standard English poems had a racial theme. All were about nature, love, and other traditional poetic subjects. In the three years following the

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<sup>70</sup>Dunbar to Gilder, 18 September 1896, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>71</sup>Dunbar to Gilder, 1 June 1897, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library. It is unclear how Gilder returned this gesture of friendship. Dunbar visited New York often, but seems never to have attended any of the Gilders’ evenings at home. Moreover, Dunbar’s declaration should be taken with a grain of salt. The statement of friendship mirrors the language he used with white patrons since his early adulthood. And, of course, friendship with a powerful magazine editor was extremely beneficial for a budding literary career.

<sup>72</sup>“On the Reading of Poetry,” *Century* 59 (April 1900): 960.

publication of his first *Century* poem, 1896 through 1898, Dunbar published thirty-four poems in national magazines. Twenty-four of these were in Negro dialect. Of the remaining ten, three were on themes related to black life. In the years following 1898 until his 1906 death, Dunbar published upwards of 200 poems in magazines and newspapers across the country.<sup>73</sup> Most of these by far were in Negro dialect. None was in Hoosier dialect.

Gilder and Johnson were clearly enamored of Dunbar's facility with Negro dialect. Through October 1898, they accepted thirteen Dunbar poems. Ten were in Negro dialect, and all but one were about Negro life. Yet, none of them appeared in the body of the magazine. Instead, they were all placed in a section of light verse and comedy at the back of each issue called "In Lighter Vein." To be sure, Dunbar often had distinguished Southern company, there. Even Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus verses were placed in "In Lighter Vein." But Dunbar yearned to have his serious poetry in standard English accepted as well. Only in November 1898 did the *Century* editors place a Dunbar poem in the body of the magazine. This was a sonnet on Harriet Beecher Stowe. Between 1898 and 1905, the magazine carried seventeen more Dunbar poems, only two of which were written in standard English and placed in the body of the magazine. A handful of other poems also appeared in the body, but these were all light-hearted Negro dialect pieces.<sup>74</sup>

The *Century*'s dominating cultural position influenced the magazines and newspapers that published Dunbar's poetry. Other editors also mostly wanted Negro dialect poems from Dunbar. And the poems they took in standard English were on black themes, mostly memorials to men important to black history, such as Robert Gould Shaw and Booker T. Washington.<sup>75</sup> The one saving grace for Dunbar was his popularity. His books sold well, and

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<sup>73</sup>This number does not include poems copied and reprinted.

<sup>74</sup>Twice the *Century* editors collected Dunbar dialect pieces in the body of the magazine. Three of these appeared in 1901 under the general title, "Songs of the Cheerful People." Two years later, under the title "Eleven Negro Songs," two of Dunbar's dialect poems appeared with others by the likes of Joel Chandler Harris and James Corrothers. See *Century* 63 (November 1901): 22-24, and *Century* 67 (December 1903): 270.

<sup>75</sup>"Robert Gould Shaw," *Atlantic* 86 (October 1900): 488; "Booker T. Washington," *Outlook* 66 (3 November 1900): 566. Dunbar had originally offered the Washington sonnet to the *Century*, Dunbar to Gilder, 7 August 1900, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library. One of the few poems in which Dunbar expressed his rage against white oppression was "To the South on Its New Slavery," which appeared in a newspaper, the

he could include there his standard English works on human (as opposed to narrowly black) themes.<sup>76</sup>

Dunbar seemed unconcerned at first that much of his poetry in the *Century* was set in “In Lighter Vein.” Certainly, when the magazine accepted his first poems he was ecstatic. He had attained his long sought poetic grail, the “highest literary authority in the land,” as he exclaimed to Alexander Crummell.<sup>77</sup> Nor did Dunbar resent editorial suggestion. He diligently worked and reworked one sonnet. He informed Gilder that “I am willing to go on working on it until you are satisfied. The thing is proving a helpful bit of schooling to me and I thank you for it.”<sup>78</sup> Such editing is neither more nor less than Gilder did for countless other authors. But for all his work, Dunbar could not get Gilder and Johnson to publish anything but black themed poems in standard English. All three of his standard English poems that appeared in the body of the *Century* were on black themes.<sup>79</sup> Wanting to write beyond the limits of a narrowly black experience, Dunbar began to chafe at the popularity of his dialect verse and the dialectical strictures the *Century* and other lesser magazines seemed to put on him.

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Philadelphia *North American*, 2 March 1901. See also “Sympathy,” with the famous line “I know why the caged bird sings,” in the *Nation* 68 (27 April 1899): 315. Dunbar published “The Poet,” which many critics have read as a protest against dialect poetry, in *Cosmopolitan* 32 (February 1902): 378. “The Poet,” Dunbar wrote, “sang of love when earth was young,/ And Love, itself, was in his lays./ But ah, the world, it turned to praise/ A jingle in a broken tongue.”

<sup>76</sup>His poetry collections appeared almost yearly after 1898. Besides these collections, Dodd, Mead published numerous gift books which combined five or six poems with photographs of black life. The photographs most often were made by the Hampton Institute Camera Club. See, for instance, *Candle-Lightin’ Time* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1901). The sale of these books allowed Dunbar a middle-class living. *Lyrics of Lowly Life* had sold almost 12,000 copies in its first four years. Dunbar most likely received a 10% royalty on the \$1.25 price of each copy. This translates into a total income of \$1,500, or a little under \$400 per year. With Dunbar’s growing book production, including short story collections and novels, he was easily making \$2000 annually after 1900.

<sup>77</sup>Dunbar to Alexander Crummell, early 1895, cited in Cunningham, *Dunbar*, 120.

<sup>78</sup>Dunbar to Gilder, 21 August 1898, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library. This second sonnet never appeared in the *Century*. But this was not unusual. For Gilder and other poets of the day, especially Thomas Bailey Aldrich, the sonnet was the highest of poetic forms. As editors, these poets were merciless critics of their own and others’ work in the sonnet.

<sup>79</sup>Besides the Stowe sonnet, there was a poem about lynching (which will be discussed below), and another that, while it does not memorialize a black figure or event, nonetheless follows in the tradition of “We Wear the Mask.” “The Forest Greeting” (*Century* 67 [December 1903]: 270) seems to be a figurative meditation on race relations, depicting the inevitable mortality of both the strong hunter and his prey.

Dunbar was notoriously ambivalent about Negro dialect literature. At times, he defensively championed it. In October 1896, he responded to a criticism of Negro dialect by Helen Douglass, widow of the great orator. "I am sorry to find among intelligent people," he haughtily wrote her, "those who are unable to differentiate dialect as a philological branch from Negro minstrelsy."<sup>80</sup> At other times, he himself reviled dialect. In March 1897, only months after Howells's review had made Dunbar's fame, he wrote one of his patrons, "Mr. Howells has done me irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse."<sup>81</sup> At still other times, he held his dialect pieces in the highest regard, as when he told a British interviewer in 1897, "I must confess my fondest love is for the Negro pieces.... These little songs I sing because I must. They have grown instinctively in me."<sup>82</sup> And some time later, he confessed to interviewer Daisy Fitzhugh Ayes, "It took me some time to realize that my natural speech is dialect."<sup>83</sup> From touching sweet lullabies to coon songs for the New York stage, Dunbar knew he was a master of Negro dialect.<sup>84</sup> But by 1901, he sadly realized that it had become a gilded literary cage. He lamented to James Weldon Johnson that magazine editors and audiences both black and white "don't want me to write anything but dialect."<sup>85</sup> This was not quite true for "the highest literary authority in the land." Gilder and Johnson proudly published what had become a rare thing for Dunbar: a poem that fused his racial anger with his lofty artistic capabilities. Dunbar was emboldened to send it to the *Century* editors when they experienced a moment of editorial self-reflection.

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<sup>80</sup>Dunbar to Helen Douglass, 22 October 1896, cited in Gossie Hudson, "Dunbar: Dialect et la Negritude," *Phylon* 34 (1973): 240.

<sup>81</sup>Dunbar to unnamed correspondent, "Unpublished Letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar to a Friend," *Crisis* 20 (June 1920): 73.

<sup>82</sup>Cited in Gossie Hudson, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Regional Heritage of Dayton's First Black Poet," *Antioch Review* 34 (1976): 439.

<sup>83</sup>Cited in *Dunbar Reader*, 262.

<sup>84</sup>In 1901, a newspaper writer dubbed Dunbar "the prince of the coon song writers" for his lyrical contributions to two shows created by his composer friend Will Marion Cook: *In Dahomey* and *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk*. For an extended discussion of the significance of the cakewalk to African American literature, see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 276-94.

<sup>85</sup>Johnson, *Along This Way*, 160.

In June 1900, for a brief moment, the *Century* editors questioned their use of black figures. Perhaps concerned over the series of race riots that had hit the country in the previous two years, Johnson asked Dunbar whether the *Century* used the Negro too often for comic material. Dunbar said no. “There is a larger moral quality in his character just as there is in that of the Irishman, and I cannot see that a laugh when one laughs with them, hurts either one or the other.”<sup>86</sup> Dunbar’s response is odd. For he clearly had begun to chafe against dialect literature by this time. And given the menacing racism of the late 1890s, it seems difficult to account for the comic use of the Negro character. At best, Dunbar here was conceiving of humor as a form of sympathy that asked readers to identify with the hapless subject of comedy. His reference to the “moral quality” that inhered in the two oppressed races, the Irish and the Negroes, suggests a sentimental basis for his response. At worst, Dunbar was fearful of losing one of his most important literary outlets. Whatever the case, Dunbar used the occasion to inform Johnson that he had written “a couple of serious pieces” in response to “the present turmoil.” One of these was “The Haunted Oak.”

“The Haunted Oak” was a powerful attack on lynching. Johnson accepted it and then published it in the December 1900 issue. The sixteen-stanza poem was by far the longest piece Dunbar published in the *Century*. (It was also one of the longest poems the magazine ever published.) In the poem, an oak tree describes a white mob’s murder of a black man falsely “charged... with the old, old crime.” It indicts the whole Southern system of extra-legal justice, incriminating not just miscreants but the judge, the doctor, and the minister. The poem was well received by opponents of segregation.<sup>87</sup> Some reviewers, however, criticized the magazine for lack of taste in printing such a visceral piece.<sup>88</sup>

Dunbar, while he appreciated Gilder’s editorial advice regarding his poetry, was extremely dissatisfied with the *Century*’s response to his prose. His dissatisfaction arose not

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<sup>86</sup>Dunbar to Johnson, 26 June 1900, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>87</sup>Chesnutt to Gilder, 1 January 1901, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>88</sup>Cunningham, *Dunbar*, 206.

merely from the pride of a literary craftsman. The problem was money. Virtually no writer in the late 1800s could make a living by poetry alone. Dunbar, like Cable and Page, understood that to make a literary living an author had to produce short stories and novels. Dunbar had written stories before 1896, one had even been accepted by the *Independent*. But the rejections were far more numerous. At the first glimmer of a literary opening with the major monthly magazines, Dunbar sought advice. Howells suggested that he write a long poem, which presumably could be published as a book.<sup>89</sup> Rejecting that idea, Dunbar wrote Gilder about the possibility of switching from poetry to prose, especially short stories.<sup>90</sup> The *Century* editors, however, were not encouraging. They peremptorily rejected story after story. In effect, they told Dunbar that his metiér was poetry and he should develop it. (This was not the first time they had sought to limit an author to a certain specialty. When Thomas Nelson Page offered to write up his European travels for the *Century*, Gilder tersely commented, “Fiction is your line.”<sup>91</sup>) Dunbar could not even sell Gilder stories that were uncannily similar to Page’s plantation works, such as “The Strength of Gideon.”<sup>92</sup> By 1900, Dunbar had become bitter. In early September, he sent a “batch” of short stories to the *Century*. “I have so often tried them with my stories,” he fretted to his literary agent, “but I can only get them to handle verse....”<sup>93</sup> When Johnson returned all of them, Dunbar complained to him, “If you were as kind to my stories as to my verses, I should begin to have a better faith in the millennium.”<sup>94</sup> He dejectedly reported to his literary agent in December that Johnson had “as usual” returned another short story and accepted three poems.<sup>95</sup> The *Century* never did publish a Dunbar story. Other magazines were not closed to Dunbar’s

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<sup>89</sup>Mentioned in Dunbar to Gilder, 1 June 1897, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>90</sup>Dunbar to Gilder, 1 June 1897.

<sup>91</sup>Gilder to Page, Page Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>92</sup>The story follows a black slave who remains faithful to his white mistress through the Civil War and after. Dunbar wrote Gilder asking about the status of the story in early 1899, see letter to Gilder, 7 March 1899, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library. Gilder apparently sent him no reasons for the rejection, his notation to a secretary at the bottom of letter tersely says, “Send it to him.” The story eventually appeared in *Lippincott’s* 64 (October 1899): 617-25.

<sup>93</sup>Dunbar to P.R. Reynolds, 15 September 1900, Dunbar Papers, Schomburg Library.

<sup>94</sup>G to J, 14 September 1900, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>95</sup>Dunbar to P.R. Reynolds, 24 December 1900, Dunbar Papers, Schomburg Library.



stories. *Lippincott's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* were perhaps the biggest supporters of Dunbar's prose. Harrison S. Morris of the former also ran two of Dunbar's novels, *The Uncalled* (1898) and *Sport of the Gods* (1902).<sup>96</sup>

The reasons for the *Century's* cold shoulder are not difficult to determine.<sup>97</sup> Where poetry came quickly to Dunbar, story writing did not. Perhaps because he saw stories and novels chiefly as sources of income, he rarely put much effort into revising and polishing them. He wrote his prose works in great bursts of energy. In one three-month period, he produced a 48,000 word novel and nine short stories.<sup>98</sup> This fast writing prevented him from constructing believable plots and developing character.<sup>99</sup> Dunbar's prose was marred, according to Gilder and Johnson's aesthetic, because his conception of character was distinctly outmoded by 1895. Literary characters were merely walking morals. They "should be what men and women are in real life," Dunbar wrote fellow author (and later his wife) Alice Moore, "the embodiment of a principle or idea.... There is no individuality apart from an idea. Every character who moves across the pages of a story is... only an idea, incarnate."<sup>100</sup> These notions ran counter to the tenets of local color realism. Stories built on such ideals could not help degenerating into moral tracts—the very sort of writing that did not sit well with Gilder and Johnson's proscription against "pamphleteering" in literature.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>*Lippincott's* ran the novels in their entirety in a single issue rather than as serials, a practice unique to the magazine in these years.

<sup>97</sup>Dunbar's short stories fall into four basic categories: 1) sketches firmly within the plantation tradition of Page, 2) stories about the black community discovering a moral lesson, 3) a story cycle about rural white Ohioans, and 4) stories about the color line, including a couple of stories about lynching. Among editors at *Lippincott's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the handful of other magazines that published Dunbar's stories, the most popular stories were those in the plantation tradition. *Lippincott's* published the story cycle. Only two or three of the black community stories appeared in magazines. Only one of Dunbar's stories about the color line appeared in a magazine, "The Mission of Mr. Scatters," in *Collier's* in 1901. Metcalf overlooked this story in his Dunbar bibliography.

<sup>98</sup>Dunbar to Brand Whitlock, 26 December 1900, Nevins Collection, Columbia. "I had done three weeks ago nine short stories and a 48,000 word novel *since September first*. " The novel was *Sport of the Gods*.

<sup>99</sup>Some critics have tried to rescue Dunbar from this accusation by claiming that his writing was intended to be atmospheric. See, e.g., Bert Bender, "The Lyrical Short Fiction of Dunbar and Chesnutt," in *Singer in the Dawn*, 208-22. Such arguments work in terms of literary theory, but seem to take little of the context of production and contemporary reception into account.

<sup>100</sup>Dunbar to Alice Ruth Moore, 17 April 1895, in *Dunbar Reader*, 429.

<sup>101</sup>*The Nation* (67 [21 July 1898]: 33), for instance, criticized Dunbar's story "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope" for degenerating "into the feebleness of a temperance tract."

Although the *Century* published none of Dunbar's stories, its effect on the context in which they did appear was deep. Dunbar published forty-four short stories in various magazines and newspapers. The majority of these were in the plantation tradition which had been so vital to the project of Cultural Reconstruction. These stories had black characters in the days of slavery speaking in Negro dialect and demonstrating their loyalty to their former masters. Editors at *Lippincott's*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and other periodicals hewed closely to the generic limitations Gilder and Johnson had developed for Southern literature. They made little distinction between a white author of the Old South and a black one.

Dunbar did write some stories outside of the Southern plantation and Reconstruction. Several delivered political messages or attempted to rewrite Old South history from a black perspective. "The Lynching of Jube Benson," for instance, decried the injustice of white mobs. "The Ingrate" examined a white slave owner's bitter sense of betrayal when a trusted slave runs away.<sup>102</sup> But these stories were rare in Dunbar's oeuvre and they rarely appeared in the magazines.<sup>103</sup> They were published almost exclusively in Dunbar's story collections, when they were published at all.<sup>104</sup>

There were a few exceptions. *Lippincott's* published a cycle of five stories about rural Ohio whites, and *Collier's* published a story in which a black con artist strips away the veneer of morality among both blacks and whites in a Southern town. There is also the greatest exception of all: Dunbar's short novel, *Sport of the Gods*. Published in a single volume of *Lippincott's* in 1902, the novel has been hailed by critics in recent years as a realist, even a naturalist novel. Yet, it remains true to certain of Dunbar's themes. The

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<sup>102</sup>"The Ingrate" was one of the few political stories Dunbar managed to publish.

<sup>103</sup>Dunbar wrote forlornly to E.H. Clemmons of the Chicago *Transcript*, begging him to publish a story about the plight of repressed blacks (9 April 1899, OHS). The story had been rejected by the *Atlantic*, the *Century*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and the *Outlook*. It seems likely, given the range of political viewpoints among these magazines, that the story's problem was its literary quality, not its political message.

