GARDENS AND GRASSES: THE QUESTION OF LITERATURE AND DEMOCRACY FOR NEW YORK CITY'S PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS IN THE ERA OF GREELEY AND WHITMAN.

by

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Abstract

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by

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The daily newspapers that flourished in New York City in the early decades of the nineteenth century provide a rich picture of the political and cultural landscape of the time. They feature vivid depictions of life in the city, wild and rancorous commentary on the political battles of the day, and sometimes equally rancorous commentary on the papers' battles with each other for circulation and respect. The papers also featured literary criticism, which drew on the current political ideas and addressed the significance of a mass audience for literature.

The literary critics in these papers held different views on democracy, but they all saw America part of a world-wide democratic movement that included the many nationalists and revolutionaries in Europe and South America. The influence of the ideas associated with these movements, nationalism and Romanticism, had a defining role in the work of these critics. The other key factor is the radical egalitarianism of the Jacksonian period (and the reactions to it).

A selection of critics provide an overview of the critical positions found in the penny press. The radical Jacksonian position is represented by William Leggett an influential editor and political commentator who began his career as a poet and short story writer. Since Jacksonian ideas about the independence and rights of the working class were based on the value of the people's labor, the critical problem for Leggett and those who follow him is how to evaluate the status of writing itself as labor. A very different political view is represented by Horace Greeley, the famous reformer and editor of the New York *Tribune,* who opposed the populism of the Jacksonian democrats as well as their economic theories. Another critic, Margaret Fuller, wrote for Greeley's paper but provided an independent and sophisticated position on literature because of her background in European critical thought and Transcendentalism. Lastly, Walt Whitman's criticism as a journalist in the years before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* represents his attempts to resolve the problems faced by Jacksonians and the challenge of European ideas from romanticism.

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I have been supported in a different sense by the institutions I have worked in: the City University of New York provided fellowships for teaching and administrative work that has made my graduate career possible; those opportunities to teach and work also for better and worse engaged me intellectually and practically as much as my research. I feel I am a better teacher and scholar for those experiences and am grateful to the Writing Fellows, faculty, and others I have worked with, especially to the two people who served as mentors in these areas Hugh English at Queens College and Judith Summerfield at CUNY's Office for Undergraduate Education. The Graduate Center's English Program provided the Lynn Kadison Dissertation Year Award for Service, which meant a lot to me. Use of the New York Public Library's Wertheim Study was very helpful in conducting the research for chapters one and two.

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Introduction

What kind of literature should a democracy have? What literary forms and themes are most appropriate to the values of a democratic society? These questions guide the discussions in the following chapters. The goal of this study is not to provide an answer to these questions either for our time or for the era in which the material studied was created, the United States in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The goal is to show the wide range of answers to these questions that existed in that period. The cultural criticism of that period was part of a widespread discourse on democracy and egalitarianism. Cultural critics from different political ideologies cast their criticism in terms of this discourse. This was particularly true in the penny press, the emerging mass market newspapers, whose writers and editors created a new public forum for debating the country's literary and cultural values.

Questions about the literature of democracy can sound a little archaic to a contemporary reader. Unlike Americans of the early nineteenth-century, we are not in the position of having to prove the practical and moral benefits of democracy. There are of course a wide range of critiques of practice of democracy in the U.S. and elsewhere, but practically all of those critiques share an assumption that democracy in some form is the ideal form of government. This is true even of radical critics who take liberal democracy as their prime target. Some of the competing claims to the ideal of democracy are no doubt semantic battles with supporters of radically different social visions attempting to lay claim to the title of democracy. That so

many do try to lay claim to that title reflects the ubiquity of the values the term represents. Those values include a commitment to public involvement in government though private associations and more generally a shared ideal that the general population should play a role in the make-up and functioning of their government, and that government should serve their interests and respond to their concerns. The debates are over the extent of that role, the nature of the powers of government and the interests that ought to be served. The values themselves are not likely to be challenged directly. There is no debate over whether the government should be responsive to the public at all or whether participation in political matters should be limited. There are, in other words, no avowed aristocrats today, no constituency in American public discourse that will make a principled objection to wide suffrage or to private citizens' right to complain about or influence their government. In the first half of the nineteenth-century (and beyond) such positions were common and were held by the leading cultural and social critics of the day.

The question of culture and democracy does resonate with us today even if our terminology and context have changed. There is certainly no shortage of debate in contemporary social and cultural criticism over the relationship between political ideals and the literature that we read and teach and study. Debates over political ideology and culture have been sustained at a high pitch over the past few decades under the rubrics of "culture wars" or "political correctness." Those debates, in terms of partisan invective at least, have a fair amount in common with the culture wars of the early nineteenth-century. But the essential difference is the degree to which the

debates in the early decades of the United States were marked by insecurity and anxiety about the future of democracy and about the country's identity.

We are not in the position today of having to establish that the United States has its own cultural identity and cultural authority as were earlier nationalist critics, just as we do not have to defend from scratch the idea of democratic rule. We do still struggle with the questions about the relationship between our political vision and our culture; questions along the lines of those that began this chapter. This study's look at a particular slice of those debates in an earlier era is valuable for its own sake for what it can teach us about the past, but it may also provide some new insights into today's cultural and political debates. If nothing else it will demonstrate how much the country and the world has been transformed, however slowly and fitfully, in the centuries since by showing us the assumptions that we can make today and the intellectual battles that we no longer need to fight. It also shows how the critical battles still fought today are for better or worse part of an American tradition.

The slice of the cultural criticism of the era that I have chosen to look at is that of New York City's daily papers during the time when those papers emerged and grew dramatically in both cultural impact and sheer numbers. The writers I consider represent the political spectrum of the popular press and provide a chronological survey of the medium from the 1820s to the 1850s. In this period we can see the growth of the medium's status in its ability to attract a leading intellectual like Margaret Fuller and the growth of the idea that the papers represented something important in a democratic society. The beginning of that time span in the 1820s and 1830s is represented by Horace Greeley, the founder and editor of the New-York

Tribune, and William Leggett, the editor for a time of the *Evening Post* (Leggett was filling in for the paper's longtime editor William Cullen Bryant). The later part of the period is represented by Greeley also, who edited the *Tribune* well into the second half of the century, as well as Margaret Fuller and Walt Whitman. These figures taken together do not add up to a portrait of the typical literary critic of the daily press nor does a study of their work and its context allow for some statement of what the typical literary views were in that medium. Their work does however point out some tendencies among the criticism of the papers. One not very surprising finding is that the criticism of those papers, which were generally founded and edited by political partisans and supported by political parties, presumed a connection between politics and literature. Specifically there was an assumption on some level that questions about the connection between democracy and culture were the most obviously interesting and important questions that could be asked about this subject. The next observation is that those discussions reflected a shift in American intellectual life brought about by the influence of Romanticism. That shift meant that the Enlightenment idea of the people which had shaped the American founding so strongly came into conflict with the more individualistic and self-centered tendencies of Romanticism.

The intellectual and political conflicts took different forms among the writers I consider, but all of them saw the intersections between politics, culture, and identity as very important issues to bring before the mass readership they wrote for. And they all took their dedication to these issues as being in the spirit of what they saw (each in different ways) as the noble ideals of the country.

Aside from the over-arching tendencies just noted the writers considered here are more remarkable for the differences in their ideas than the similarities. In some cases the idiosyncrasies of their views are a feature of the medium. Three of the writers, Leggett, Greeley, and Whitman, were editors of daily newspapers. These papers, even the ones that reached a large audience, tended to reflect the personalities of their editors, who in the cases of the smaller papers and during the early years of the larger ones wrote most if not all of the original copy. It was understood that papers reflected their editors' quirks, obsessions, grudges, and politics. That understanding didn't mean that those editors could say whatever they wanted, however. Their views were constrained by the politics of their publishers and the commercial advertisers who supported the papers. Leggett and Whitman for example, were both fired or forced out of editorships because of their political views; in both cases the position that caused them problems was their opposition to slavery, a position that was incompatible with their role as otherwise loyal Jacksonian Democrats.

Horace Greeley enjoyed much greater freedom in his political opinions since he was his own publisher. His paper was successful and enjoyed a wide readership across the country, but Greeley himself was regarded by many as an eccentric character who was often ridiculed for his support for extreme and oddball causes. Greeley was staunchly opposed to slavery and capital punishment; he was a critic of free market capitalism and at one stage private property of any kind; and he had no enthusiasm for the Jacksonian model of popular democracy. Margaret Fuller's career at the *Tribune* shows how Greeley's success as an editor did not depend on his

political views. He was willing and able to hire talented contributors like Fuller to expand the paper's appeal. Fuller was hired to be the primary literary critic for the paper. Most of her writing was devoted to literary and cultural matters though she also wrote about cultural reform issues. She was more dedicated to democratic reforms and movements than Greeley and far more strongly opposed to slavery and the U.S.-Mexico War than Democrats like Whitman.