<sup>104</sup>Dunbar wrote over 100 short stories, which means more than half were never published either in magazine or book during Dunbar's lifetime. As with his poetry, critics since the 1960s have tried to recuperate his reputation by revising earlier estimations of his work. Their focus, however, again as with Dunbar's poetry, has been on Dunbar's aesthetic with little reference to the context of publication and reception. That is, the critical battle has been over Dunbar's intentions and abilities, rather than over how his work played out in American culture. Thus, the stories critics almost always focus on are those that were not published during Dunbar's lifetime.

narrative follows a black servant in the rural South who has been falsely accused of theft. He escapes with his family to the urban North. There he watches the city, the evil city, tear his family apart. Redemption arrives through the agency of a news-hungry reporter who, wanting a big story, discovers the true thief and exonerates the former servant. The story's end offers only a slight variation on Dunbar's poems and articles extolling the return to the countryside. Though the former servant's children are lost to him, he and his wife return home to the very plantation they worked. "It was not a happy life," Dunbar remarks at the novel's conclusion, "but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own." They are broken, but they are also home on the plantation. If Dunbar intended the novel as a new direction, he did not sustain it. His next collection of stories was entitled "In Old Plantation Days." It was mostly a return to the plantation tradition of Page. The pull of Cultural Reconstruction's Old South history was too strong for Dunbar's muse.

Reviewers also understood Dunbar in terms of Cultural Reconstruction. They saw race, however, as trumping the regionalism of Page and other white authors of Negro dialect. Howells, for instance, expressed an ambivalence about Dunbar that characterized much of Dunbar's reception. Howells's initial hope in discovering Dunbar was that here might be the poet who could bridge the color line, who would be the "evidence of the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all."<sup>105</sup> Yet, even as Howells said color should not matter, he made racial difference the essence of Dunbar's work. For Howells, as for Du Bois, each race had a peculiar set of gifts to offer the world. And, because Howells's realism demanded first-hand experience of phenomena, when it came to the psychology, the inner gifts of a race, who else but a member of that race could speak to the topic? As Howells said, "I do not know any one else at present who could quite have written these [Negro dialect] pieces. These are divinations and reports

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<sup>105</sup>"Introduction" to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, viii–ix. This introduction was a revised version of Howells's *Harper's Weekly* review.

of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now finds, for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretation of a very artistic completeness.”<sup>106</sup> For Howells, the need for a shining knight to forge bonds between the black and white “social classes,” to represent the Negro in the national culture outweighed his universal humanism. And in the very act of hailing Dunbar as a bridge across the color line, Howells only reinforced the line. For he conceived Dunbar’s ability as that of a black man, and not of an American.

Dunbar’s photograph often evoked in critics a simultaneous desire to deny and affirm his blackness. White critics of *Majors* and of *Lyrics of Lowly Life*—which largely recapitulated the poems in Dunbar’s two self-published works—were first reticent to judge Dunbar’s work simply on the grounds that it was by a Negro. Howells set the tone that carried through most of the first reviews: “I am speaking of him,” began Howells, “as a black poet, when I should be speaking of him as a poet....” But even before his pen’s ink was dry, his attempt at judging Dunbar solely on the artistic merits of the work collapsed and Howells bubbled over: “but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality.” (630) Over the next year or so most major reviews performed a similar operation, proclaiming the necessity of judging Dunbar on his merits alone but then immediately dwelling on the importance of his being black. The effect of this blackness rising out of Dunbar’s photographic presence was to make purely aesthetic judgment impossible. The politics of the color line was too potent.

The few reviews in the Negro press—which could hardly be said to exist in 1896—were rather lukewarm and ironically recapitulated much of Howells’s review. Indeed, the reviewer for the *Southern Workman*<sup>107</sup> lamented that the photograph gave Dunbar’s work too much reality and made unbiased criticism impossible: “We could almost wish that the book

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<sup>106</sup>“Introduction” to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, ix. Note Howells’s use of the inclusive pronoun “our” rather than the exclusive “their.”

<sup>107</sup>This magazine is not a “purely black” journal, for it was produced chiefly for alumni of Hampton Institute and under the editorship of the Institute’s white president Samuel Armstrong.

might have been first given us without Mr. Howells's introduction and without the portrait in the beginning, so that we might know whether the poems it contains would still seem to us as they do to-day."<sup>108</sup> If this reviewer was worried that too early knowledge of Dunbar's race might raise barriers to his future success as a standard bearer for American Negroes, it was clear within two years in both the white and black press that Dunbar was "the Negro's poet laureate"—and all agreed that his dialect poems were his essential contribution to American letters.<sup>109</sup> As a critic in the black newspaper, the *Washington Times*, succinctly put it in 1899, "The old plantation songs have never been successfully imitated, and this [Dunbar's dialect poetry] is to literature what those melodies are to music—the expression of a racial genius."

Reviewers across the nation reacted to Dunbar with virtually the same set of adjectives with which they responded to Page's dialect works. Dunbar was a virtual ethnologist, portraying Negro "life as it exists."<sup>110</sup> Critics praised his "genuineness," his "true impression of negro character," and proclaimed his dialect to be "perfect."<sup>111</sup> His work was the epitome of humor and pathos.<sup>112</sup> Dunbar was now "the historian of his race."<sup>113</sup> In short, his dialect poems captured "the real thing."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Southern Workman* 26 (April 1897): 78.

<sup>109</sup> H.T. Kealing, writing in the conservative *A.M.E. Church Review* (13 [October 1896]: 256–58), was perhaps the only reviewer to favor the works in standard English and to revile the dialect pieces, which he argued should be "let... go for the titillation they will occasion among folk-lore fanciers and soda-water foam drinkers." Kealing held the standard English works to be "poetry, bold and beautiful."

<sup>110</sup> *Detroit Journal*, c. 1898, in blurb in Dodd, Mead advertisement for *Folks from Dixie*, Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>111</sup> *Denver Evening Post*, c. 1898; *Denver Republican*, 31 June 1900; Burlington, Iowa, *Hawk-Eye*, 13 May 1900; clippings from Dunbar scrapbook in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>112</sup> Willard Holcomb, unidentified newspaper, c. 1898, clipping from Dunbar scrapbook in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>113</sup> James Poyntz Nelson, unidentified newspaper from Lexington, Kentucky, c. June 1900, clipping from Dunbar scrapbook in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>114</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, c. 1898, in blurb in Dodd, Mead advertisement for *Folks from Dixie*, Dunbar Papers, OHS; and *Outlook* 61 (8 April 1899): 832. If there remained any doubt about Dunbar's dialect authenticity, his publisher attempted to lay them to rest with a series of gift books that appeared almost annually, beginning in 1899. In these books, a few of Dunbar's Negro dialect works were set among illustrations and delicate decorations. But these illustrations were quite unusual for the time: rather than the hand-drawn pieces that could hardly ever be considered as anything but caricature, the publisher overdetermined the reality of the dialect with photographs of "real" Southern Negroes, photographs taken by the black students of the Hampton Institute Camera Club. As one reviewer observed, "These illustrations bring before the eye the negro as he looks and lives in the South, with glimpses of Southern fields, roads, bits of landscape, character studies, and very effective groups ("Review of *Poems of Cabin and Field*," *Outlook* 63 [23 December 1899]: 978). Another reviewer noted that Dunbar's dialect books were among the few that were "true enough to life to stand illustrating by photographs" ("Review of *Howdy, Honey, Howdy*," *Independent* 60 [1906]: 284). W.S.

But the “reality” of Dunbar’s black characters, that is the ground on which the real could be judged, was somehow different from Page’s. For as one newspaper columnist noted of Dunbar, “he is a real negro in personality and spirit.”<sup>115</sup> His work seemed to “touch a deeper and truer note than is possible to the outside observer.”<sup>116</sup> But this reality was not something these reviewers discovered from merely reading Dunbar’s dialect work. And perhaps they could not have made this discovery without already knowing that Dunbar’s skin was black. Black skin made Dunbar real. His reality made the concept of race real for Americans at a time when they were sorely confused about the nature of the American nation itself.

Those Americans, both black and white, who read Dunbar, those who sat before him in his many public appearances, and those who discussed him in the nation’s newspapers and magazines were beginning to see race as “the real thing.” The social construction of American identity based on regional culture was giving way to, or rather was helping to structure a belief instead in racial essences. Thus, readers and critics forced Dunbar, in a sense, to be what Henry Louis Gates has called the black voice present in the text.<sup>117</sup> With the appearance of Dunbar’s photograph and Howells’s broadcast of it throughout American mass culture, Dunbar’s image fused with the emerging “reality” of race to make him more than a representative of the Negro race, as Frederick Douglass had been. Now, because of the intensity of the purported reality unfolded in his dialect, Dunbar was the very soul of black folk.<sup>118</sup>

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Scarborough, the black president of Wilberforce University, thus gave Dunbar perhaps his most fitting epitaph in 1914: “every phase of Negro life has been caught by [Dunbar’s] pen as by a camera” (Scarborough, “Poet Laureate,” 140).

<sup>115</sup>Willard Holcomb, c. 1898, unidentified newspaper, clipping from Dunbar scrapbook in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>116</sup>Philadelphia *Times*, 19 May 1900, clipping from Dunbar scrapbook in Dunbar Papers, OHS.

<sup>117</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>118</sup>“Dunbar’s verse,” wrote one of Dunbar’s eulogizers, “was an earthly flowering of Negro genius.” See George Davis Jenifer, “The Services of Dunbar,” *Voice of the Negro* 3.6 (June 1906): 408. Or as Du Bois fondly remembered in 1913, Dunbar “realized the soul of this most artistic of all races” (in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* [New York: Henry Holt, 1995], 114).

Dunbar was comfortable with idylls of the Old South because of the state of black culture in the decade of his popularity. Black culture was amorphous. It had yet to find expression. Indeed, many blacks did not see the need for a separate black culture, as they aspired to middle-class life. American middle-class culture was far clearer to the late nineteenth-century eye, the contents of its repertoire were there to see in any magazine.<sup>119</sup> For Dunbar, as for the *Century* editors, the outrages of Wilmington and similar race riots were aberrations. Taking his cue from the project of Cultural Reconstruction and its sentimental underpinnings, Dunbar sought reconciliation among the races. He did not seek liberation.<sup>120</sup> When he felt hemmed in by racial enmity, he resorted to writing articles. His poetry and published stories he mostly reserved for themes of loyalty and sympathy. These were the personal characteristics most highly prized by magazine editors such as Gilder and Johnson.

Dunbar, growing up outside the South and in close association with whites, felt relatively little of the day-to-day violence and degradation of rural Southern blacks. To be sure, he experienced the evils of race and caste at times, but these were not ingrained into his character. The South for him, certainly until the turn of the century, was an imaginary place large enough to hold warm memories, the stories of his mother, the idylls of nature. This was not the case for an author, like Charles Chesnutt, who had experienced the hardening line of racial caste throughout his Reconstruction upbringing in rural North Carolina. Chesnutt, as did Dunbar, looked to the magazines as means for rising into the middle class. But he made a gamble Dunbar was unable to comprehend. Chesnutt wanted to use the magazines to sound the tocsin of racial liberation.

### **Charles W. Chesnutt: Aesthetics versus Morals**

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<sup>119</sup>This included the new magazines that catered to blacks, such as *The Colored American* and *Voice of the Negro*. Both were founded at the turn of the century.

<sup>120</sup>William Ramsey, "Dunbar's Dixie," *Southern Literary Journal* 32 (Fall 1999): 30-45.

Charles Chesnutt had a glimmer of hope in early 1901 that the *Century* might offer a new outlet for serious African American literature. On the first day of the year, he thanked Gilder for publishing his story “The March of Progress.” He also offered thanks “on behalf of several readers, for the poem by Paul L. Dunbar ‘The Haunted Oak’.... If trees could talk, the single oak would probably be only one of a large chorus.” Publication of the two works suggested that the *Century* editors might be returning to the advocacy of black civil rights they had demonstrated in Cable’s moral heyday. They might even make the support of black authors an editorial priority. Chesnutt had reason to be excited: “March” was the first story of Chesnutt’s the *Century* had published. He had been at Gilder and Johnson for over ten years to publish one of his stories, and now, finally, they had accepted one. Any hopes Chesnutt had, however, were soon dashed. Gilder’s acceptance of “March” was only the exception that proved the rule of rejection. The *Century* published nothing else by Chesnutt. Thereafter, Chesnutt published only one more story in a national magazine. He went back to the business he had started before his brief literary career. Unlike Cable, Page, and Dunbar, Chesnutt did not rise to literary fame in the pages of the *Century*.

The unproductive *Century*–Chesnutt relationship says much about the limits of Cultural Reconstruction. Gilder and Johnson could not let go of the project’s regionalism and its dialectic of realism. Although Chesnutt used literary regionalism and dialect to create marketable literature in the late 1880s—placing three stories in the *Atlantic*—his experiments with dialect would render his work illegible to the eyes of Gilder and Johnson. And his developing literature of social critique would clash with the *Century* editors’ desire for a literature of cultural evocation, thus replaying to some degree the earlier tangle between Cable and Johnson. This time, however, Gilder and Johnson’s revised understanding of their magazine’s mission contributed to the demise of an author’s career, rather than an arrival.

By 1901, Chesnutt had been developing his literary themes for almost twenty years. He had begun with a series of dialect stories, three of which had appeared in the *Atlantic* at the end of the 1880s. Although these stories, subtly and ingeniously undermined the racist



implications of white-authored Negro dialect work, Chesnutt found the figure of the freed slave too confining to his cultural project of forming a critique of racialist ideology. Through the 1890s, he would come to reject the dialect-speaking character as his mouthpiece, and would challenge the basic tenets of Cultural Reconstruction in a surprising way. Chesnutt would complicate local color by posing a problem that was neither black nor white, but rather both. That is, he turned away from a focus on blacks that purportedly looked behind the veil of black life. Instead, he focused on the color line itself. He wanted to transform the regionalism of Cultural Reconstruction into the problem of the color line. As he did so, however, he challenged the historicity of Cultural Reconstruction, which implicitly held up folk characters as the nation's past. He fought to bring the black-white dynamic of Southern life into the present as a moral problem of race. To do this, he made a class appeal. He emphasized the middle-class aspirations of those who, like him, were both black and white. He attempted to dramatize the plight of Americans who straddled the color line to stir the sympathy of white Americans for all those on the other side of the line. Chesnutt, that is, wanted to transform sectional reconciliation into racial reconciliation by bringing blacks out of the historical fields of the old plantation and demanding they sit in the parlors of the contemporary middle class. This was no easy task. Neither he nor his New York editors had much precedent.

Chesnutt's life was a constant struggle against the facts of his birth: He was a white complected black man who chose not to pass for white. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858. His parents were both free people of color, with significantly more white blood than black. They had left their original home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1857 to search for greater opportunity in the North. During the war, Andrew Jackson Chesnutt, Charles's father, served as a teamster with the Union army. After the war, hoping for a much improved Southern society, the Chesnutts returned to Fayetteville. Charles Chesnutt excelled in the schools provided for colored children. By the age of fifteen, he was himself a teacher and by the age of twenty-two he was the principal of the North Carolina Normal School for black

teachers. Marrying and starting a family, Chesnutt became restless in the South and frustrated at the meager income of an educator. He moved his family to Cleveland in 1883 and there became a court stenographer.<sup>121</sup>

Chesnutt militantly aspired to be middle class. He saw education as the road to a better socioeconomic status, and literature was the vehicle that would take him there. He read voraciously from his early teens and pushed himself to learn a variety of languages. His journals from the period 1874 to 1882 show him taking up classic works of Western literature, Shakespeare, Burns, Byron, Cowper, Dickens, Homer, Goethe, Tennyson, Voltaire.<sup>122</sup> Making common cultural cause with various Fayetteville figures—including the white proprietor of a book shop and German Jewish immigrants—Chesnutt acquired a college education of his own making.<sup>123</sup> His single-minded pursuit of knowledge left him bitingly critical of uneducated people. They were, he complained to his journal in 1875, “the most bigoted, superstitious, hardest headed people in the world!”<sup>124</sup> He erected a class barrier between himself and dark-skinned Southern Negroes. He considered them “commonplace and vulgar.”<sup>125</sup>

Considering himself superior to most blacks did not alleviate the repression by whites. Unlike Dunbar, Chesnutt experienced the full brunt of Southern racism in North Carolina. He saw the bullet riddled body of a lynched black man in Fayetteville when he was nine years old.<sup>126</sup> He found no white patrons to support his work, nor did he attend white

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<sup>121</sup>Chesnutt passed the Ohio bar in 1887, but could not attract clients. Both blacks and whites feared a colored lawyer would be unable to achieve the results of white lawyers.

<sup>122</sup>The *Journals* also show him acquiring the trappings of middle-class culture. Early on, he copied sections from *A Handbook for Home Improvement* (1857). The sections he entered into his journal discussed the daily bath, care of the feet and nails, the importance of changing bed linens, and the evil of spitting (1 July 1874, in *Journals*, 40-41).

<sup>123</sup>Brodhead, “Introduction,” *Journals*, 17-18.

<sup>124</sup>13 August 1875, *Journals*, 81. On Chesnutt’s white acquaintances in Fayetteville, see Brodhead, “Introduction,” *Journals*, 4-5.

<sup>125</sup>16 March 1880, *Journals*, 125. He had no compunction in labeling rural blacks as “darkies.” He could even empathize with a white train passenger who stuck his head out the window, repulsed by the odor and filth of a boarding gang of blacks (*Journals*, 112-13).

<sup>126</sup>William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 2-3.

parties and social events, as Dunbar had in Ohio. He felt racially isolated: “I am neither fish[,] flesh, nor fowl—neither ‘nigger,’ poor white, nor ‘buckrah.’ Too ‘stuck-up’ for the colored folks, and, of course not recognized by the whites.”<sup>127</sup> Unable to identify with either white or black, he deeply invested his sense of self in a middle-class identity. When the strictures of segregation and prejudice or associations with blackness threatened his journey toward the middle class, Chesnutt often reacted vitriolically.

Chesnutt had precious little experience with middle-class amenities while growing up in Fayetteville. He was cut off from culture by both distance and caste. Music was the only art available in his small southeastern North Carolina town. “I live in a town where there is *some* musical culture,” he wrote in his journal. “I have studied and practiced till I can understand and appreciate good music, but I never hear what little there is to be heard.”<sup>128</sup> Yet, he could readily imagine middle class culture. He had read about it in the important cultural periodicals of the day. In turn, he fervently hoped that literature would pay his way to a better life.

For Chesnutt, writing for the magazines was “a respectable calling.”<sup>129</sup> It was both financially remunerative and morally purposeful. “I will go to the Metropolis,” he vowed in 1878, “and like Franklin[,] Greeley and many others, there will I stick.” His choice of these two figures is revealing.<sup>130</sup> Franklin and Greeley were two former working men who used writing and publishing to rise to places of social prominence. The young adult Chesnutt considered literature to be a panacea for social and personal ills. It offered financial rewards unlike any other vocation Chesnutt could imagine. “[L]iterature pays,” he succinctly put it in

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<sup>127</sup>3 January 1881, *Journals*, 157-58.

<sup>128</sup>12 October 1878, *Journals*, 92-93.

<sup>129</sup>February 1882, *Journals*, 175. These words appear in Chesnutt’s sarcastic poetic lampoon of his own situation. “I’m ‘quite an intelligent nigger,’” the poet begins. He then goes on to lay out the social and political limitations placed on him by white racism. Writing for the magazines is virtually the only way out of his plight. The stanza the “magazine” remark appears in reads, “As I have no remarkable fondness,/ For handling the plow or the hoe,/ Boot-blackening or driving a carriage,/ Which I had to do not long ago;/ And having no great predilection,/ for living on bacon and greens,/ I’ll adopt a respectable calling,/ And write for the magazines.”

<sup>130</sup>Franklin is largely credited with founding the first American magazine; and Greeley was deeply involved in the extension of newspapers to popular audiences.

his journal.<sup>131</sup> Confident that he could write well, he was emboldened to declare further, “I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from.”<sup>132</sup> Chesnutt balanced the economic benefits of the literary life with a moral determination. “I shall write for a purpose, a high holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort.”<sup>133</sup> Literature, for Chesnutt as for any adherent to the principles of sentimentality, was culturally ennobling. Once a writer, Chesnutt planned to use his position to “test the social problem. I will see if it’s possible for talent, wealth, genius to acquire social standing and distinction.” Worried that this proclamation sounded egotistical, Chesnutt justified his desires by cloaking them in the garb of sentimental reform (and larded them with youthful grandiosity): “This work I shall undertake not for myself alone, but for my children, for the people with whom I am connected—for humanity!”<sup>134</sup>

Chesnutt exploited his connection to rural blacks at the beginning of his literary career. The more he came to see the black folk culture around him through the lens of Cultural Reconstruction, the greater his interest in it grew.<sup>135</sup> The subject that fascinated Northern readers, Chesnutt recognized, was not the South per se, but the Southern black. Northerners’ interest in Southern blacks, he recorded in his journal in 1880, was not “blunted by familiarity with the state of affairs in the south,” nor was it “prejudiced by a love of ‘our institutions.’” Northern literary audiences were not blinded to the realities of black life as

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<sup>131</sup>26 March 1881, *Journals*, 154. He was not naive about the publishing industry, for he added to this remark, “literature pays—the successful. There is a fascination about this calling that draws a scribbler irresistibly toward his doom. He knows that the chance of success is hardly one out of a hundred; but he is foolish enough to believe, or sanguine enough to hope, that he will be the successful one.”

<sup>132</sup>26 March 1881, *Journals*, 154. Chesnutt’s family was not destitute, either financially or socially. Chesnutt’s father, Andrew Jackson Chesnutt, opened a grocery store on his return to Fayetteville from Cleveland, with the financial assistance of his white father (Charles Chesnutt’s grandfather). Andrew Chesnutt owned the home Charles grew up in, a gift again from his white father. Charles Chesnutt’s parents bore a higher social status among blacks and coloreds in Fayetteville being free blacks from before the war. Andrew Chesnutt was elected to county political offices in 1868, and served for two years, until redemption in North Carolina swept most Republicans from office. Charles Chesnutt’s youth was hardly free of economic strife. His father’s grocery business failed in 1872. The family then moved to a farm on the outskirts of Fayetteville. Chesnutt saw little of the family’s farm life, for the next year he began his teaching career in Charlotte. (“Chronology,” in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, & Essays* [New York: Library of America, 2002], 915-16).

<sup>133</sup>n.d. 1880, *Journals*, 139.

<sup>134</sup>*Journals*, n.d. [1879], 106.

<sup>135</sup>For more on this dynamic, see Brodhead, “Introduction,” *Journals*, 23.

southern whites were by their own “hazy moral and social atmosphere.”<sup>136</sup> Chesnutt made a vow to realism and set to recording the “hard facts” of the folk life of Southern blacks. These he would polish, after the fashion of the Scottish poet Burns, to impress “literary people, at the North.”<sup>137</sup>

The 1880 sale of Albion Tourgée’s manuscript for *A Fool’s Errand* for a reported \$20,000 (\$350,000 in current U.S. dollars) sent Chesnutt into a fevered reverie. All of Tourgée’s work had been about Reconstruction in the South, and the plight of Southern blacks was a central theme of his work. If this Northern carpetbagger could do so well with Southern and black themes, Chesnutt reasoned, “[W]hy could not a colored man?” The writer of black life, he suggested, should be one “who has lived among colored people all his life; who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices; their whole moral and social condition; their public and private ambitions; their religious tendencies and habits....”<sup>138</sup> In other words, Chesnutt understood the basic tenets of local color.

By 1880, then, Chesnutt was an adherent of Taine’s and an adept of Cultural Reconstruction. Chesnutt’s critique of Tourgée turned on the fact of his place of birth and his cultural background. As a white Northerner, Tourgée, Chesnutt believed, could never touch the true essence of colored Southerners. If this were true of the carpetbag author, Chesnutt considered it to be even *more* true of white Southerners. Unlike them, he could pass through the color line as a self-identified colored man. He could stake a claim to intimate knowledge of rural black life and he could present that knowledge in Negro dialect stories.

As Chesnutt aspired to a literary career in the late 1880s, he saw Negro dialect as the device that would gain him a national audience, somewhat as Dunbar would just a few years later. But Chesnutt’s use of dialect diverged from Dunbar’s in a significant way. Where Dunbar considered it to be chiefly a commercial enticement, Chesnutt saw it as a moral

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<sup>136</sup>16 March 1880, *Journals*, 125.

<sup>137</sup>11 March 1880, *Journals*, 121.

<sup>138</sup>16 March 1880, *Journals*, 125.

Trojan Horse. Before writing his first story, Chesnutt had outlined his aesthetic-moral strategy: “The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste... a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it.”<sup>139</sup> Chesnutt would disguise his moral war machine within a dulcet lulling literature: “Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force... but a moral revolution.... The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans—cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it.”<sup>140</sup> Under the rhetoric of war and stealth, Chesnutt was formulating a sentimental project. A literature of race would gain the American reader’s sympathy before he or she had the chance to take offense at a literary Negro entering the parlor.

Chesnutt experimented with this sentimental strategy in the early years of his literary career. Unlike Page, Chesnutt did not send his first story to a major magazine. Instead, he submitted stories to newspapers or regional magazines.<sup>141</sup> Most of these mid 1880s stories focused on the lives of rural blacks who spoke Negro dialect. But Chesnutt seems to have soured on this approach rather quickly. As Dunbar experienced, stories about blacks speaking Negro dialect were hardly distinctive products in the literary marketplace. A black or mulatto author could signal no special relationship to his or her black characters simply by writing in the plantation tradition. Moreover, Chesnutt did not have the option of announcing his connection to the colored race through photography as Dunbar did. His skin was far too white to pass for black. These early stories also pointed up to Chesnutt a moral problem, it

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<sup>139</sup>8 May 1880, *Journals*, 139-40.

<sup>140</sup>8 May 1880, *Journals*, 140.

<sup>141</sup>Seven of them were purchased by Samuel McClure’s syndicate, which then sold them to a variety of newspapers around the country.

seems. Being about blacks (or characters who were essentially raceless<sup>142</sup>), they could not be expressions of himself. They could not delve into the unique plight of mixed race Americans in an increasingly polarized biracial society. After serving his literary apprenticeship in the hinterlands of publishing with his early stories, Chesnutt took a new direction in 1887.

In the late 1880s, Chesnutt conjured up “Uncle Julius,” a plantation character who told dialect tales. Uncle Julius challenged the plantation stereotype by being a far more assertive character than his literary forbears. Like them, he was a freeman living on the old plantation where he had once been a slave. But Julius does not tell tales that glorify the white Southern past. Thoroughly versed in the ways of sentimentality, he uses stories as rhetorical tools for manipulating the new Yankee owners of the plantation. They in turn decode the stories and often, sympathetically aware of the manipulations, take actions that accord with Julius’s aims.

Chesnutt felt confident that his Uncle Julius tales could establish his literary reputation. He thus sent them off to infiltrate the heart of middle-class culture. He submitted one of the Uncle Julius tales to the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* Editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich accepted the story and published it in August 1887. Two more Uncle Julius tales followed in 1888 and 1889. But Chesnutt quickly wearied of Uncle Julius, just as he had grown frustrated with his first black characters. Although Uncle Julius was more assertive and shrewd than his generic forebears Sam and Uncle Remus, readers rarely noticed.<sup>143</sup> Chesnutt himself could not help treating his character, as critic William Andrews points out, “with a mixture of respect, bemusement, and condescension.”<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the use of the plantation genre bound Chesnutt to rural settings and a class subjectivity that was quite foreign to him. By 1889, feeling constrained by the available colored racial figures in

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<sup>142</sup>That is, Chesnutt gave no racial signals or descriptions, thus leaving readers, most likely, to assume that the characters were white. This is particularly true for the humorous anecdotes he wrote for magazines such as *Puck*.

<sup>143</sup>Robert C. Nowatzki, “‘Passing’ in White Genre: Charles W. Chesnutt’s Negotiations of the Plantation Tradition in *The Conjure Woman*,” *American Literary Realism* 27 (Winter 1995): 27-29.

<sup>144</sup>Andrews, *Literary Career*, 52.

American magazines, Chesnutt experienced a literary revelation. He would give up writing stories filled with Negro dialect fiction.<sup>145</sup> He would strike out in two new directions. Henceforth, he would attack white supremacy in nonfiction essays about the social suffering of blacks and coloreds, and he would write fiction about characters who reflected his own personal experience, aspirations, and dilemmas. These new directions brought him his first contacts with the *Century*.

Chesnutt had become something of a protégé to George Washington Cable by the late 1880s. Through Cable, Chesnutt submitted to Gilder an essay called “The Negro’s Answer to the Negro Question.” It was a biting critique of New South apologists such as Henry Grady. Condemning the gradual approach to the race problem, Chesnutt asserted that the Negro had clear political goals that could be met relatively simply. As had Cable, Chesnutt softened his attack by disclaiming any interest among Negroes for social equality with whites.<sup>146</sup>

Gilder rejected Chesnutt’s essay. He and Johnson had shown considerable courage in publishing Cable’s essays about black civil rights. But something had changed their conception of the *Century* in the succeeding few years. Gilder and Johnson had virtually ceased publishing material on black issues. This may have been due to a fear of further antagonizing Southern white readers while running the massive Nicolay and Hay biography of Abraham Lincoln. But something else gave Gilder pause. “Mr. Chesnutt’s paper... is a timely political paper,” he wrote Cable, “so timely & so political—in fact so partisan—that we cannot handle it.” That is, Gilder did not read the essay as a balanced apology for black rights. Rather, he confided, he felt it was bitter in tone and addressed a time-sensitive issue. Gilder agreed with Chesnutt’s general argument, but he thought “[i]t should appear at once”

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<sup>145</sup>Chesnutt to Tourgée, 26 September 1889, in Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., & Robert C. Leitz, III, “*To Be an Author*”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44.

<sup>146</sup>For a brief overview of the article, see McElrath, *Chesnutt Letters*, 30n2. The essay was originally called “An Inside View of the Negro Question.”



in a politically oriented periodical.<sup>147</sup> Gilder was remorseful about turning down the paper. Two weeks later, he tried to explain his reasoning to Cable. He suggested that the *Century* was less inclined to publish controversial material than it had been in the mid 1880s. “I am sorry not to think we can use ‘The Color Line,’” he apologized, with seemingly genuine remorse. But his magazine’s policy forbade it. “I dare say to different specialists in the world of reform,” he lamented to Cable, “we seem sometimes lukewarm.” The problem, Gilder suggested, was that the magazine’s success gave it a greater social responsibility to avoid the extremes of argument: “we sit in the centre and look over the whole field, and try to keep a cool head over a warm heart.”<sup>148</sup> A creeping conservatism had seeped into the *Century*’s editorial policy. Chesnutt and Cable were undeterred.

Chesnutt next submission to the *Century* was a story that he himself ardently championed. He determined that the *Century* should publish it. “Rena Walden” was about a young mulatto woman and the tragedy of the color line. Set in Patesville (a fictionalized Fayetteville), the story opens with her mother worrying over whom the seventeen-year-old Rena should marry. Molly Walden speaks in Negro dialect, and the reader can quickly infer that she is black. She is extremely color conscious. She wants her mulatto daughter, whose skin is light enough to pass for white, to marry up on the color scale. She thus scorns Frank Fuller’s attentions toward Rena. Frank is black and is “strongly marked [by] African features.”<sup>149</sup> Molly is saved by the appearance of a seemingly well-to-do stranger, Washington Wain. He is a very light brown, and tantalizingly describes his fine plantation stocked with numerous servants in a neighboring county. Molly pushes Rena into a relationship with Wain at a party that Frank is cruelly forced to witness from the back porch.

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<sup>147</sup>Gilder to Cable, 13 March 1889, Cable Papers, Tulane University. One such magazine, the *Forum*, had rejected the article before Cable submitted it to Gilder—the editor had just accepted an article similar in theme and tone from black educator W.S. Scarborough of Wilberforce University (Chesnutt to Cable, 12 February, 22 February, and 1 March 1889, *Chesnutt Letters*, 31-35).

<sup>148</sup>Gilder to Cable, 29 March 1889, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

<sup>149</sup>This overview is based on Robert T. Sedlack’s reconstruction of the various versions of “Rena,” from short story to novel (“The Evolution of Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*,” *CLA Journal* 19 [December 1975]: 127-29). (By the time the novel was published, it carried its more familiar title, *The House Behind the Cedars*.)

Within days, Wain marries a reluctant Rena and sweeps her away from mother and home. Rena is dismayed to discover that Wain's prosperity was all a front. His plantation home is in fact a two-room cabin, the servants are actually his children from his first marriage plus his sister and her four children. The fancy carriage, horse, and clothes he wore in Patesville were all borrowed. As if this were not enough, Rena soon discovers that Wain is a bigamist. His first wife is not dead as he suggested, but had fled her husband's cruelty. Wain's mother, angry at what Rena has discovered, tries to poison Rena. The distraught girl then does what Wain's first wife did: She escapes. But the emotional turmoil has exacted a horrible toll. Rena dies on the way back to Patesville. Frank Fuller discovers her body and carries it home.

Chesnutt's strategy of eliciting sympathy from white readers with "Rena" was highly problematic. His goal was to demonstrate the destructive power of color prejudice *among* colored people. By refraining from indicting whites directly, Chesnutt hoped to remove any imputation that the story was directly implicating whites in Rena's tragic fall. White readers, then, could identify with Rena and sympathize with the horrible consequences of racial caste. But this lack of whites also underscored a vital aspect of the story. Molly's aspirations are those of an emerging middle-class America. She wanted to raise her child to a higher social status, just as Chesnutt did. But Chesnutt's use of dialect cut against the stereotype of the Negro dialect speaker. From Page to Dunbar, Negro dialect was the quintessential vehicle of pathos. But Molly the Negro dialect speaker is not a sympathetic character. Although her dreams are those of the middle class, her practice is mercenarily materialistic. Moreover, Molly is a secondary character. Yet, readers had to identify with her if the story was to create the conditions in which the class theme could trump racial intolerance. The story had to turn on Molly's social plight: She was barred from full participation in the middle class because of her color. Yet, something prevented Chesnutt from making Molly a sympathetic character. She is a calculating social climber with a hard heart that drives the protagonist, her own daughter, to destruction. Nonetheless, Chesnutt considered "Rena Walden," as a work of sympathetic fiction about middle-class aspiration, to be ideally suited to the *Century*.