That someone would study the literary opinions of the daily papers of this time might have surprised the era's leading critics and opinion-makers. The most prestigious print medium (at least according to its contributors) of the time was the magazine. The monthly and quarterly journals, and to lesser extent the weeklies, set forth the culturally authoritative opinions on literature and public affairs. They were formed on the model of the leading English and Scottish reviews of the Eighteenth-century. William Charvat's classic study of the American magazines in the early nineteenth-century illustrates their influence and the conservatism of their literary and social views. The reviewers saw their task and the task of literature as upholding social order and the rights of the property-holding class, which they regarded as essentially the same phenomena. Study of the penny press can not take away from the influence of these magazine reviewers on the cultural establishment of the time, but it can show the value of the popular criticism and establish its place in the intellectual currents of the time.

The penny press is studied today not on the grounds that its critics and writers were individually powerful or influential, but in terms of what the popular press reveals about the culture in general. Hans Bergmann's discourse approach to the

penny press in *God in the Street* provides important background on the penny press as well as methodological guidance for this work. Bergmann shows how the popular press in New York City developed a distinctive discourse about the city and itself, a discourse that he finds reflected in the work of literary writers like Whitman and Melville.[1] I see a similar relationship between the writers that I look at; they draw and contributed to a discourse about democracy and culture in the United States. Where Bergmann concludes his study with Melville's *Confidence Man* I conclude with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* which captures and attempts to resolve many of the critical problems that these critics addressed.

A relatively liberal voice in the literary magazine scene emerged in New York City in the Young America movement (with which Melville was associated). The Young America critics are often linked to the radical Democratic politics of the time. In the context of the magazine literary culture they did represent a radical voice for democracy, but there are significant differences, shaped mostly by class, between their work and that of the penny press writers. In his extensive study of the Young America movement and their literary battles with their Whig opponents, *The Raven and the Whale,* Perry Miller notes that the Young America editors called for democratic literature routinely and that calls for a great democratic poet were "stereotyped."[2] In the manifesto for the *Democratic Review* in the early 1840s*,* John O'Sullivan argued for the importance of a literature that reflected democratic values.[3]

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[1] Hans Bergmann, *God in the Street: New York Writing from the Penny Press to Melville* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995), 1-40.
[2] Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wit in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1956), 101.
[3] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale,* 111.

This idea was well established by this time. William Leggett had published influential expressions of it a decade earlier. In his *The Literary Criticism of Young America,* John Stafford notes the influence of Leggett and associates the Young America writers with radical Jacksonian politics, though he also notes that in many ways they were conservative in their religious and social outlook. While they may have thought about the relationship between democracy and the new nation and its literature they were also dedicated to criticism as a professional role filled by the educated class. All of the leading writers of Young America, Stafford notes, were trained as lawyers.[4] In spite of their dedication to democratic values in principle the Young America writers were part of the educated upper class, and whatever kind of democratic literature they imagined they did not envision a wide democratization of the role of the critic. The sense of class authority is clear in the sometimes harsh reaction to Charles Frederick Briggs, a Young America editor and writer who came from a less privileged background than most of the other figures in the literary scene. Criticisms of his work were cast in class terms. His magazine was derided as "cockney" and another writer responded to a satirical piece with remarks that Briggs was too unsophisticated to understand the appropriate use and limits of satire.[5]

The Young America writers do help to show the distinct features of intellectual life in New York City. All three critics, Bergmann, Stafford and Miller identify the distinctive features of the New York intellectual and literary scene, and particularly its difference from that of New England. Miller compares the

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[4] John Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of "Young America": A Study in the Relationship of Politics and Literature* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 22-38.
[5] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale,* 57-63.

prospectuses of the *Dial* and of *Arcturus,* the journal founded the same year as the *Dial,* 1840, by some of the leading figures in Young America. The New Yorkers wanted critics to be engaged in society through their writing on books, not through writing on nature, the subject the New England transcendentalists were most interested in.[6] Bergmann sees the distinctive discourse of New York emerging from the penny papers with their focus on the life of the street, again with the focus shifted away from nature.[7] Stafford identifies the Young America movement with the radical element of the Democratic party which was centered in New York under Van Buren's political organization.[8] This New York literary culture and its influence is reflected differently in the writers considered here. Fuller represents a bridging figure between the New England and New York cultures. Her criticism shows Fuller making that intellectual move along with the geographical one. Whitman's poetry has become emblematic of the New York street scene that clearly had its origins in his newspaper work. Leggett and Greeley provide important examples of the groundwork for a New York voice in the popular press.

For the most part the texts studied here are literary and social criticism though there is some discussion of the poetry of two of the writers (Leggett and of course Whitman). This choice of material is not especially controversial—popular writing and material that is not written in the traditional literary genres has been an essential part of research in this period for decades—but the rationales that critics have used to argue for the inclusion of this material are worth considering. A few decades ago

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[6] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale,* 89-91.
[7] Bergmann, *God in the Street,* 45-48.
[8] Stafford, *Literary Criticism of "Young America,"* 2-3.

Laurence Buell in his *Literary Transcendentalism* had to make apologies and arguments for focusing on material that was outside of the traditional literary genres of poetry and novels even though he was writing about figures who were solidly part of the New England cultural elite. His argument was that the primary achievements of the Transcendentalists were found outside those genres in their essays, reviews, lectures, and other non-fiction work. It is hardly necessary to repeat that argument today to justify the study of Margaret Fuller's work in the *Tribune,* which has been widely studied, and is recognized as forming and important contribution to American literary criticism and journalism. The same argument can not be made for the other writers studied here. Whatever virtues there are in the work of Leggett and Greeley, neither writer's criticism could be described as a major contribution to American letters that has been ignored because of some bias against non-fiction writing. This is true for Whitman's pre-1855 criticism also. It is studied but more for the sake of illuminating his poetry than for it's value as criticism.

Under the influence of the cultural studies approach of American Studies the scope of material that critics studied widened. More popular material was and is studied for its own sake and for the relationship between that work and the more traditional literary material. Jane Tompkins' work on sentimental fiction and poetry sought to reclaim that work from its long-standing dismissal from the canon of serious literature. For Tompkins and for many scholars who have taken a similar approach, this work was valuable for its critical social vision and for the craft with which its sentimental elements were deployed. In other words they were valuable according to the standards of their writers and audience, even if they were not

valuable according to the standards of the literary values that established writers like Melville and Hawthorne in the literary canon. Tompkin's reevaluation contains a critique of those traditional literary values, which she calls "modernist" literary values, on the grounds that they hold up non-political, non-dogmatic, ambiguous writing as an ideal and reject books that were undeniably important and successful in their time.[9]

The defense of sentimentalism (and the concomitant rejection of traditional literary judgments) can well be applied in different degrees to all of the writers studied here. More generally, Tompkins' argument that the *unoriginal* features of popular writers' work account for their popularity and are therefore the most interesting aspects of that work to study applies to the political and critical views in the popular press. None of course were as widely read as Harriet Beecher Stowe or some of the other writers that Tompkins studies, but they shared some features with those writers. Greeley in particular fits the mold. He shared the progressive political views and Christian moralism of the sentimental writers. He also saw literature in strictly moral terms. He admired literature that taught the moral lessons he thought should to be taught and advanced the values he thought should be advanced. There is little or no consideration in Greeley's criticism of aesthetics or literary value. Leggett takes a similar approach to literature though he wanted different lessons from literature than Greeley did. Leggett's evaluation of literature is less moralistic than it is dogmatic. He applies his Jacksonian egalitarian views to literature with the fate of the republic in mind not the fate of the individual soul. Fuller could deploy

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[9] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), i-x.

sentimental elements in her social criticism and admired some sentimental writers, but her literary criticism was strongly influenced by Romantic ideas about the greatness of the individual artist that stressed the artist's independence from morals and standards of society. Whitman, like Fuller and Greeley, supported some of the moralist reform movements—he wrote a temperance novel early in his career—but like Fuller he was drawn to the Romantic vision of an artist who stands above such moralism. The artist that Whitman and Fuller admire is actually much like the artist admired by the modernist literary critics that Tompkins criticizes and the tensions in their work prefaces some of the larger cultural tensions that Tompkins describes.

Is it necessary to reject the modernist literary standards to defend the value of studying non-traditional, non-literary material? The answer from historicist scholars is a qualified "no." Historicism is based on the principle that popular or non-literary cultural material is important for learning about a culture but that literary material is distinct in some way because of its aesthetic value or its ability to transcend its culture and appeal to readers in a different time and place. The relationship of the literary to the rest of the culture is not necessarily one of influence but of shared engagement with the tensions and debates of the era.