Gilder rejected “Rena.” He wrote Cable a short letter to explain his thinking. It is, however, a difficult letter. Gilder seems genuinely to want to find something to cling to in the story, or in Chesnutt. But the story’s shortcomings left Gilder almost mystified as to how to respond. He read the fifty-one page story “with great care,” he told Cable. On the positive side, the story’s setting in the small-town South opened a new literary field, being neither the large Southern city (such as Cable’s New Orleans) nor the rural plantation. Its “point of view,” by which Gilder seemed to mean the use of mulatto characters, was also new. But he recoiled at the plot, the characters, and the story’s very essence. “Rena,” Gilder wrote Cable, was “amorphous—not so much in construction as in *Sentiment*.” The dilemma seemed to be that none of the main characters could elicit a reader’s sympathy. Wain and Rena were both “such frauds.” Wain was too villainous. Rena was too weak. Worst of all, Chesnutt’s strategy of leaving out white characters meant that he had to make Molly the story’s antagonist. This alone was exceedingly unusual in sentimental fiction. But Chesnutt made the situation worse in rendering Rena’s mother unsentimentally. She was grasping, evil, and self-centered. Gilder fumbled after the right way to characterize the problem that ate away the heart of the story: “There is either a lack of humor in the author, a brutality in the characters, lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous, imaginative life in the people, lack of outlook—I don’t know what—that makes them—as here depicted—*uninteresting*.” At bottom, Gilder sadly confided to Cable, “Rena” was “a crude study; not a thoroughly human one.” To make it “human,” Rena and her mother, in Cable’s paraphrase of Gilder’s sentiments, would have to “grow into the knowledge of their own terrible speciousness.”<sup>150</sup> What Gilder seemed unable to put into words was that Molly’s dialect, instead of inviting sympathy as the dictates of Negro dialect convention mandated, did the opposite. Because

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<sup>150</sup>Cable to Chesnutt, 31 May 1890, in *Chesnutt Letters*, 68n11. Gilder’s aversion to the first draft of the story has generally been seconded by literary critics. Sedlack pronounced “Rena” “an inferior piece of fiction.... Chesnutt’s characters were poorly drawn” (“Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*,” 129-30). Andrews criticized the plot as “melodramatic.” But he also found the characters and setting to be “realistically and matter-of-factly presented. The characters are all essentially ordinary and unromanticized, displaying no heightened passions or gross moral liabilities” (*Literary Career*, 24).

her character repulsed sympathy, her dialect became noise to Gilder's ear. So accustomed had he become to the pathetic mode of Negro dialect, he could not hear it speak in any other register. Gilder, then, judged called the story "amorphous" because, to his regionalist ear, the characters did not speak dialect correctly.

The one character Gilder praised was Frank. The sentimental editor found the freedman to be the only truly sympathetic figure in the story. Frank demonstrated, Gilder suggested, core sentimental virtues: love, fidelity, filial piety, tenderness. Here was a literary Negro character Gilder could understand.

Though he was severely critical of "Rena" in its first draft, Gilder believed that Chesnutt displayed enough writerly talent to encourage him to write more. Aspects of the story excited Gilder. Besides the new field and point of view, Gilder appreciated the story's opening pages. They were "excellent," redolent of the best in local color realism. Gilder praised the character of Frank and held out the possibility that Wain and Rena could be made into interesting characters, if approached in a different way.<sup>151</sup>

Chesnutt's response was a confused welter of emotions. On the one hand, he was enraged. He mistook Gilder's characterization of the story as "amorphous" for a reference to mulattos as a people.<sup>152</sup> "I fear," Chesnutt wrote Cable, "there is too much of this sentiment to make mulattos good magazine characters." He then condemned the characters of color that the *Century* persisted in depicting: "[A]ll the good negroes (excepting your [Cable's] own creations) whose virtues have been given to the world through the columns of The Century, have been blacks, full-blooded, and their chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity and devotion to their old masters." The progenitors of the plantation tradition, Page, Harris, Harry Stillwell Edwards, and Maurice Thompson, only drew a "sentimental and devoted negro who prefers kicks to half-pence." In his anger, Chesnutt took Gilder for a pure

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<sup>151</sup>"The hero & heroine are such frauds both of them that they have no interest—as *here described*" (Gilder to Cable, 28 May 1890, Cable Papers, Tulane University). The fact that Gilder emphasized this last phrase indicates his interest in the characters.

<sup>152</sup>Chesnutt to Cable, 13 June 1890, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

romanticist. Where Gilder said the characters were uninteresting, Chesnutt took this to mean that Gilder was proscribing him from a Howellsian realism. He sarcastically quipped to Cable he would thus “try to make my characters like other folks’, for uninteresting people are not good subjects of fiction.”<sup>153</sup>

On the other hand, Chesnutt attempted to take Gilder’s criticisms to heart. He admitted that his characters possessed a “‘brutality, a lack of mellowness, a lack of spontaneous imaginative life, lack of outlook.’”<sup>154</sup> These, he exclaimed to Cable, were precisely “the things that do characterize them.”<sup>155</sup> If he was disappointed that Gilder could not see the social history that made his characters what they were, he nonetheless appreciated Gilder’s literary advice. He accepted Cable’s view that it was a “faithful, wise word of friendly counsel.” He was “grateful to Mr. Gilder for his interest in me,” and vowed, with a mixture of pride and submission, “Mr. Gilder shall see more of my work, and better. I shall write to please the editors, and the public, and who knows but that perhaps at some future day I may be best able to please others by pleasing myself?”

Cable was not moved by this melodramatic gesture. “[Y]ou must take back your proposition,” he wrote Chesnutt, “‘to drop the attempt at realism and try to make your characters like other folks.’”<sup>156</sup> Knowing that Gilder constantly had to compromise his own realist tendencies to maintain his magazine’s popularity, Cable urged Chesnutt, “You must not let yourself for a moment consent ‘to please the editors’ as publishers but only as faithful critics and never let anything go to the public—which is all too easily pleased—until you have pleased and satisfied yourself.” He pointed out that Chesnutt should imply his

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<sup>153</sup>An odd circumstance may have heightened Chesnutt’s reaction to Gilder’s criticism. While the *Century* editor was reading “Rena,” Chesnutt discovered a *Century* story that seemed to have plagiarized one of his own. Harry Stillwell Edwards’s “How Sal Came Through” seemed eerily similar to Chesnutt’s own “How Dasy Came Through.” Chesnutt brought the issue to Gilder’s attention, through Cable. He then fretted that the controversy might adversely affect Gilder’s response to “Rena.” See letters to Cable, 4 February, 18 February, 15 April, 6 May, and 23 May 1890 in *Chesnutt Letters*, 57-65.

<sup>154</sup>Chesnutt to Cable, 13 June 1890, *Chesnutt Letters*, 66. Chesnutt was, of course, paraphrasing Gilder’s comments.

<sup>155</sup>Chesnutt to Cable, 13 June 1890, *Chesnutt Letters*, 66.

<sup>156</sup>Cable to Chesnutt, 17 June 1890, Cable Papers, Tulane University.

awareness of his characters' brutal reality, rather than assert it as a cruel fact. He wanted Chesnutt to separate the "realism" of the story from his telling of it. Chesnutt needed, that is, a greater artistry in his storytelling if he was to make his social moral theme popular.

With Cable's encouragement and Gilder's criticisms, Chesnutt revised almost every page of "Rena." He soon wrote Cable that "I have given the mother more heart, I think to the improvement of the character." He also "shaded Wain down" to be a less melodramatic villain, and attempted to rewrite Rena's "speech and bearing so that she is not quite so superior a being." When finished, Chesnutt was deeply appreciative for the criticisms of Cable and Gilder. He now admitted that the first draft was little more than a "crude sketch."<sup>157</sup> Yet, the defects were still glaring. The *Atlantic*, which had published three Chesnutt stories, declined "Rena." Chesnutt then tried to interest Houghton, Mifflin in a collection of short stories, with "Rena" as the title piece. The publisher turned down the offer. On Cable's advice, Chesnutt put the manuscript away.<sup>158</sup> He revised it again in the mid 1890s, turning it into a novella. He asked Gilder if the *Century* might reconsider it, but there is no record that he ever sent it off.<sup>159</sup> In 1899, Houghton, Mifflin rejected the idea of publishing a long version of the story.<sup>160</sup> Under the mentoring of another editor, the North Carolina-born Walter Hines Page at the *Atlantic*, the manuscript became a novel. Now retitled, *The House Behind the Cedars*, the novel was published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1900. It did not appear, however, as a magazine serial.

Gilder's initial rejection of "Rena" had shattered Chesnutt. Rena was Chesnutt's breakthrough as a *colored* writer. No longer focused on a group to which he did not feel naturally attached, Chesnutt had found a way to express the soul of *his* own people.<sup>161</sup> This is

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<sup>157</sup>Cable to Chesnutt, 12 September 1890, *Chesnutt Letters*, 70.

<sup>158</sup>Cable to Chesnutt, 18 August 1890, *Chesnutt Letters*, 70-71n1.

<sup>159</sup>Chesnutt to Gilder, 11 April 1895, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>160</sup>As Chesnutt put it, the publisher "condemned the plot, its development, [found] the distinctions on which it is based unimportant, and have predicted for it nothing but failure" (Chesnutt to W.H. Page, 22 March 1899, *Chesnutt Letters*, 121).

<sup>161</sup>Chesnutt wrote another story in 1889 about a mulatto character, "The Sheriff's Children" (published in the *Independent* [7 November 1889]: 30-32). But the story is still about an ex-slave. The plot turns on a sheriff

why he was so intensely dedicated to “Rena.” “I have not slept with that story for ten years,” he wrote Page after Houghton, Mifflin turned it down in 1899, “without falling in love with it, and believing in it...”<sup>162</sup> With “Rena,” Chesnutt discovered his place in American society and his voice in American literature. “Rena,” he hoped, would encourage white Americans to shift their group boundaries from the plain of race to that of class. But it could do nothing if it were not published.

Chesnutt would spend ten years in the literary wilderness after Gilder rejected “Rena.” He published only one anecdote and three stories in the next ten years.<sup>163</sup> But in that decade, Chesnutt’s life changed immeasurably. He gave his energies to his legal stenography business, built up capital, and entered into Cleveland’s colored middle class. He nursed his literary ambitions, however, and found an unlikely accomplice. For the second time in his life, a white Southern became instrumental to his literary career. Walter Hines Page, newly installed as the editor of the *Atlantic*, published three of Chesnutt’s stories in 1898 and 1899.<sup>164</sup> He also convinced Houghton, Mifflin to publish two collections of Chesnutt’s stories, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, both in 1899.<sup>165</sup> With this sudden spate of notoriety, Chesnutt tried the *Century* again.

Gilder turned down “Her Virginia Mammy” in September 1898. (Page had already declined it for the *Atlantic* and suggested Chesnutt send it to another magazine.<sup>166</sup>) The story subverts the stock plot of a heroine who rejects marriage upon discovering that she is part black. Chesnutt’s heroine, Clara, is adopted, and fears her blood might have the “taint.” By chance she meets the older, olive complected Mrs. Harper, who leads Clara to believe that the

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guarding a mulatto from a lynch mob. In the course of the story, the mulatto informs the sheriff that he is the white man’s son, the child of a former slave the sheriff had sold off before the war.

<sup>162</sup>Chesnutt to W.H. Page, 22 March 1899, *Chesnutt Letters*, 121-22.

<sup>163</sup>“A Cause Célèbre,” *Puck* (14 January 1890); “A Deep Sleeper,” *Two Tales* (11 March 1893); and “The Wife of His Youth,” *Atlantic* 82 (July 1898).

<sup>164</sup>“Hot-Foot Hannibal,” *Atlantic* 83 (January 1899); “The Bouquet,” *Atlantic* 84 (November 1899).

<sup>165</sup>Page was also deeply involved with Chesnutt’s two follow-up novels to *House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel’s Dream*. He acted not only as editor of both, but as publisher for the latter at Doubleday, Page.

<sup>166</sup>*Chesnutt Letters*, 113n2.

young woman was in fact the child of illustrious Virginia whites. Clara's Northern fiancé John Winthrop, however, noting the resemblance between his betrothed and the older woman, quickly surmises the truth. But instead of jilting Clara, according to the genre's rules, he refuses to care and embraces her "with an air of assured possession."<sup>167</sup> Clara believes herself to be white, and thus available for marriage to the white Winthrop, but remains blind to the sacrifice of her own colored mother. It is certainly possible that Gilder objected to the insinuations of mixed-race marriage. There is a muted scene of brutality (Mrs. Harper reports having been held prisoner by a slave catcher). And there is a subtle jibe at Cultural Reconstruction: Race intermixture was so rampant before the Civil War, Chesnutt suggests, that no Southern white woman could absolutely assure her Northern lover that her blood was pure. Gilder's stated criticism, however, hews to the editorial elements of the story, not the racial or moral. Perhaps thinking of the imputation of brutality, Gilder judged the story to be "lack[ing] something in the way of charm, and mellowness." Gilder's comment was consistent with his reply to "Rena Walden": He did not care for Chesnutt's style. He said little or nothing of Chesnutt's content. He did not have to, for style and content had become virtually the same thing for the editor due to his infatuation with the dialect of character types.

Chesnutt was unbowed by this rejection. He envisioned his literary flowering of the late 1890s as the moral crusade he had once dreamed of in his journal. The earlier air of aesthetic stealth gave way to a roiling righteousness. He wrote to Booker T. Washington, "I quite agree with you that the medium of fiction offers a golden opportunity to create sympathy throughout the country for our cause." But sympathy was no longer an aesthetic Trojan horse, it was now, for Chesnutt, a naked sword taken up against apologists for the recently invented "Old South." Chesnutt explained to Washington that he was writing to counter the work of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris. "I know I am on the

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<sup>167</sup>"The Wife of His Youth," in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899, reprint; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 59.



weaker side in point of popular sympathy,” he proclaimed, “but I am on the stronger side in point of justice and morality.”<sup>168</sup>

Chesnutt’s fervor was spurred by a significant change in his personal life. He had attained a solid place in Cleveland’s colored middle class. (One example: His two daughters had both matriculated at Smith College and his son was soon to enter Harvard.) Assured of his own social position, he was able to give full play to his moral ire. His great sense of the nation’s racial duplicity now extended beyond mixed-race Americans to encompass all those on the dark side of the color line. Chesnutt no longer saw any significant racial divide between mixed-race and black peoples. The onslaught of white racial supremacy drew the color line so distinctly that he could no longer afford to see the two colored groups as having any fundamental social or legal difference. Chesnutt revolted against this racial onslaught, but he did so by switching playing fields. Since “Rena,” he had sought a fiction that valued moral power over racial division. As William Andrews put it, Chesnutt’s color line fiction argued that “true progress could not be defined in terms of *racial* ascension but only in terms of *moral* ascension over the stumbling block of race consciousness, whether black or white.”<sup>169</sup> This attitude set Chesnutt on a collision course with Gilder. Gilder could not separate the racial from the moral in Chesnutt’s work, or perhaps better, he feared that his readers could not. Gilder saw Chesnutt’s stories in terms of their characters and social place, while Chesnutt saw them in terms of their ideas.

Chesnutt sought to scale the *Century*’s editorial walls with his new moral work. Apparently attempting to convince Gilder of his rising stature as an author, he urged the *Century* editor to read his story “The Wife of His Youth” which Page had published in the *Atlantic*. The story examined a moral decision by the light-skinned, mixed-race, middle-aged Mr. Ryder. On the verge of proposing to an almost white, highly educated, younger colored

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<sup>168</sup>Chesnutt to Booker T. Washington, 5 November 1901, in Lewis W. Harlan & Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 6 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 288.

<sup>169</sup>Andrews, *Literary Career*, 82.

woman, he is confronted with the toothless, “very black,” dialect-speaking woman he had first married when both were slaves and then lost in the confusion of the Civil War. Should he be true to his wedding vows or should he renounce the old woman to maintain his elite social position among other light-skinned blacks? Gilder saw the story much as Chesnutt intended it, as the study of a moral question. “It is certainly very striking,” he told Chesnutt. But he felt sorry for Ryder: “somehow it seems as though that poor fellow was entitled to a compromise of some sort. I don’t know just what it would be, but the precise outcome hardly seems humanly right.” Gilder’s response here is somewhat mystifying. ‘Liza Jane, the wife, speaks in Negro dialect and is the quintessential pathetic figure. Yet, Gilder rejected sympathizing with her, and attached his interest to Ryder instead. Perhaps ‘Liza Jane brought to Gilder’s mind memories of the old, irascible black servant, Diana Piro, who had long served in his boyhood home. If this were the case, Gilder’s experience would have left him thinking of the story in bold class terms. Indeed, “Wife” reads as a critique of the divisions of class within the black community. As such, this story plays against the theme of “Rena Walden.” Ryder chooses allegiance to the race and to his own principles over his elite social position and a highly desirable younger woman. From Chesnutt’s response to Gilder’s criticism, it would seem that this fall from the grace of class was what displeased Gilder. Chesnutt waxed indignant to W.H. Page about Gilder’s comments. “It is surprising [how many] people do not seem to imagine that the old woman was entitled to any consideration whatever, and yet I don’t know that it is so astonishing either, in the light of history.” But the story is not about the wife, and she remains a one-dimensional character. She is at best a stilted, almost stereotypical cut-out of the plantation tradition. She resembles in some degree, in her twenty-five year search for her husband, the “dog-like fidelity” Chesnutt had criticized in the full-blooded black characters of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris. The key difference, of course, is that Chesnutt has switched the relationship from that of master and servant to husband and wife. In so doing, he demonstrated a new attitude toward rural, full-blooded blacks. “Wife” offers a wider view of social mobility. The story suggests that it

was now up to lighter skinned blacks to lift the class boats of the entire race, not just their own.<sup>170</sup> Here was an irony. Chesnutt, with his single-minded determination to rise to the middle class, was urging racial solidarity between blacks and coloreds, between the slave past and an assimilationist future, while Gilder, uncomfortable with his own class ascension, pitied the middle-class mulatto and not his Negro-dialect-speaking wife. To some degree, Gilder's attitude is explainable in that the story frustrates the generic conventions of the love story. There is no "loving." The mulatto Ryder and his black wife do not embrace, they do not formally reaffirm their vows, nor do they look to the future together. Moreover, Chesnutt deflects the story away from the generic love tale by having Ryder present the dilemma of accepting or rejecting the wife of his youth to the members of a dinner party. "Wife," then is not a love story, it is a moral problem. As such, it fell outside the *Century* editor's conception of the artistic treatment of a moral theme.