In nineteenth-century American literature, the historicism's leading proponent and practitioner is David S. Reynolds. Reynolds' work has shown popular forms—from sermons and popular songs to outlandish gothic novels—that drew on the dynamism and tensions of the period influenced the literary work of the time. Reynolds distinguishes between the literary and the popular and, in discussions of his methodology, explains his sense of the relationship between the two. He sees the

popular culture as exploring and responding to the most important tensions in society. That culture also embodies those tensions and propagates them. In the case of antebellum America the key tensions were the sectional divisions over slavery, the economic changes brought about by the growth of the market economy, the growth of cities, mass immigration, mass migration (to the frontier), the expansion of transportation and communication (steam-powered printing, penny papers, rail roads, telegraph, faster trans-Atlantic shipping). The same tensions inform the work of the literary works of the period that we still read and find valuable, but the literary works differ from the popular culture by virtue of their self-consciousness and reflexiveness. Those traits along with a high degree of formal success constitute what Reynolds calls the "literariness" of literary works.[10] Reynolds' position does include a critique of some traditional ideas about the artist and the nature of art. His central objection in *Beneath the American Renaissance* is to the Romantic-influenced understanding of the artist as removed from society and somehow at odds with its materialistic and base nature. He sees and shows ample evidence of artists and intellectuals who are now part of our literary canon drawing on popular sources.

The approach of this dissertation is threaded between these three general approaches just discussed. I take for granted the point that Buell makes about expanding the canon to prose and non-fiction because of the vibrant contribution that material represents to the national literary culture as well as the American Studies-influenced openness to a wide range of media and forms. In discussing this non-literary or non-canonical work I employ something of the historicist approach to

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[10] David Reynolds. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 6-10.

popular culture: it reflected the debates and conflicts during a vibrant and turbulent time and its influence shaped the lasting literary culture of the country. This approach is most evident in the chapter on Whitman. I look at the how critical debates on democracy and literature influenced Whitman's work. He was influenced by the Jacksonian cultural critique—he refers to Leggett as a role model—as well as by the Romanticism of Emerson and Fuller. But aside from that chapter this study overall doesn't share the goal of Reynolds' studies. His *Beneath the American Renaissance* and *Walt Whitman's America* are dedicated to connecting a huge range of popular culture to the work of the literary writers of the period.

I am less concerned with defining literariness than with examining the origin of just that idea in American intellectual life. Acknowledging Tompkins' historicizing of our literary standards and her reclamation of sentiment, my goal is to examine a critical and aesthetic discourse that existed alongside and interwoven with the sentimental position. That debate centered around democratic values. Practically all the critical voices in the United States were engaged in this debate in some way, but my focus is on the form this debate took in daily papers whose demotic nature (or at least their demotic stance) and their political partisanship illuminate the connections between political and economic ideology and cultural values. Two archetypal partisan editors, Leggett and Greeley, demonstrate that connection. They represent almost diametrically opposed politics but both call for democratic values in literature. Fuller in simply accepting the position at the *Tribune* and then in the development of her writing there brings her Romantic idealism into dialog with practical and political reality. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is the most enduring work for the period on the

relationship between democracy and literature. My study of Whitman's early criticism and the context of the debates will I hope shed some new light on his central work in the American literary tradition. In the poetry and prose of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* he tried to create a model for the poet and the poetry of a democracy. He drew on the popular culture of the time including the newspaper world he was part of as material for his poetry, and he clearly was responding to the political crises of the day, but he also drew on the critical and ideological debates over literature and democracy to shape his poetic approach. The poetic persona of *Leaves of Grass,* its signature feature, is Whitman's attempt to resolve some of the problems raised in that critical debate. That persona reflected a concept of public discourse different from that of his early journalism and criticism. In response to the political crises of his time Whitman moved away from the Jacksonian enlightenment concepts of democracy and the public and toward Romantic ideas closer to that of Fuller.

The idea of the public or the people and their relationship to writer and poets runs throughout the material studied here, but before discussing some of the theoretical material that applies to this idea, I would like to close this discussion of methodology and historicism with some comments on how our theoretical positions relate to what we do and why we do it. "We" in this case refers to literary scholars, but it might be extended more broadly to intellectuals in general. The usual practice is for scholars to frame a discussion of a given set of authors or texts with a rationale that explains why they are worth studying. The claims to worth take various forms as noted above: a text can be worthwhile because it is great (in some literary trans-historical way), or because it allows us to learn about another time period or about

greater works that it influenced, or because it illustrates some virtue or evil. But our rationales are not the same as our reasons. We may develop powerful theoretical frameworks to explain how we work with the material we study and why our approach is valuable, but those theories don't explain why we do the work we do. No one doing work in the humanities (or any other field I assume) arrives at his or her chosen specialty through deduction from first theoretical principles. We have ended up doing what we do because of a series of responses to texts and people over the course of our educational and personal lives. We take the positions we take because of our values. In the case of American academics those values come from a predictable list: support for feminism, democracy, civil liberties, social equality; opposition to racism, misogyny, militarism, and the exploitation of the working class. Our work is guided by response and affect. Our theoretical frameworks are formal facades built on the haphazardly-constructed pile of our intellectual life. Those facades can be worthwhile, for ourselves and for our readers. They allow us to see more clearly than we would otherwise be able to the consequences of our ideas.