The *Century* finally accepted a story by Chesnutt, "The March of Progress," in 1901. The story tells of the first decision by a group of black school board officials who had finally obtained the right to appoint teachers to the colored school of Patesville. They are faced with a difficult moral choice: Should they retain the aged white teacher Miss Noble in gratitude to her long service, or should they promote one of their own, a young mulatto former student of Miss Noble's who had recently graduated college? After a sharp debate, loyalty to service wins out over loyalty to race. The school board chooses Miss Noble, but in a twist, she dies on hearing the news, thus leaving the position open for the young mulatto. The appearance of the story was something of an anticlimax after Chesnutt's long struggle to place a story in the *Century*. The story was slight, as Chesnutt defensively admitted: "It does not pretend to 'atmosphere,'" he wrote Gilder, "but is a plain story of plain people, although I think

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<sup>170</sup>T. Thomas Fortune, the Florida-born New York journalist applauded Chesnutt's direction in "Wife." On reading the story, he wrote to Booker T. Washington, "Fortunately we are able to turn from Dunbar to Chesnutt, from pure niggerism from the white man's point of view hashed up by a black man, to the genuine negro presented by a literary artist who has full sympathy with the low tendencies and the high aspirations of the race" (Fortune to Washington, 10 February 1900, in *Washington Papers*, vol. 5, 439).

gratitude is a fine theme & not overworked.”<sup>171</sup> There was little action, little local color, and only a whiff of controversy.<sup>172</sup>

“March” did not change Chesnutt’s fortunes with the *Century*. His literary career faltering, he made a last-ditch effort to interest the *Century* in a serial novel, *The Rainbow Chasers*. It was a patent attempt at commercial popularity. The nonracial romance followed a middle-aged white bachelor who, in trying to arrange white suitors for a beautiful white widow, ends up marrying her himself. With Gilder in Europe, Johnson declined to take the novel, as did Page.<sup>173</sup>

Gilder’s rejection of much of Chesnutt’s work reveals stark limitations of Cultural Reconstruction as they evolved through the 1890s. It is tempting to say that Gilder’s rejection of Chesnutt was a simple matter of race. The white editor feared that his white readers could not identify with Chesnutt’s colored subjects. There is some truth to this. The *Century* clearly turned away from race controversy after 1888. But the very fact that Gilder entertained the idea of publishing Chesnutt’s work suggests an alternative interpretation. Gilder was unable to see the racial forest for the dialectic trees.

Gilder wanted stories that were told from inside a vivid American culture. For Gilder, the truth of local color was in the details of dialect. But for Chesnutt, Negro dialect denied the possibility that there could be an inside to African American culture, particularly in the early years of his literary career. Moreover, African American identity was still too fluid, too new; it lacked history and precedent beyond the slave past. For Chesnutt personally, this lack propelled him toward middle-class culture as a means of formulating an identity and

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<sup>171</sup>Chesnutt to Gilder, 24 April 1899, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library. In this letter, Chesnutt teased Gilder over “The Wife of His Youth.” Gilder apparently had praised the story again in a second letter, after his first letter of September 1898. Chesnutt, by then, had realized that he had sent the story to the *Century* before submitting it to the *Atlantic*. He let Gilder know this with a hint of glee. It is unclear who rejected the story at the *Century*, if Chesnutt did indeed submit it. But it does not seem to have been Gilder. His comments indicate his first reading of the story was in the *Atlantic*.

<sup>172</sup>Andrews strongly criticized the story as merely “a little sketch.” It had, according to Andrews, “a dearth of dramatic action,” its characters were “mere types” (*Literary Career*, 82).

<sup>173</sup>Chesnutt to Johnson, 15 May 1900, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library; Page to Chesnutt, 19 July 1900, cited in Andrews, *Literary Career*, 122. Page’s criticism was strikingly reminiscent of Gilder’s reaction to the first draft of “Rena”: “There is a certain unreality about these people that prevents them from being interesting.”

amassing social status. By the end of the 1890s, there was an evolving African American culture. But, for Chesnutt, it was largely a fiction created from the outside pressure of white supremacy.<sup>174</sup> He thus followed an aesthetic-moral direction that increasingly turned him into what Gilder and Johnson objected to as pamphleteering. This was precisely what they had objected to in Cable. Cable's work, however, offered two things they believed Chesnutt's lacked: redemption and the beauty of local color.

Gilder found "Rena" objectionable largely because all of the characters were unredeemed. Wain was irrevocably duplicitous, Rena was tragically weak willed, and Molly was unrepentant, selfish, unmotherly. Molly was the key problem it seems. As the mother and bearer of Negro dialect, she should have been, according to the sentimental aesthetic tenets of Cultural Reconstruction, an abundantly sympathetic character. What Gilder wanted in the end was for Molly to be a new Uncle Tom. Moreover, "Rena," as Chesnutt first wrote it, had no white characters. This cut against the formulation of the South that Cultural Reconstruction had instituted. (Significantly, W.H. Page's interest in the novel version sprang up only after Chesnutt added a white love interest for Rena.)

The only Chesnutt story Gilder accepted, "March," was a story of redemption. The members of the school board took the moral high ground of loyalty to Miss Noble's service. True, in "Wife" Ryder makes a difficult moral decision. Gilder's comments show that he identified with the middle-class Ryder. Somewhat like Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths, he could not imagine Ryder choosing the haggard wife of his slavery days over the young, blue-blooded socialite. Speakers of Negro dialect were to sympathize over, not to marry.

Gilder's lukewarm response to Chesnutt was based largely on the lack of charm and humor the editor had found in the early work of Cable, Chesnutt's former mentor. Chesnutt's emphasis on racial issues was unrelieved by vivid characterization. He created no memorable

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<sup>174</sup>At the turn of the century, a nascent black culture appeared in the form of two magazines, *The Colored American* and *The Voice of the Negro*. Each emulated the mainstream cultural monthlies and sought to build a national middle-class black readership.

*literary* characters like Cable's Aurore and Clotilde Nancanou. This is why Gilder termed "Rena" brutal. Chesnutt relentlessly bore down on the tragic. He provided no relief, no vision outward, no possibility *within* his stories for the resolution of social tensions.

The *Century* editors were little impressed with Chesnutt as a literary stylist. They could not see his work attracting a popular audience.<sup>175</sup> Chesnutt continually ignored Cable's earlier suggestion to augment his moral work with a greater literary artistry. He swung back and forth between pamphleteering and derivative attempts at popular anecdotes and novels. These latter attempts at popular fiction, according to his closest literary critic, "proved that Chesnutt had no literary future as a writer of standard, mass market fiction."<sup>176</sup> In Chesnutt's social fiction, Gilder and Johnson saw only colored Frowenfelds and no colorful Grandissimes or Nancanous.

Uncle Julius was Chesnutt's most complex character. The stories featuring his conjure tales did evince a humor, pathos, and charm that Chesnutt's other later stories lacked. But Chesnutt, and many readers, deemed Julius to be too immersed in the plantation tradition. His abandonment of Julius by 1890 suggests that he was doubtful about class uplift for the former slaves. He broke with Julius, perhaps too quickly, leaving us to wonder what might have happened if he had developed the character further.<sup>177</sup> Chesnutt, however, was impatient with the politics of race as they crippled African American life in the 1890s. He could not envision a "realist" path through which Julius could rise into the middle class. Chesnutt wanted to grapple with the problem directly in literature without waiting for the long gestation of change literary genres often require. Chesnutt's own steady rise into

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<sup>175</sup>Their judgment is echoed in literary critic William Andrews's extensive examination of Chesnutt's literary career. Considering the twenty-two pieces Chesnutt submitted to Page in 1897 as potential selections for a story collection, Andrews determined that full a third of them were "definitely inferior" (Andrews, *Literary Career*, 31).

<sup>176</sup>Andrews, *Literary Career*, 31.

<sup>177</sup>Chesnutt did return briefly to Julius in the late 1890s. He hoped to interest Houghton, Mifflin in publishing a collection of his short stories. At the request of Walter Hines Page, he quickly produced several Julius stories to go with the three of the 1890s to create enough product for a book (Chesnutt to W.H. Page, 22 October 1897, *Chesnutt Letters*, 100, 101n1, 104n4).

Cleveland's middle class encouraged him to alter his thinking about class within his stories toward a more inclusive racial vision, beginning with "The Wife of His Youth."

By the time Gilder read "The Wife of His Youth," he like Chesnutt had revised his thinking about social class—but in the opposite direction. He had once gone along with Cable in championing the political rights of all blacks. But his response to "Wife" hints at a collapse into a defensive middle-class world view. For Gilder, that is, race was of little consequence when compared to one's standing in the great middle class. Race, as religion and national origin, was of little consequence to Gilder; class was all important.

Gilder was not unique in his editorial reactions to Chesnutt's work. Editors at other magazines recognized both Chesnutt's potential and his literary limitations.<sup>178</sup> One in particular deserves special mention. Francis Garrison was the son of the radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. As an editor at Houghton, Mifflin and the *Atlantic* in the 1890s he was involved in all their decisions regarding Chesnutt's work. It was Garrison who, in March 1899, explained why Houghton, Mifflin declined to publish "Rena" as a novel. His reasons grew out of the aesthetics of sentimentality and local color realism: "though the simplicity of the plot gives unity to the book, it also makes a little more plain certain fundamental facts which will weaken the sympathy of the reader with the heroine, a sympathy which is indispensable. For it is borne in on the reader that the girl, wholly aware of the ineradicable prejudice against the negro strain, and testing her lover on the point, is weak enough to think to conceal the truth; and again, that with all her natural refinement and pure intuitions, she allows herself to drop into the position of the wife of a scoundrel of color. Would it be necessary that the evil of the second man should be demonstrated to a girl of the instinctive delicacy of Rena?" Garrison could not be accused of refusing the novel on racial grounds.

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<sup>178</sup>One of the few critics to champion Chesnutt's work was William Dean Howells. In an *Atlantic* review of Chesnutt's stories, he strongly praised Chesnutt. He emphasized in particular Chesnutt's realist approach to "[c]haracter, the most precious thing in fiction..." (*Atlantic* 85 [May 1900]: 700). He compared Chesnutt favorably to Maupassant, Turgenev, James, Jewett, and Wilkins. Yet, as with his famous Dunbar review, Howells claimed a disinterest in speaking of Chesnutt's racial status even as he spent a significant portion of the review discussing precisely that.

This is evident not only by his political lineage, but by his response to Chesnutt's next novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*. Garrison was enthusiastic over Chesnutt's 1901 depiction of the Wilmington race riots because Chesnutt strove to strike a balance between moral purpose and popular entertainment.<sup>179</sup> For Garrison, the new novel was comparable, on both scores, to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>180</sup>

By then, however, Gilder and Chesnutt had given up on each other. Gilder wanted a literature of cultural evocation, while Chesnutt had evolved a literature of social critique. In its evolution, Chesnutt's work crossed the wires of regionalism and middle-class culture. Though the sparks that flew revealed the aesthetic and racial limitations of Cultural Reconstruction, they also signaled the short-circuiting of Chesnutt's literary career. His realism had grown out of the local color aesthetic central to Cultural Reconstruction. But he was never at home with dialect's implications for maintaining a middle-class status. Under the pressure of intensifying white racial intransigence, his work became accusation. Chesnutt feared there was no time for currying sympathy. Chesnutt, began his literary career reformulating the building blocks of Negro dialect literature. By 1900, he was attempting to break through the racial wall those blocks supported. He lodged an increasingly frontal attack against those who would bar the entry of a man like himself into the middle class. The white middle class, however, did not buy his three early 1900s novels indicting American racism. They could not hear Chesnutt. They had inadvertently taught themselves to hear a dialect that was not natural to him.

## Conclusion

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<sup>179</sup>Andrews, *Literary Career*, 175-76.

<sup>180</sup>Garrison to Chesnutt, 9 November 1901, *Chesnutt Letters*, 172n1. McElrath claims that Garrison had long disdained Chesnutt, but that *Marrow* led to a change of heart. The more intense politics of the novel, McElrath suggests, was the cause. It seems a safer bet to say that it was Chesnutt's change in aesthetics that impressed Garrison. For, although a staunch supporter of black civil rights, he was equally a commercial editor who had to look to the popular success of his literary wares.



The attempts of Dunbar and Chesnutt at forging a dialect that spoke for them created a highly complicated literary practice. Where the blackface minstrel performer was what Eric Lott calls “a perfect metaphor for one culture’s ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else’s,” Dunbar and Chesnutt performed a similar but more convoluted act when they wrote in Negro dialect.<sup>181</sup> They were using a white art form that employed purported black speech to attempt to produce their own black realism. Dunbar’s and Chesnutt’s experiments with Negro dialect led them in two strikingly different directions. Dunbar attempted to subvert Negro dialect by linking it to his black body through his photographic portrait. But, with fame, Dunbar’s aesthetic got stuck to the Tar-Baby of dialectic. Trapped, he was never able to extricate himself. Chesnutt largely eschewed Negro dialect after his first brushes with it (except for brief period in 1898 and 1899 when it promised to yield a book publication). He increasingly turned to a more modernist sense of self-expression. He used his characters not to evoke a distant past, but to assert a middle-class self that, by its very being, stood as social criticism.

The *Century* and similar magazines helped Dunbar and Chesnutt imagine and achieve middle-class lives. But their literary legacy was ambiguous. Both Dunbar and Chesnutt employed plantation tradition figures to gain access to the *Century* and other leading magazines. Both saw these figures as literary ladders enabling them to climb into literary careers. Both rebelled against their own use of these figures. Dunbar swung back and forth between an affection for his Negro dialect characters and a smoldering anger that these characters were not true to his life. Chesnutt used dialect characters early on to subtly critique the dialect characters of white authors. Yet, he largely abandoned dialect work before he fully explored it as a means of undermining white stereotypes. The irony is that he then employed middle-class characters to critique white imposition of the color line.

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<sup>181</sup>Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 92.

Gilder and Johnson did not appreciate much of the prose work of Dunbar and Chesnutt. Their attitude toward both authors derived to some extent from their 1870s struggle to turn Cable away from didactic pamphleteering in his narratives. Their development of the plantation theme as a means of enfolding the white South into Cultural Reconstruction had given them a realist version of postbellum Southern society. But, due to the cultural limitations of realism, it was also a woefully incomplete version. Too wedded to the optimism of progress, they continually underestimated the growing destructive power of white supremacy and the institutionalization of segregation. For Gilder and Johnson, the great cultural victory had been won when a preponderance of white Southerners rejoiced at the destruction of slavery. They thus consistently believed the reports of progress offered by Southern liberals, and refused to see segregation as anything but a temporary aberration.<sup>182</sup>

Cultural Reconstruction had been built on the idea of inclusion. But the price of inclusion was a certain aesthetic charm and tie to the soil and the culture the soil supposedly gave rise to. Gilder and Johnson only rarely discovered that charm in Dunbar's and Chesnutt's work. The two editors, limited by the terms of local color realism, could not embrace any other realism that preferred righteousness over sentiment, accusation over sympathy.

It is possible that, at some level, Gilder and Johnson shied away from the prose of Dunbar and Chesnutt for racial reasons. Blacks certainly did not enter their social sphere. No white editor asked Chesnutt to write his will, as Howells had asked T.N. Page. They may have feared black authors for commercial reasons: White Southerners might object to black authors, particularly when those authors attempted to write about white life, as both Dunbar and Chesnutt did at times. They may have thought, *prima facie*, that a black man could not write prose. He could only carry the rhythm of poetry. They may have sought to pigeon-hole Dunbar, for instance, into a racial, and not a local, colorist.

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<sup>182</sup>Two of their chief sources were Charles Forster Smith and Joel Chandler Harris.

But there seems to be no direct evidence that either Gilder or Johnson hued to a racial line in literature or any cultural work. They were certainly aware of the two European authors who wrote from the other side of the color line: Pushkin and Dumas were both widely characterized as black. The history of their magazine had been to champion black political rights. They had published Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, feted Dunbar, and lunched with Washington in a day when a simple lunch could invite intense controversy. The extant letters and evidence from the pages of the magazine suggest that the problem Gilder and Johnson had derived from Chesnutt's use of dialect. The *Century* editors had been instrumental in constructing and popularizing literary dialect and had trained themselves to recognize the particular modes of speech associated with a plethora of purportedly dialect-speaking regional cultures. In the process, however, they reconstructed their understanding of the world according to the rigidly defined social types that dialect invented. They never seem to have quite realized that they, too, had gotten their aesthetics stuck in the Tar-Baby of dialectic nor that the Tar-Baby was mostly of their own making.

The literary rise of Dunbar and Chesnutt marked the racial limit of Cultural Reconstruction. White authors continued to write in Negro dialect for decades afterward. But their work could no longer legitimately claim any thread of the realist mantle. After Dunbar and Chesnutt, black dialect by whites could only be romantic, revisionist, and reactionary.<sup>183</sup> Both Dunbar and Chesnutt experimented in taking back the Negro voice and turning it toward black racial expression. But Dunbar's physical and mental breakdown and Chesnutt's moral righteousness cut short those experiments. It would remain for a later generation of black authors to attempt to strip Negro dialect of its racist force.

The *Century* could still claim its heritage of supporting civil rights, but only meekly. "The Haunted Oak" was a high point. It was well received by many. But in the growing race

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<sup>183</sup>Johnson at least seemed to recognize this. For in 1901 he solicited a story from T.N. Page, but underscored he wanted something *not* in dialect (in Harriet Holman, *The Literary Career of Thomas Nelson Page* [PhD Dissertation, Duke University, 1947], 88-89n2).

crisis of the early 1900s, Gilder and Johnson did not seek out a new Cable to champion the downtrodden. They weakly published a brief essay by a Southerner (presumably white) calling for better wages for Negroes as the only true means of bringing about black “refinement in intellect, manners, and dress.”<sup>184</sup> The article placed blame for the distressing state of “Negro” culture in the Southern states at the feet of white employers and municipal governments. But it was hardly a stinging rebuke of the oppressive system of white supremacy that had taken hold in the South and the national imagination.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, it demonstrated that the *Century* editors could not conceive blacks outside the South. They were simply blinded to the black middle class, particularly in Northern cities, then coalescing around its own newly founded magazines of culture.

After 1901, the *Century* virtually abandoned black America. There were a handful of “open letters” about black education. The last significant exchange about African Americans came in 1906. Five items appeared as a sort of forum on the state of American blacks. Charles Francis Adams drew a dire picture of the state of African civilization.<sup>186</sup> An editorial countered his tentative conclusions with anthropologist Franz Boas’s early work on cultural relativism. The editorial reaffirmed the necessity of “special effort on the part of the American people for the uplifting of a race so lately in a state of slavery.” It applauded the work of several Southern communities and educational institutions such as Hampton and Tuskegee. Harry Stillwell Edwards (the white author of Negro dialect stories) wrote optimistically of the growth of black home ownership as a sure solution to black crime.<sup>187</sup> But two articles offered a devastating critique of black abilities. Anatomist Robert Bennett Bean argued that the Negro brain was smaller than that of whites.<sup>188</sup> This difference in brain

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<sup>184</sup>Jerome Dowd, “Paths of Hope for the Negro,” *Century* 61 (1901): 278.

<sup>185</sup>One small victory: In the article, the *Century* first spelled the word “Negro” with a capital “N.” The victory was fleeting, however, as the *Century* seems to have gone back to the lower case “n” soon thereafter. See the correspondence between Robert Underwood Johnson and Booker T. Washington in the *Washington Papers*, vols. 5, 11, 12.

<sup>186</sup>*Century* 72 (1906).

<sup>187</sup>“The Negro and the South,” *Century* 72 (1906): 212-15.

<sup>188</sup>Bean, “The Negro Brain,” *Century* 72 (1906): 778-79.

size, Bean claimed, impeded black mental development. Boas, for one was outraged. He wrote Gilder asking for the chance to refute Bean.<sup>189</sup> “[T]he mere fact,” he cautioned, “that a paper of this kind should have found a place in a journal of the reputation of *The Century* will give strong support to those who deny to the negro equal rights....”<sup>190</sup> Gilder offered Boas the chance, but rejected the final article as not suited to a popular audience.<sup>191</sup> Yet the *Century*’s legacy of racial continued to flicker. Speaking to a women’s club in 1913, Charles Chesnutt urged his audience to support those “journals which hold up the standard of human equality.” Among the five he mentioned was the *Century*.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup>Hyatt, “Franz Boas and the Struggle for Black Equality,” *Perspectives in American History*, n.s. 2 (1985): 284.

<sup>190</sup>Boas to Gilder, 18 September 1906, cited in Hyatt, “Struggle for Black Equality,” 287.

<sup>191</sup>Hyatt, “Struggle for Black Equality,” 287.

<sup>192</sup>Chesnutt, “Address to the Medina Coterie” [1913], in Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., et al., eds., *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 319.

## Chapter 9

### A Hazard of New Cultures

Just as historians have not been able to see the magazine at the heart of nineteenth-century American society, so critics have not been able to see the magazine at the heart of William Dean Howells's great American novel of 1889, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Howells's novel has long been misunderstood because the magazine, as a literary genre, has been invisible. Amy Kaplan, for instance, examined *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as a meditation on *the city*, and the novel's characters as reflections of it. She astutely points out that Howells diverged from his earlier practice of tightly focusing his narratives on a single character or family to bring together "what Raymond Williams has called a 'knowable community'—a network of mutual social recognition that unites diverse members."<sup>1</sup> For her this community is the community of New York City. But there is something missing here. None of the leading characters in this knowable community is from New York. As Kaplan recognizes, but does not comment on, all of these characters are recent arrivals to the city. This suggests that Howells's novel is about something else than the experience of New York City alone. That something else reflects the fact that the novel did not first appear between book covers. It debuted as serial in a magazine in 1889.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Originally slated for *Harper's Monthly*, the novel ran too long and Alden thus shifted it over to *Harper's Weekly*, where installments appeared from 23 March to 16 November 1889.

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* first appeared in a magazine and its overriding concern is with the magazine as the medium of national imagination created by the project of Cultural Reconstruction. The characters form a knowable community in New York because they come together to found a periodical, *Every Other Week*. New York is the site of the narrative's action, but its true function is to represent the swirling together of the nation's myriad regions. "There's only one city that belongs to the whole country," declares the editor Fulkerson in contemplating where to base the new magazine, "and that's New York."<sup>3</sup> New York, through its production of the American magazine, is the centralizing force of the new regional America. Characters enter the narrative from multiple regions and class statuses. There are Westerners, Southerners, rural and urban New Englanders, upstate New Yorkers, a German immigrant, who simultaneously represent working, the middle, and rising industrial capitalist classes. Myriad regional dialects pepper the novel. The episodic narrative demonstrates the full panoply of sentimental realism's thematics and stylistics. It largely eschews plot because the novel itself is structured like a magazine dedicated to Cultural Reconstruction.

*Hazard* reads like a précis for the American magazine. Numerous scenes and themes are taken right from the history of the magazine, which Howells, as former editor of the *Atlantic* knew so well. Howells lays bare the apparatuses of the magazine as a medium of social imagination as the editor and publisher assemble the staff essential to creating a successful magazine: illustrators, painters, fiction writers, essayists, capitalists. Howells based the narrator, the resolutely middle class Basil March, on his own editorial experiences. He then describes the magazine and the project of Cultural Reconstruction in the course of the novel. March, for instance, saunters through the city to witness the conflicting classes of fin de siècle American society. He also speaks at length on the vital importance of the short story to the magazine's success and on the form's nationalist significance: "we Americans are

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<sup>3</sup>William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889; reprint: New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

supposed to excel in writing them.”<sup>4</sup> The great editorial project of the *Every Other Week* is straight out of Cultural Reconstruction: It is to publish a white Southerner planter’s defense of slavery in a gesture of regional sympathy.<sup>5</sup> The magazine’s publisher is a proponent of female culture (albeit for commercial reasons). He distinctly recognizes the necessity of appealing to a female audience: “There ain’t anything so popular as female fiction....”<sup>6</sup> He equally recognized that popularity depended on the magazine’s ability to picture the world with “appeals to the eye” giving readers the impression of “actuality.”<sup>7</sup> That actuality was essential to Cultural Reconstruction. The magazine, exclaims one character, “makes you feel as if you *did* have a country after all.”<sup>8</sup> *A Hazard of New Fortunes* was a sociology of the American magazine, its polysemic form, its sentimental mission, its function as a medium for imagining American society.

The timing of *Hazard's* publication marked a milestone in the history of the American magazine. The novel appeared in 1889, just as the first generation of American magazines had passed their primes, in terms of both creative force and circulation. Howells's fictional magazine, *Every Other Week*, was a different from the established magazines chiefly in the fact that it was issued bi-weekly, rather than monthly. This simple change, aimed at reaching a new audience with the standard magazine format, presaged the rise of a new generation of magazines. By the mid 1890s, newly founded monthlies would make the American magazine far more popular than the earlier, more expensive monthlies had. The new magazinists of the 1890s modeled their monthlies directly on the *Century*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's Magazine*. There were changes. But these changes, rather than signaling a new departure, merely sped up the process of the American magazine's evolution. The new magazines printed photographs, rather than engravings. They pushed the telegraphic style of

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<sup>4</sup>Howells, *A Hazard*, 126.

<sup>5</sup>Howells, *A Hazard*, 257ff.

<sup>6</sup>Howells, *A Hazard*, 124.

<sup>7</sup>Howells, *A Hazard*, 178-79.

<sup>8</sup>Howells, *A Hazard*, 219.



writing further toward shorter and more concise sentences. They paid more attention to celebrity and current events. But the basic project of educating and amusing within the framework of the sentimental social moral remained firmly in tact. The changes amounted to tinkering with an old formula, not a break in the evolutionary chain of the American magazine.

This chapter will consider the legacy of the magazine as Howells memorialized it. The American magazine entered a new phase in the 1890s as a rising generation of magazinists took over the form and tried to take it to new audiences. A close examination of the mission these younger magazinists set for themselves shows that their forbears at magazines such as the *Century* and *Harper's* were not anti-modernists, as numerous twentieth-century critics have claimed. Rather, as a brief examination of Henry Mills Alden's 1902 rumination on the magazine and sentimental culture will demonstrate, they had tried to adapt the magazine form to meet the rising exigencies of a rapidly changing society. Finally, the chapter closes with an overview of the dissertation that points to the effect magazines had on producing twentieth-century conceptions of race as a black-white binary.

### **The End of the Magazine Revolution**

In 1931, the Kansas newspaperman William Allen White surveyed the arrival of a new generation of magazines in the 1890s. The "new magazines with new editors," he observed, were cut from the same cloth as their forebears, the *Century*, *Harper's*, and the revived *Scribner's*. Their "ideals differed from the loftier ideals" of the earlier magazines. "Yet," White cautioned, "the difference was a difference in degree of sweetness and light which they shed; it was not a new kind of light."<sup>9</sup> A few years before White's observation, Edward Bok, the legendary editor of the "mass market" magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*, admitted that he had contemplated buying the *Century* in 1913 after Robert Underwood Johnson's resignation.

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<sup>9</sup>William Allen White, "Fiction of the Eighties and Nineties," in John Macy, ed., *American Writers on American Literature* (New York: Liveright, 1931), 391.

He saw editing the *Century* as “a chance for his self-expression.”<sup>10</sup> A decade before that, Bliss Perry hesitated before accepting the editorship of the *Atlantic* after the departure of Walter Hines Page. Before taking the position, he discussed its possibilities, not with Gilder at the *Century* or Alden at *Harper’s*, but with Bok. These brief examples of continuity and overlap offer a different picture of the relationship between the first generation of the American magazine and the generation that arose in the 1890s than that maintained by magazine commentators since Frank Luther Mott.

In 1954, Mott abandoned the more even-handed analysis of the new magazines he had first offered in his massive history published fifteen years earlier.<sup>11</sup> He now dubbed the appearance of mass-selling magazines in the mid 1890s a “magazine revolution.”<sup>12</sup> Such terminology to describe the phenomenon is tempting. These magazines achieved far higher circulation rates than the established American magazines. New periodical competitors, including *Cosmopolitan*, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *McClure’s*, and *Munsey’s*, reached circulations in the 500,000 and above range, while the older ones were either stuck at around 200,000 or losing ground. The massive expansion of the magazine medium has led numerous commentators to believe that these second-generation American magazines offered something distinctly different from *Harper’s* and the *Century*.

In recent years, a spate of historians have identified these new magazines as consumerist revolutionaries overthrowing their bearded aristocratic forebears.<sup>13</sup> But these historians have built on Mott’s terminology without thoroughly investigating the earlier magazines. When examined as successors to the earlier magazines, the advent of the new

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<sup>10</sup>*The Americanization of Edward Bok: An Autobiography* (1920, reprint; Philadelphia: American Foundation, 1965), 271. Note that Bok told his autobiography in the third person.

<sup>11</sup>Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 4: 1885-1905 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 2.

<sup>12</sup>“The Magazine Revolution and Popular Ideas in the Nineties,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 64, pt. 1 (21 April 1954), 195-214.

<sup>13</sup>Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985); and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Authorial Professionalism and the Literary Marketplace, 1885-1900,” *American Studies* 19 (1978), 35-53. Ohmann cites only one issue of one magazine to generate his generalizations about the first generation of American magazines.

magazines appears to be less a revolution than an evolution. Virtually every facet these historians claim as new has roots deep in the commercial and literary practices of the earliest American magazines. Much as *Scribner's* had once challenged *Harper's*—flattering by imitation but overtaking by refined business practices—the new American magazines copied the template and themes of the older magazines while adopting new business practices that allowed them to reach larger audiences.

The circulation of the new magazines of the 1890s grew spectacularly because of the marketing practices they largely borrowed from the established monthlies. But, as brief summary of the four most important shows, they also borrowed the older magazines' basic cultural formula. These magazines were intent on beating the earlier American magazines at their own game.

*Ladies' Home Journal* was first a newspaper supplement offering advice to women. Its publisher Cyrus Curtis, however, dreamed of reaching a larger audience. So he fired his wife from the editorial chair in 1889 and replaced her with Edward Bok. He charged Bok to mimic directly and challenge the established monthlies.<sup>14</sup> The *Journal* hailed, as had the first successful ladies' magazines, from Philadelphia.

*Cosmopolitan*, which closely emulated the American magazine format, was founded in Rochester, New York, in 1886. Unable to attract magazine readers from their upstate perch, *Cosmopolitan's* publishers soon moved the magazine to New York City and engaged Edward D. Walker, a former *Harper's* subeditor, to bring it into line with the successful monthlies. A succession of owners failed to generate much interest in the magazine, and it was sold in 1889 to John Brisben Walker (no relation to E.D.) who used all manner of marketing schemes to improve circulation, to little avail.

*Munsey's* appeared in 1889 to challenge the established American magazines. Frank Munsey hoped he could beat them by publishing his magazine on a weekly basis. He

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<sup>14</sup>David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States, 1880-1960* (Toronto, Can.: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 63.

discovered, however, that the competition from the Sunday editions of the newspapers, which also built off of the American magazine format, was too hot and too cheap. On losing \$100,000 in two years, he determined that “a weekly was ‘a dead cock in the pit.’”<sup>15</sup> He transformed the magazine into a monthly and it was this change, Munsey later averred, that made his magazine “the leading factor in modern publishing.”<sup>16</sup>

S.S. McClure was a former member of the *Century*'s advertising department. The former *Century* adman sought to replicate the *Century*, his periodical idol and former employer, but at a lower price.<sup>17</sup> *McClure's* hit the stands in 1893. Sales were slow. Even with a relatively cheap 15 cent cover price, the first issue netted only \$600 on 8,000 copies sold. For three years thereafter, the magazine ran at a loss.<sup>18</sup>

Neither *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey's*, nor *McClure's* sold particularly well in the late '80s and early '90s. Even when they charged as little as 15 cents per copy (20 cents less than the 35 cents per copy of *Harper's*, the *Century*, and the *Atlantic*), none could break the 100,000 circulation ceiling, nor barely even 75,000. This may be due in part to the fact that the price of magazines, in real terms, had been falling for decades. Antebellum magazines long charged \$3.00 per year. Both *Harper's* and the *Century* had retained the same cover price (35 cents per issue) and subscription rate (\$4 annually) for almost twenty-five years. The second *Scribner's* entered the market in 1887 at 25 cents per copy. Thus, buyers seem to have considered the newer magazines to be but pale copies of the earlier magazines and were thus unwilling to make a widespread commitment to them. What circulation and income the new American magazines did have before 1894 was the product either of various marketing and promotional gimmicks, such as offering premiums (i.e., rewards to readers who brought

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<sup>15</sup>Cited in Algernon Tassin, *The Magazine in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916), 341.

<sup>16</sup>Munsey, in 1907, cited in Tassin, *Magazine in America*, 342.

<sup>17</sup>On McClure's brief tenure with the *Century*, see Peter Lyon, *Success Story: The Life and Times of S.S. McClure* (Deland, Flor.: Everett/Edwards, 1967), 46-50; William W. Ellsworth, *A Golden Age of Authors* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1919), 127-31.

<sup>18</sup>McClure, *The Autobiography of S.S. McClure* [actually written by Willa Cather] (reprint; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 214, 223.

in subscriptions<sup>19</sup>); pouring money into advertising themselves (the *Journal* spent over \$300,000 in 1888<sup>20</sup>); or rampant borrowing from anyone with a few hundred dollars to spare.<sup>21</sup>

The vital price discovery came in the first dark days of the great financial panic of 1893.<sup>22</sup> Munsey, desperate to save his magazine in September of that year, slashed his price from the “quality” monthly rate of 25 cents to 10 cents per copy, or \$1.00 for a yearly subscription. His first issue at this price sold 20,000 copies. But the new price rendered miraculous changes. Circulation grew 1000% in little over four months. By the time the depression was over in 1897, *Munsey’s* sold 700,000 copies per month.<sup>23</sup> *McClure’s* and *Cosmopolitan* found similar results by dropping their price to the magical 10 cents in July 1894.<sup>24</sup> There had been no noticeable change in editorial policy.

The greatly increased circulations that resulted from the price revolution, combined with falling costs for a range of production materials and labor, created a new economy of scale in the magazine industry. Building on the innovations and insights of Roswell Smith, Curtis, Walker, McClure, and Munsey realized that larger circulations allowed them to sell their magazines below what it cost to produce them. Their profits came from advertising

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<sup>19</sup>The *Ladies’ Home Journal* even offered the prize of an organ for 350 new subscribers (Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 62, 65).

<sup>20</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 62.

<sup>21</sup>See McClure’s desperation borrowing, in *Autobiography*, 212-18; Lyon, *Success Story*.

<sup>22</sup>Tassin notes that Walker, McClure, and Munsey all claimed credit for the idea of a cheap magazine (*Magazine in America*, 341). But it is indisputable that all had experimented with lower cover prices and that Munsey was the first to sell at 10 cents in September of 1903. *McClure’s* and *Cosmopolitan* reduced their prices to 10 cents in July of 1904 (Mott, *American Magazine*, vol. 4, 5).

<sup>23</sup>*Munsey’s* circulation figures are from Mott, *American Magazine*, vol. 4, 561. Ohmann (*Selling Culture*) discusses these circulation increases at page 25.

<sup>24</sup>This explosion of sales makes evident a tendency that no historian of the magazine has explored. In the nineteenth century, economic instability and crisis was a boon to the development of the magazine. The economic crisis of the late 1830s and ’40s led to the intense experimentation with the literary magazine format of the mammoths and story papers. This resulted in 1850 with the advent of *Harper’s New Monthly*. Sales of Scribner’s hovered around 40,000 for its first several years. But Roswell Smith used the depression of 1873 to 1877 not only to double *Scribner’s* circulation but to launch a new and highly successful children’s magazine, *St. Nicholas*. The crisis of the 1890s created a price revolution among the magazines that in turn led to unprecedented circulations approaching the 1 million mark for individual titles. The similarities of these developments bears more in-depth examination.

revenue in the new national market<sup>25</sup>—a market that the established monthlies had largely created. By the end of the decade, 10 cents was a standard price for magazines copying the basic formula devised by *Harper's* and *Scribner's/Century*.