There are many writers who do discuss the personal and subjective origins of their critical approaches. Jane Tompkins for example discusses her interest in sentimental fiction and her response to it. The role of response as I've outlined it here is central to the reader response theory that shapes Tompkins work.

This discussion of response and methodology is not meant to be meta-commentary its own sake. The issue of intellectual work is the central question of the dissertation. A look at the work of intellectuals (or one subset of intellectuals) in our time informs the study of the earlier period. We draw on a literary tradition in order to

explain and advance our values. The earlier writers studied here also looked to a literary tradition with their values in mind and had, as we have, anxieties about that tradition. They in some cases saw that tradition, British and European, as foreign. They were more likely than we are to direct their attention forward to a future tradition. They also carefully and self-consciously considered the role of writers and intellectuals in a society that valued democracy and egalitarianism. In a democratic society, should intellectuals or literary writers be given a special privileged status? The answer could be, as we'll see, emphatically "no" or "yes" depending on the political views of the writer. The historical discussions over the role of literature extended beyond *belles-lettres* to include almost all scholarly work and criticism. It is possible for us to see these historical debates as an earlier phrase of the debates we continue to engage in over the practice and function of literary study.

Debates today over the practice of literary research continue a historical debate over literature and the public, a debate that applies to the historical material we study and implicitly to our own work. What do we feel is the relationship between the so-called great writer and the public of his or her time? How great a difference do we see between these two imagined entities? How we answer these questions is tied up with how we see our own work. What is the relationship between scholarly work and the public, between our work and popular culture? We might see our work reflecting the values and social energies of our own time. Assuming that scholarly work, in the humanities at least, is rooted in our values and responses to texts then most scholars would acknowledge a public dimension to their work; that is they see their work as performing some public good by advancing certain values or teaching certain lessons

about our history or society. The questions remains however of who this public is and of the authority of those who presume to teach lessons.

Since I have raised these questions of personal response and values in scholarly work, I should explain my own understanding of intellectual work and my relationship to my subject. Briefly, I am drawn to the question of what intellectuals do in an egalitarian society in part because of my background as the first person in my family to go to college. I have had to explain to myself and to my family what it is that professors do (aside from teaching college classes). I thought about similar questions as a graduate student while teaching at a large public university in which many students had similar family backgrounds to mine. My thinking on these questions has been informed by political values along the lines of the typical liberal academic as discussed above. I was drawn to this historical period through my response to Walt Whitman. Initially that response was to the mystical evocation of his presence in his poetry, but I have responded to and continue to respond to the egalitarian and democratic ethos of his poetry. This work has allowed me to better understand both responses and to see in fact how directly the mystical figure of the poet-narrator in *Leaves of Grass* is related to Whitman's sense of democracy. That poet figure is neither a representative man nor is he a particular individual—though he is given the name "Walt Whitman." He is a figure who transcends the politics and the public debates that caused such discord in Whitman's time and represents both Whitman's disillusionment that rational public discourse could resolve such tensions and his faith that his ideal democratic poet could.

The Press and the Public

The writers discussed in this study can be considered in terms of the idea of rational-critical public discussion. This idea was developed by Jurgen Habermas as the public sphere to explain the growth of a tradition in modern Europe of private people criticizing government. Part of the innovation of this cultural tradition was the development of the modern concepts of public and private. This development included the creation of a community of writers and readers who felt they were engaged in a shared effort to deploy their rational critical faculties in a public arena. It also involved the creation of a moral sense of the value of publicness in the activity of governments and of privateness in the activity of private households and families. These values were (and still are) cornerstones of bourgeois liberalism, and Habermas and the many critics whose work he has inspired have traced the consequences of these ideas. In particular, the bracketing off of the private familial arena from the public one has been identified as contributing to the exclusion from the public sphere of issues identified with sexuality or gender. In practice this meant severely limiting the role of women in the public sphere and virtually denying the existence of any sexualities or identities aside from the heterosexual couple with children.[11]

For the purposes of this study, gender and identity are regularly linked in discussions of the role and individual can play in the public sphere. The dueling

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[11] See Habermas himself in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 45-48 and passim. For critiques of the public sphere see Michael Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002) and Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," In *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 109-42.

ideologies of free trade versus pro-tariff hinged on the concept of the individual citizen as a contributor of labor to the society. This citizen was always considered to be male, and his masculinity was tied to his labor and to the circumstance under which is was provided. The ideal man of the republic was a free laborer, that is one who could choose to sell his labor to one employer or another. The counter-point to that ideal was the slave, and even an ardent opponent of slavery like Horace Greeley could refer to slaves as being abased or emasculated due to their status as slaves. The understanding of the laboring man is very different, however, for the two sides of this debate. The free trade side, represented here by William Leggett, held to a Jacksonian view that the laborer was the central figure in a democracy. His moral and financial independence was essential to democracy. The Whig position, which Greeley represented in an extreme form, understood the function of labor in moral terms. Labor and the willingness to perform it established one's moral righteousness, but it did not necessarily establish that one was fit to contribute to the governing of society. All people ought to work, but only a minority of people had the capacity to do the work necessary to run society, the most crucial element of which was managing the economy so that there was enough work for everyone.

Gender and identity are especially prominent in the work of Fuller and Whitman whose work in our time as well as in their own challenged readers on these issues. Labor is still important to Whitman who carries along the Jacksonian free laborer ideal in his portrayals of proud independent working class figures in his poetry. But Whitman and Fuller, influenced by Romanticism, are not invested in the Enlightenment idea of the individual as a dispassionate independent electoral

decision-maker. They want their individuals heroic, defiant and larger than life. Fuller, far more than Whitman, reflected this ideal in her life and work. Whitman's poetics, splitting the difference, contain the Romantic image of the poet, while being populated by idealized free individuals.

Both writers envisioned a broader range of identities active in the public sphere than there were at the time. Whitman did so in his poetic identification with women and African-Americans, including slaves, and his presentation of a wide range of erotic and emotional relationships—he approvingly refers to sexual desire between men and women, between strangers, between the narrator and the reader. Today we might read Whitman's work as daring because it referred to sex between men and women and hinted at sex between men, but there is a whole range of relationships and connections in his work that fall outside the traditional heterosexual marriage that was supposed to be central. Fuller expanded the public sphere with everything she wrote simply by being a woman writing as a full time professional critic, and of course her work was actively dedicated to expanding the role that women could play in society.

The idea of the public sphere provides some powerful explanatory tools in discussing the figures studied here, but there are some problems with applying Habermas' concepts to this period. For one thing, Habermas himself never applies his ideas to the United States. This may simply be because, like any scholar, his area of research is limited to a particular tradition. Also his work on the historical issues surrounding the public sphere began and ended with *Transformations of the Public Sphere.* His subsequent work is more strictly theoretical. Other writers have taken

Habermas' concept and extended it chronologically and geographically from Habermas's original discussion of Western Europe of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth nenturies.

When critics apply Habermas's concepts to the United States in its early decades and beyond they run into a more serious problem than the historical context of his work. One of the defining cultural features of this period, the development of the mass media, is regarded very critically by Habermas. The final central "transformation" referred to in the title of his book is the growth of mass media in the nineteenth-century, and he sees this development as the beginning of the end of the rational public sphere. With the mass media of the papers, the old model of small communities of readers and writers who responded via letter to small circulation magazines and met at coffeehouses to discuss the latest issues was replaced by a model in which the readers were seen (and saw themselves) as generally passive consumers. Information and discourse became just another marketable commodity in the emerging capitalist economy.[12] In order to argue that there was some kind of public sphere in the circulation of nineteenth century newspapers in the United States one needs to come to terms with Habermas's critique. The common approach to dealing with Habermas's critique here is to object to it while retaining the theoretical framework of the public sphere. That concept and the associated ideas of public and private are still useful even if one doesn't share Habermas's historical interpretation of their development.[13]

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[12] Habermas, *Structural Transformations,* 159-74.
[13] See for example Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), a collection published to mark the American publication of

One critic who takes this approach to nineteenth-century America, Michael Warner dispenses with the question of which historical period or context provided the best public discourse. Warner focuses on defining the concept of the public as it developed in the early mass media of the nineteenth century and up to his own time in the late twentieth century. The self of the writer is shaped by his or her sense of the nature of public being addressed. We will see how the more conservative writers, Greeley and Fuller, addressed a different audience and assumed a different role for themselves than did the more radical writers Leggett and Whitman.