These new American magazines proliferated. There had been only four general monthlies with a circulation of over 100,000 in 1885, with a combined readership of about 600,000. These were all priced at 25 or 35 cents. The number of cultural monthlies with 100,000+ circulations grew to over twenty by 1905. All but four sold in the 10- to 15-cent range. The combined circulation of these magazines was now well over 5 million, or about 7% of the nation's entire population.<sup>26</sup> This would suggest that these magazines had upwards of 25 million readers, a number approaching one third of the nation's citizens.

The new magazines were by and large close imitators of the model formulated by *Harper's* and *Scribner's/Century*.<sup>27</sup> As historian Harold S. Wilson rightly observed, “*McClure's* invented little;... At *McClure's* it was difficult to maintain that there was a decisive split between the old mugwump generation and the new progressives.”<sup>28</sup> McClure sustained an imaginary rivalry with the *Century* long before actually wrangling a job there.<sup>29</sup> In an early editorial venture, he had followed “exactly” the *Century's* design, typeface, and general style.<sup>30</sup> While working at the *Century*, he had been responsible for writing the magazine's ad copy. He thus had to make himself intimately familiar with the magazine's files, past and present.<sup>31</sup> His *Century* tenure was short-lived but his deep desire to emulate the

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<sup>25</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 67

<sup>26</sup>Mott, *American Magazine*, vol. 4, 8.

<sup>27</sup>Stinson, “McClure's Road to *McClure's*: How Revolutionary Were 1890s Magazines?” *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Summer 1970): 256-62. Ohmann recognized the similarity, as well: “the elite monthlies [i.e., *Century*, *Harper's*, etc.] had earlier concocted the blend of genres that editors of the 1890s adapted for a wider audience...” (25). See also Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1839-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 77, 81.

<sup>28</sup>Harold Wilson, *McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 148. Wilson, in his reference to Mugwumps and progressives is alluding to Richard Hofstadter's argument in *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 167.

<sup>29</sup>Lyon, *Success Story*, 36; Stinson, “McClure's Road,” 258.

<sup>30</sup>See, regarding his quixotic attempt to turn a bicycling magazine into a new *Century*, McClure, *Autobiography*, 149-50.

<sup>31</sup>McClure, *Autobiography*, 165.

magazine continued into the 1890s. McClure shared plans to found his own magazine with Jeannette Gilder (Richard Watson Gilder's sister, and magazine publisher and editor in her own right). She recalled later that his design "was to have a magazine of his own that would be edited on as broad lines as those followed by the *Century*, but published at a much lower price."<sup>32</sup> McClure's own assessment of his periodical achievement after two years of publishing was that "I may claim the credit of devising a magazine which, while retaining all the best features of those already in the field, sells at half their price"—a clear, though arithmetically challenged, reference to the 35-cent monthlies.<sup>33</sup> McClure's editorial formula also closely followed that of the *Century*. Strongly influenced by the older magazine's emphasis on the Civil War memory and Lincoln worship, McClure dedicated almost 10% of the first decade's pages to the Civil War. He published thirty articles on Lincoln, including Ida Tarbell's serialized biography of the martyred president (shades of Nicolay and Hay's Lincoln biography in the *Century*).<sup>34</sup> Another sign of his emulation: He demanded literature that accorded to a four-point formula which was virtually identical to that forged by the established American magazines. For McClure, fiction had to appeal to "the great masses," avoid sensationalism while yet being "full of excitement and incident," exhibit a tone of high moral principles, and eschew themes divisive along either class or regional lines.<sup>35</sup>

The authors that the 10-cent monthlies sought and displayed in their advertising were those whose literary names had been made famous by the established American magazines: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Octave Thanet (Alice French), James Russell Lowell, Frank Stockton, Richard Malcolm Johnston, Richard Henry Stoddard, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, Thomas Hardy, W.D. Howells, Robert Louis Stevenson, Joel Chandler Harris,

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<sup>32</sup>Jeannette Gilder, "When McClure's Began," *McClure's* 41 (August 1913): 71, cited in Stinson, "McClure's Road," 261.

<sup>33</sup>Cited in Stinson, "McClure's Road," 262.

<sup>34</sup>Wilson, *McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers*, 109-11.

<sup>35</sup>From McClure's Syndicate Circular, 1886, cited in Stinson, "McClure's Road," 259.

Edward Everett Hale, Henry James, Brander Matthews, H.H. Boyesen, Kate Douglas Wiggin, Murat Halstead, Theodore Roosevelt, and Thomas Nelson Page.<sup>36</sup> John Brisben Walker made the link to the earlier American magazines palpable in 1890. He lured Howells, former editor of the *Atlantic*, into co-editing the *Cosmopolitan*.<sup>37</sup> Walker declared that the mission of his magazine was to serve as “an educational movement of the most far-reaching importance, designed to bring literature and art of the highest character within the reach of every household.”<sup>38</sup> There could hardly be a more concise statement of the sentimental project of creating a national culture.

The 10-cent monthlies carried on the same editorial policies as the older magazines in regard to potentially salacious and tasteless material. As businessmen concerned to reach and maintain a large national audience, they understood the necessity of refraining from offending significant portions of their readers. The *Cosmopolitan*, according to Walker’s right-hand man Charles Hanson Towne, was morally “austere” for it was intended to be “a family magazine which was placed on a [home] library table.”<sup>39</sup> When the *Cosmopolitan* editor published the sensational “Rubaiyat” of Omar Khayyam, he expurgated numerous questionable lines and riddled the text with asterisks.<sup>40</sup> Walker also cut passages of Tolstoi’s serialized novel *Resurrection*, then halted it altogether due to the Russian author’s descriptions of various sensualities.<sup>41</sup> Bok refused to allow discussion of the lives of Zola and

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<sup>36</sup>Mott, *American Magazine*, vol. 4, 482; Lyon, *Success Story*, 128; John Tebbel, *The American Magazine: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn, 1969), 166, 171, 177; Schneirov, *Dream*, 271; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 28. Ohmann, after providing some of the names on this list admits that “What actually happened in 1893, then, was the broadening of a ‘revolution’ already underway.” This admission, however, does not goad Ohmann into investigating the ramifications of this “revolution” being sparked by the so-called aristocratic monthlies.

<sup>37</sup>Howells and Walker clashed often. Howells resigned after only four months and one completed issue of the magazine.

<sup>38</sup>Walker, *Cosmopolitan* (August 1897), cited in Schneirov, *Dream*, 108-109.

<sup>39</sup>Charles Hanson Towne, *Adventures in Editing* (New York: Appleton, 1926), 38-39.

<sup>40</sup>Towne, *Adventures in Editing*, 38-39; John Tebbel & Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741–1990*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 70; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 252-53. Tebbel and Zuckerman add that due to the high number of asterisks “readers could hardly wait to buy it in book form” (*The Magazine in America, 1741–1990* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 70).

<sup>41</sup>Towne, *Adventures in Editing*, 38-39; Mott, *American Magazine*, vol. 4, 490; Tebbel, *American Magazine*, 171; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 252-53. Ohmann’s negative criticism of the taboo on sex in these magazines would seem to imply that these magazines should have engaged in a popular pornography. What Ohmann seems



Tolstoy “for fear that the statistics... on such writers... would be so large that it is best not to acquaint the public with it.”<sup>42</sup> *Munsey’s* criticized a statue of a nude bacchante as inappropriate for the fountain centerpiece of an educational institution and denounced the novels of the Italian Nietzschean libertine Gabriele D’Annunzio as “revolting” and “unpardonable.”<sup>43</sup> *Munsey’s* even found Kipling guilty of “bad taste.”<sup>44</sup>

Historians have recognized the similarities in model and contributors between the American magazines and their 10-cent cultural descendants.<sup>45</sup> Yet, they have persisted in seeing a sharp distinction between the two in attempting to explain why the cheaper magazines achieved a much larger circulation than the established American magazines after the mid 1890s. The distinction rests on the supposition that the new magazines were more “journalistic” and “timely” in their coverage of contemporary life. These assertions have always been based on highly impressionistic responses and the requirements of whiggish historiography rather than hard numbers.<sup>46</sup> One recent historian has assembled these hard numbers and confirms the close similarity between the two generations of magazines.<sup>47</sup> The amount of fiction remained consistent. In 1900, for instance, *Munsey’s* and *McClure’s* contained 33% and 41% fiction, respectively, thus closely mirroring the average 33% rate of *Century*, *Harper’s*, and the new *Scribner’s*.<sup>48</sup> Article lengths were similar in both generations, where one would expect a “journalistic” article to be shorter.<sup>49</sup> Surprisingly, the

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to miss, is that these magazines, as well as the first cultural magazines, were not anti-sex per se. Rather, they understood that certain issues should be dealt with in certain contexts.

<sup>42</sup>Salme Harju Steinberg, *Reformer in the Marketplace: Edward W. Bok and The Ladies’ Home Journal* (Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 54.

<sup>43</sup>Cited in Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 253.

<sup>44</sup>Cited in Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 253.

<sup>45</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, 2; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 25-26; and Schneirov, *Dream*, 76-77.

<sup>46</sup>Based on A.R. Kimball, “The Invasion of Journalism,” *Atlantic* 86 (July 1900), 119-24; see also Kimball’s figures and further analysis in *Journal of Social Science* 37 (1899): 26-43.

<sup>47</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, ch. 3. Arthur John undertook a less exhaustive comparison, limited only the *Century* and *McClure’s*, and came up with the same conclusion: “there was no marked difference in the proportion of space each devoted to literature, history, travel and adventure, fiction, and the range of articles that might be classified under public affairs or social issues” (*The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner’s Monthly and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981], 236).

<sup>48</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 61, 69, 71.

<sup>49</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 61.

new American magazines gave far greater coverage to the three “R’s” than one would expect to find in the established “sepulchers of culture”: royalty, the rich, and religion. *Munsey’s* in particular made a specialty of celebrity by peeking into the lives of the royal and the wealthy. As for religion, where the established cultural monthlies gave no space to religion in 1900, *McClure’s* made it a central feature: Ten percent of its volume 15 was given over to a serial retelling of the New Testament.<sup>50</sup> As to culture, *Munsey’s* rivaled *Harper’s* and the *Century* in 1900 by allotting 26% of its pages to the arts.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, while the *Century* had given up on book criticism, *Munsey’s* devoted 7% of its pages to literary commentary.<sup>52</sup> If one were determined to find a difference, it could perhaps be found in the *style* of coverage.

Richard Ohmann, in the introduction to *Selling Culture*, attempted to depict the difference between the earlier and newer magazines by imagining a typical reader of *Munsey’s* receiving her magazine in the mail and turning quickly to the theater section. Ohmann suggested that the stage was too popular a topic for the established American magazines.<sup>53</sup> Yet, it was these earlier magazines, particularly the *Century*, that had made the theater a special focus of American life. Almost from its founding as *Scribner’s*, the magazine had commented on all aspects of the theater, with Brander Matthews (often writing as Arthur Penn) virtually inventing theater criticism in its pages.<sup>54</sup> The “gossipy sophistication of the theater notes” that Ohmann mentions in the 1895 issue of *Munsey’s* were actually the direct outgrowth of the *Century’s* attention to the theater. To be sure, the *Century’s* coverage could not be described as “gossipy.” Yet, neither was it a scholarly or even critical. There were many articles in the *Century* that focused on actors as “personalities,” particularly on such popular native and foreign actors as Edwin Booth,

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<sup>50</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 71.

<sup>51</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 69.

<sup>52</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazine*, 70.

<sup>53</sup>Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 1.

<sup>54</sup>John, *Best Years*, 87-88, 193-94.

Eleanora Duse, John Gilbert, and Helen Modjeska.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the *Century* serialized Joseph Jefferson's autobiography over almost two years, from 1889 to 1890 (and then published it in book form, as well). Thus, the turn to the coverage of "celebrity" had begun in the established monthlies and was merely carried to a wider plain in the new ones.

Even where historians have seen the greatest difference between the old and the new—the journalistic focus on contemporary events—the differences derive from the new magazines trying to do what the old magazines did, only in a flashier vein. The *Journalist* lauded Gilder's *Century* in 1890: "It deals with matters of contemporaneous human interest; it leads thought, but never gets out of sight. The journalistic side of the *Century* has kept it in touch with the people."<sup>56</sup> In 1892, virtually on the eve of the price revolution yet while the newer magazines showed little sign of displacing the established American magazines, Emma Blair wrote in the *Andover Review* that "The most notable characteristic of to-day's periodical literature is its intense vitality. Here we find the tokens of the world's life and growth, not only in the products of its brain but in the pulsations of its heart."<sup>57</sup> In the 1890s, well before the new magazines represented a commercial threat, the established cultural monthlies became increasingly journalistic. In the mid 1890s, the proprietors of the *Atlantic* tried to stimulate its long stagnant circulation by appointing to the editorial chair the liberal progressive Southern newspaperman and recent New York magazine wizard, Walter Hines Page.<sup>58</sup> Page served first as an assistant editor and then as editor-in-chief in 1898. Page considered his mission at the *Atlantic* to be a thoroughly sentimental one. On the one hand, he fought to awaken the Emersonian cultivated classes to a greater involvement in

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<sup>55</sup>On the development of popular interest in celebrity personalities, see Charles L. Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>56</sup>*Journalist* 12 (13 December 1890): 3, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, 9.

<sup>57</sup>Blair, "An Excursion Among the Periodicals," *Andover Review* 18 (August 1892): 153.

<sup>58</sup>Horace Scudder, *Diary*, 27 April 1896, cited in Ellery Sedgwick, *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 240. Page had been instrumental in developing the issues oriented monthly, the *Forum*, from 1887 to 1895, serving as its editor in the second half of his tenure.

progressive social action and to put literary culture at the service of social progress.<sup>59</sup> On the other, he hoped to widen the audience for the magazine by appealing to readers who were intellectually curious but not necessarily drawn to history, literature, or ideas as worlds unto themselves. Articles in Page's *Atlantic* had to have clear contemporary relevance. Authors' observations had to be direct and not filtered through books.<sup>60</sup> Reform of current problems was the subject of several series in Page's *Atlantic*: such as Jane Addams's critique of philanthropy, David Starr Jordan's exposé of the corporate exploitation of Alaska, and Jacob Riis's articles on tenement house blight specifically castigating landlords who engaged in "profit without conscience."<sup>61</sup> (As editor of his own magazine, *World's Work*, Page admonished writers in 1902 to "write with more directness, with more clearness, with greater nervous force"—hardly a new sentiment, it was straight out of the telegraphic style book that had long informed the American magazine.<sup>62</sup>) In short, Page, much as Gilder three decades earlier, represented a sentimental merging of culture and journalism. Page's successor, Bliss Perry, continued this emphasis of soliciting direct and relevant writing on timely issues into the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup>

The editors of the established American magazines could find many points of commonality with the new generation. The older magazines had been gradually increasing the number of journalistic articles they published since the 1880s. By 1900, the number of such articles had increased by 10% in *Harper's*, *Century*, and *Scribner's*, the three top-selling established magazines (this was a high percentage given the number of other sorts of articles

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<sup>59</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 250.

<sup>60</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 254.

<sup>61</sup>Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 258-59.

<sup>62</sup>Page, *World's Work* 4 (October 1902): 2562.

<sup>63</sup>Here Christopher Wilson misreads the evidence. He quoted Perry's disdain for "Wild West feat" of journalistic solicitation to imply that Perry was a genteel editor who simply waited for articles to come to him. Perry's target was not solicitation per se, but rather the outrageous stunts that some newspaper editors pulled. Both Perry and Page were instrumental in putting racial and ethnic issues on the nation's journalistic agenda in actively soliciting journalistic series and literary works by an increasingly diverse range of authors, including Cahan, Riis, Antin, Chesnutt, Booker T. Washington, and Du Bois. They even solicited works that criticized the majority white culture. (Sedgwick, *Atlantic*, 18)

the magazines carried).<sup>64</sup> Gilder, in particular, had a sense that the new magazines were, to use the image Alden once used regard the appearance of *Scribner's*, "mettlesome steeds...running the same road." Gilder saw that the new periodical apples had not fallen far from the magazine tree. In 1902, for example, congratulated McClure for creating a magazine that was "doing good on a great scale."<sup>65</sup>

But there were two aspects of the new magazines the older editors did not care for. The first, which they may have recognized from their own early experiences, was the competitive drive of the new generation of editors. In 1904, feeling the pressure from the Century Company's president to develop more "advertisable features," Gilder discovered that *McClure's* was preparing an article similar to one the *Century* already had. Gilder instructed an assistant editor that "we must use ours at the first possible moment."<sup>66</sup> On discovering that Ray Stannard Baker, a *McClure's* editor, planned to write a series on European palaces just as the *Century* planned to do, Gilder told his assistant, "So its a race—It would be a pity to be beaten."<sup>67</sup> The fact that Gilder saw himself in a race with McClure suggests how similar he saw their magazines to be.

Editors such as Gilder and Johnson recognized that there were differences between the generations. The older monthlies continued to reproduce illustrations with engravings, believing that the newer halftone photographic reproductions were inartistic and lifeless. The

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<sup>64</sup>See Kimball, "The Invasion of Journalism," 124; idem, *Journal of Social Science* 37 (1899): 26-43. While *Harper's* contributed least to this amount, it would be a mistake to simply assume that this was due to some effete refusal to confront timely issues. *Harper's* editor Alden did remark in 1902, the year of the eruption of Mount Pelee in the Caribbean and of the advent of a new English king, that "*Harper's* is the only magazine which during recent months has contained nothing about volcanoes or about Edward VII" (*Harper's* 105 [September 1902]: 646-47, cited in Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, 9). But in justifying this lack, Alden reverted to the long-standing critique of journalism as too narrowly focused on the sensational event and not the big picture. Moreover, there was a very important reason why *Harper's Monthly* did not *have* to focus on the "timely" event, and an astonishing array of historians have not grasped this: The monthly's sibling periodical *Harper's Weekly* was geared precisely toward commentary on the timely event. Thus, timely journalism of the newspaper sort in the *Monthly* would have been merely redundant with the same company's *Weekly*. Even Lewis Lapham, in his introduction to a collection of *Harper's Monthly* pieces in celebration of the magazine's 150th anniversary, failed to grasp this.

<sup>65</sup>Cited in John, *Best Years*, 235.

<sup>66</sup>Gilder to *Century* office, 28 June 1904, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>67</sup>Gilder to *Century* office, 30 June 1904, Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

new magazines used engravings also, but increasingly used the quicker and cheaper photographic processes.<sup>68</sup> The new magazines introduced an innovation in cover design. The established monthlies had long sported the same cover design month after month, year after year. But the second generation monthlies positioned themselves more firmly in the market, relying on individual retail sales at newsstand more than the first generation, which emphasized subscription sales. This greater emphasis on newsstands led the new magazines to emphasize their freshness and display a new cover image every month.<sup>69</sup> Yet, even here the earlier magazines had set something of a precedent, pioneering in the production of art posters distributed to newsstands to advertise new issues by 1890.<sup>70</sup>

The new generation of American magazines diverged from the earlier ones in two important ways. The first was not a change of major proportions, but significant in terms of consumer society. While *Scribner's* had pioneered in the use of heavy advertising, the new magazines interspersed advertising throughout the body of each issue. In this way, they integrated to a greater extent their cultural and commercial content.

The second change became a point of significant difference. Muckraking, which became a central feature of the new magazines only in 1902, represented for the older magazines a degradation of the magazine's sentimental project. Muckraking for them was akin to newspaper sensationalism. They criticized muckraking as scurrilous, personal attacks on specific individuals and specific institutions—in other words as prejudgment.<sup>71</sup> Muckrakers, according to the established critics (and others as well, both Progressive and conservative), pronounced sentence on their culprits without any care to find balance. More to the point, for the established American magazines, muckrakers painted a picture solely of decline and degradation. The older magazines were not concerned, in criticizing muckraking,

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<sup>68</sup>Reed, *Popular Magazines*.

<sup>69</sup>Tebbel, *American Magazines*, 198.

<sup>70</sup>Mott, *American Magazines*, vol. 4, 19; Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), 497.

<sup>71</sup>Tassin, *Magazine in America*, 350.

with protecting corporate or other established interests. They conceived of daily journalism and monthly periodicals as having fundamentally different, though ultimately complimentary, tasks. The newspaper was to focus on the negative aspects of modern social life. As Gilder put it in 1899, “the greatest service” of the newspaper press was “the searchlight it throws on the dark places.”<sup>72</sup> The magazine had a different task: sentimental reform.

Editors such as Gilder and Johnson placed an emphasis on tone that made their difference with the muckrakers more apparent than real. For the muckrakers chose themes that the *Century* itself had championed, from the curbing of corporate rapacity to the reform of the cities. Although their tone was negative, as the old-line editors saw it, the new editors put the culture of sentimentality at the heart of their new magazines. It was explicit in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, but Walker and McClure pushed it as a social program. Walker was heavily influenced, not only by the early American magazines, but also by Edward Bellamy's utopian social vision.<sup>73</sup> And outside of the magazines themselves there was probably no greater cultural expression of the sentimental than Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward*. His time traveler goes to sleep in a world of class struggle, alien races, and warring states only to wake up in a peaceful nation which organized social life "as a family, a vital union, a common life" whose greatest goal was the inculcation of culture.<sup>74</sup> Bellamy's book sold millions of copies and gave rise to clubs whose aim was to put Bellamy's sentimental social vision into practice. Walker saw his magazine in just these terms, as a force in the nation's cultural education, as a guidebook for national life. He even advocated for a *Cosmopolitan* University. The university, as Walker envisioned it, was to be national in scope and dedicated to training students in life, not in dead languages. The university was to be open to

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<sup>72</sup>Gilder, “The Newspaper, the Magazine, and the Public,” *Outlook* (4 February 1899): 320.

<sup>73</sup>Schneirov, *Dream*, 108.

<sup>74</sup>Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888, reprint; New York: Signet, 1960), 171.

anyone, though particularly to those millions who could not afford to obtain higher education otherwise.<sup>75</sup>

McClure saw his magazine as the first step in a financial empire that would include a book publishing firm, an insurance company, and a bank. The combined profits of these enterprises were to fund a wide array of charitable projects, settlement houses for the poor along the lines of Jane Addams's Hull House, and other housing projects.<sup>76</sup> While Munsey was less inclined to progressive social reform, he saw his magazine as a vehicle for demonstrating that the cultural fruits of success were available to all, not merely those who fit narrow ruts of breeding and background.<sup>77</sup> The new American magazines, with their muckraking and progressivism, were the apogee of the social moral, of sentimentality realized in the idioms of the journalist and the expert.

### **The Feminization of Culture**

Progressivism was, to a great extent, an outcome of the antebellum culturists' fights over the gendered nature of culture. The antebellum editors had sought a cultural solution to the problem of divisive partisan politics. Holland's influence had made it possible to approach political issues from the vantage point of sentimental principle, and the mugwump element among these editors allowed them to stand outside both the partisan fray and the theological barbecue pit. The promotion of art and literature replaced religion as the domain for moral representation and ethical exhortation.<sup>78</sup> It also fostered new modes of political and

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<sup>75</sup>To make it feasible as a national organization, it was to be a correspondence university. The eventual demise of the idea, after over 20,000 enrollees, due to antagonism of the academic community (Tassin, *Magazine in America*, 360-62; Schneirov, *Dream*, 109).

<sup>76</sup>Tebbel, *American Magazines*, 178.

<sup>77</sup>Schneirov, *Dream*, 119-20.

<sup>78</sup>Thus, historians who say these magazines had a Christian ethos (see, e.g., Orvell, *The Real Thing* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989], 103) misplace the historical emphasis. They imply that these magazines *retained* a Christian perception of the world, when in fact they were busy shedding the religious ethos and substituting for it a godless, aestheticized ethos. What historians have underplayed is that the aestheticized morality threw out the Christian metaphysics that had served as the legitimating force of Christian morals. Without this dualistic metaphysics and its prerequisite of a supernatural being, the social moral of the magazines was as different from Christianity as postmodernism is from Marxism.



sociological discussion and commentary that were outside the constricted political arena. The project of Cultural Reconstruction was the culminating secularization of American evangelicalism, blending culture with commerce to create a powerful social force. The postbellum editors led in creating a new mode for the criticism of life that depended on what they perceived to be the democracy of the marketplace. The Progressives transformed these sentimental communal values into a political program. Key projects such as limiting women's work hours, temperance, and eliminating child labor were calculated precisely to create the conditions for nurturing families.

Henry Mills Alden, the long-serving editor of *Harper's*, understood the motivations of the Progressives. They were but part of what he called “the new psychical era in life, faith, art, and literature.” This new era was characterized “by the positive love of truth, for its own sake and for the elements of value and interest it brings to us.”<sup>79</sup> The key function of magazine literature in this new era, Alden argued, was not to be a repository of hoary truths and supernatural metaphysics, but to generate “the imaginative interpretation of life and Nature.”<sup>80</sup> To work properly, this function required a defense of “legitimate freedom and flexibility.”<sup>81</sup> The editors of the earlier American magazines certainly lost some of that flexibility after the mid 1890s. But they had long appreciated—albeit, of course, within certain cultural and audience constraints—freedom and flexibility, novelty, the requirement that new truths must be expressed in new terms and new forms. They were utterly modernist in recognizing that truth was the product of community standards, and not of ossified tradition or of omniscient authority. They saw themselves as participants in social progress toward a more fulfilling life for all Americans.

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<sup>79</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing and the New Literature* (New York: Harper, 1908), 202. This book was a collection of essays Alden had written for *Harper's*.

<sup>80</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 54.

<sup>81</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 56.

The nation's social progress was the product of what Alden called the “feminization of culture.”<sup>82</sup> “*Dux femina facti*,” he exclaimed in his *Harper's* column around 1900: A woman led the exploit.<sup>83</sup> Alden was trying to describe the new “modes of thought and feeling” that characterized audiences in the western U.S. These new modes, emerging from the final stages of the “strenuous enterprise” of frontier life, were for Alden a rich balance of male and female sentimentality. They were “vital, tense, and intuitively direct—just what we would expect of a culture which has come to follow the lead of feminine inspiration.”<sup>84</sup> But where contemporaries and historians have often seen this feminine audience as a gaggle of righteous prigs, Alden’s female readers protested against the older forms of lachrymose literature. According to Alden, they were distinctly impatient with “traditional and conventional forms” of literature.<sup>85</sup> They craved perspective on “present and living thought.”<sup>86</sup> In this, these western audiences were not unique, however. For as Alden observed, “the feminization of culture is not exclusively a peculiarity of the West, or even of America; it is a characteristic of our period, of the stage which we have reached in our civilization.”<sup>87</sup> American culture, that is, had become thoroughly imbued with the culture of sentimentality: It was intuitive, social, and deeply concerned with imagining life as people actually lived it in order to ameliorate its brutalities, whether personal or societal.

The feminization of culture, contrary to the way twentieth century literary and cultural historians have tended to conceive it, cleared the way for realism to become the dominant mode of American literature. The American magazines, Alden mused, had led in sloughing off the “false and shallow and even meretricious masquerade of human passions and sentiments which vitiated the fiction of a former age....”<sup>88</sup> Now, American literature was free

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<sup>82</sup>It is interesting to note, also, that Ann Douglass, in her attack on aestheticized sentimental culture, makes no mention of Alden’s essay (*The Feminization of American Culture* [New York: Knopf, 1977]).

<sup>83</sup>*Magazine Writing*, 62.

<sup>84</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 61.

<sup>85</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 62.

<sup>86</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 62.

<sup>87</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 63.

<sup>88</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 67.

to confront the human condition in the same manner that science explored the natural world. This confrontation, asserted Alden, was “a direct and intimate attitude.... It indicates a distinct advance in our culture, which in literature brings us ever more and more face to face with the truths of life, just as in science it insists upon the true representation of physical phenomena. The supreme interest of the greatest fiction of our time is in its psychical interpretations and disclosures.”<sup>89</sup> Whether to James or Zola, Alden declared, “[w]e willingly follow where the path inevitably leads—to see life as it is.”<sup>90</sup>

There were limits of course to the sort of disclosures editors such as Alden were willing to disseminate.<sup>91</sup> They had little concern regarding “embarrassing moral constraint,” Alden claimed: “That is scarcely felt.” Rather, what the cultural editors guarded against was “the weak, unworthy stuff.” By this, Alden meant the “revel in brutalities” of authors “who enjoy an infernal habitation not for its purgatorial fires but for its sulfurous airs, and who complain because they may not make their descents before a polite audience.”<sup>92</sup> Here, Alden was expressing what had become the sentimental norm: Exposure to vice without the suggestion of positive cultural direction inevitably led to a debilitating addiction to sensational shock and social degradation. If Alden was directing these comments to the naturalists, it was not because he thought them misguided in focusing on down-and-out characters. Naturalism’s crippling defect was that it was so deterministic, so redolent of original sin, it could serve as neither social critique nor social example. Without these, sentimental editors like Alden believed, there could be no social progress. And we as modern readers must beware of reacting too quickly to the word “polite” in Alden’s comment. By polite, Alden did not mean an effete, squeamish, and prudish audience, fearful

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<sup>89</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 67.

<sup>90</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 68.

<sup>91</sup>Alden hedged his commercial bets in referring to Zola by praising him thus: “Even Zola is pathologically true, and has his proper place in the respect of readers who seek that kind of truth” (*Magazine Writing*, 67). Moreover, while proclaiming the necessity of following the path of truth, Alden admitted that not all media should journey the path’s entire length. The coarser truths should be delivered in books.

<sup>92</sup>Alden, *Magazine Writing*, 68.

of catching a glimpse of an immoral ankle. Rather, he was referring to the different tasks of the newspaper and the magazine. For the magazine's ultimate task, according to Alden, was to point the way out of the morass of national despair and corrosion.

The new magazines such as *McClure's* and *Cosmopolitan* fit right into Alden's conception of the magazine as expression of the new "psychical era." They reworked the basic themes and concerns of the established American magazines in a somewhat flashier, more personal style. But they did this nonetheless according to the basic tenets of sentimentality. As they turned the social figures born in the newspapers into personalities, into evanescent representatives of American life, they completed the naturalization of the cultural frame of sentimentality and its aestheticized morality. Muckraking, though different in tone from the earlier magazines, was but a new expression of the same social concerns as those that had concerned Gilder and Johnson. The social project of the new magazines was formed out of pieces from the cultural repertoire of nineteenth-century sentimentality. Into the twentieth century, pioneers of the popular new electronic medium of film such as D.W. Griffith composed their narratives using the themes of this cultural repertoire.

The editors of the first generation of American magazines were pivotal figures in the transformation of American life from its antebellum era of political and theological fractiousness to the national extension of the American social imagination. They did not approach this transformation as "old-stock" patricians jealous of change and protective of tradition. Their own lives were too full of social change. They were not the upper-class defenders of neo-aristocracy that historians have made them out to be. None was a cultural Brahmin. Only a few were Eastern or college educated. None was born to the upper class. None was an embattled defender of class prerogative and paternal tradition, certainly at least not until the mid 1890s. They were Americans transforming cultural tools forged in an earlier era to grapple with the intense and massive social change of their day.

The most important cultural tool they devised, however, was dangerously double edged. Because they came from different corners of the nation, they sought to represent those

corners in their magazines. Their faith in European nationalist theorists, Taine in particular, led them to formulate a democratically representative culture. But what they did not realize, was that the very means of seeing the myriad American cultures limited their field of vision. They saw the nation primarily through the stories they published. And even when they traveled out into the common life of the nation, they had conditioned themselves to see what they already knew to be culturally true. The great truth of American life, they came to believe, was its cultural diversity.

The project of Cultural Reconstruction enshrined cultural difference as a basic American belief. In the early popularity of literary dialect, magazine readers learned a profusion of dialects. It seemed that the nation was bursting with different regional and urban cultures speaking dialect. But after the mid 1890s, the wider repertoire of regional and ethnic dialects in the magazines declined until there were two principle two modes of speech: standard English and “Negro.” Negro dialect was essential to the maintenance of the standard. From this, whites falsely intuited that a separate black life, signifying difference within the nation, was essential to the maintenance of national unity. Negro dialect was the pediment on which the fragile national structure of white union was built. Real differences of region, race, ethnicity, gender, and class could be effaced so long as difference was continually structured through the false speech of Negro dialect.

### **An Overview**

This dissertation has traced the development of the magazine to show that it was founded and developed with the express purpose of “seeing” national culture. Newspapers were the first step in the process. They inaugurated popular, periodical reading, suggested methods for making social characters imaginable, and linked the culture of sentimentality to popular culture.

The male magazinists of the 1840s adapted the model of the penny press to a different mission. Hoping to counter the corrosive effects of male politics, they attempted to meld the

ladies' magazine with male aspects of the newspaper medium to reconstruct American public culture along sentimental lines. But the political, regional, and professional infighting combined with a lack of capital to cripple early attempts at the American magazine. *Harper's* originated the standard template and suggested the possibilities for a national magazine. *Scribner's* editor Josiah Gilbert Holland gave the magazine a voice that was righteous without being partisan or politically divisive. But it was only with the advent of the *Century* that the American magazine took its final form.

Yet, the national magazine produced a cataclysmic, unintended consequence. Editors such as Richard Watson Gilder and Robert Underwood Johnson championed the production of regionalist literatures as a method for reconstructing American culture after the failure of Political Reconstruction. Their project of Cultural Reconstruction devised a new realist aesthetic to appeal to numerous audiences, in the hope that this would give them representation in the democratic body of American culture. The linchpin of their project, however, was the Tar-Baby of dialect.

Gilder and Johnson intended literary dialect as a means of capturing the plethora of American realities and representing those realities to their readers. Literary dialect created cultural types through which the readers of the American magazine could construct their national identity. But literary dialect produced ambiguous results. It could never escape the racist implications of other forms of dialect, particularly those of blackface minstrelsy. Just as each regional and ethnic dialect had set rules that made the dialects immediately recognizable, literary dialect created corresponding psychological types with set psychological characteristics. By 1900, these types had become reified into cultural stereotypes. Black authors such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt attempted to wrest Negro dialect away from its white production, but discovered that the form was too imbued with white racist sentiment to allow for the creation a viable counter subjectivity. Their work did, however, begin a process of revealing the fundamental unreality of dialect as an index of either personal or regional character.

By then, however, Cultural Reconstruction had created the very sectional monster it had been created to slay. The invention and production of Southern literature in the *Century* and other Northern magazines was instrumental in consolidating white Southerners' regional identity. It also nationalized the region's black–white racial polarity. Where once Cultural Reconstruction seemed to offer the possibility of forging national union through the production of multiple cultures, it ultimately legitimated regional and racial stereotypes by gauzing them over with both the imprimatur of the nation's leading national magazines and realism's pretensions to being a human science. Rather, than producing a unified representative democracy of culture, editors such as Gilder and Johnson had in fact helped reproduce, in the realm of culture, the sectional factionalism that had bedeviled antebellum American politics. Dialect turned out to be a mute representative, incapable of expressing the lives and desires of those it was supposed to speak for.

Through the early 1900s, a new generation of cheaper American magazines expanded the readership for the earlier magazines' cultural themes. Although the new magazines introduced some changes to those themes (such as a greater emphasis on celebrity and a more newspaperly approach to current events), the stereotypes formulated through Cultural Reconstruction remained largely in tact. In 1904, as if taking a cue from Howell's fictional magazine in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *McClure's* solicited a series of articles on the Southern "race problem" from none other than Thomas Nelson Page. McClure published the series under the general title, "The Negro: The Southerner's Problem." In a way the nationalists of the 1840s could not have imagined, the cultural endpoint of the invention of the American magazine was *The Birth of a Nation*.

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