In this case there was a widespread community of readers who expected the writers they read in their papers to portray themselves in some fashion as part of the national project of the democracy. And writers for the papers defined themselves in terms of their role in an ideological debate. Warner notices how Whitman's poetry plays with some of the conventions of the penny press. This is a comparable observation to that of Bergmann though Warner is more concerned with how Whitman's rhetorical strategy changed in his early career. Commenting on *Leaves of Grass*, Warner notes that Whitman's poetry "continually exploits public sphere discourse conventions."[14] The work of *Leaves of Grass* displays what Warner calls the tensions in the self, and represents a move away from the narrative of self-control that he sees in Whitman's early temperance novel *Franklin Evans*.

This move toward the tensions in the self applies to the overall move in the

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Habermas' *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere.* Most essays in the collection begin by noting a limitation or serious flaw in Habermas' concept.

[14] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics,* 285.

critical opinions of these authors. The earlier authors in spite of their opposed politics saw generalized individual selves struggling against external forces. The influence of Romanticism introduced the thought of tensions in the self and attempts to have writing reflect those tensions. Political changes also shaped the presentation of the self in writing; Ziff Larzer has observed that the move to the Romanticist self in writing, which he calls the "immanent self," generally followed from doubts about democratic political representation.[15]

Whitman, writing in both the political and literary traditions, provides the most sweeping perspective on these questions about the written self and democratic ideology. But that perspective on writing and democracy is informed by the writing in New York City's daily papers that had been part of his life for decades. Whitman and the other writers in this study read much else besides the papers, but the audience for the papers—this new mass audience for literature and criticism—concerned them most in their criticism, and their writing registers their hopes and worries over what that audience would mean for society and also their sense of their responsibility in writing for it.

[15] Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 125.

Chapter 1: William Leggett: Writer and Ultra Democrat

William Leggett's admirers (and even some of his detractors) noted his adherence to fundamental principles in his writing and his willingness to follow those principles to whatever conclusions they might lead him to in spite of the personal or political difficulties that often resulted. He developed this reputation in the course of nine years writing political editorials in New York City papers, mostly at the *Evening Post*, in which he defended Jacksonian Democratic principles of equal rights and democracy and attacked the initiatives of his political adversaries, the Whigs, such as the national bank, tariffs, and national improvements and generally assailed his political opponents for their anti-democratic ways. His political critique extended to the Tammany Hall Democratic establishment in New York when it went against the principles that he felt were central to the party. Because of this critique he is usually credited with influencing the split in the Democratic party in the city that led to the formation of the Loco Foco (or Equal Rights) Party, which influenced state and local politics in the years after Leggett's death.

Leggett's political contributions are interesting in themselves for the insights they provide on the history of New York politics, and he usually earns a passing mention in historical surveys of this period. For the purposes of this study, however, the most interesting example of Leggett's adherence to his political principles and his willingness to pursue them is the evolution of his views on the role of literature (and culture in general) in a democratic country. Leggett began his career writing poetry, short stories, and literary reviews that reflected the belletristic and sentimental

standards of the day. As he moved to writing exclusively about politics, spurred by the political conflicts of the Jacksonian period, Leggett's views of literature became subsumed under his politics. He came to see any kind of singular artistic accomplishment as aristocratic and at odds with democratic values. For him the literature of a democracy should not be marked by individual accomplishments but by accessibility. Leggett pursues his republican ideology, which is rooted in ideas of the independent and free individual, until he arrives at an almost anti-individualistic view of culture and society.

It is this move that makes Leggett of interest: he combines, in a way no one else does, the literary culture of the period with the political ideologies of Jacksonian democracy and market economics. And though no one else formulated the relationship between literary culture and democracy in quite the same way Leggett did, other critics faced the same problems and incompatibilities he identified when they addressed reform and democracy in their work or considered the role of art in democracy.

Leggett gives his most thorough critique of the anti-democratic tendencies in American culture in a late career article called "Aristocratic Education." This piece serves as a good introduction to Leggett's analysis of political ideology, culture and education as well as to the brash style he was so well known for. He opens the piece by asserting that "The one leading object of modern philosophy and science is to reconcile and associate aristocratic principles with truth." This system of knowledge leads to an educational system that's incompatible with democratic values. Under this current system, "No student can begin to learn until he has surrendered every vestige

of independence of mind, by acquiring a veneration for authority, and yielding placidly to prescription." At this early stage of their education students are presented with materials that corrupt them by bringing out "the selfish feelings of the mind." Critiquing the existing curriculum of higher education, Leggett writes:

> Whatever of history is spread before the novice, is but the richly adorned records of human ambition and grandeur; whatever of literature, is classic or distinctive; and whatever of philosophy, is grossly individual: that which scarce recognises a common nature in mankind, and buries the great principle of truth in a multiplicity of facts.[16]

The consequence of this system is that college students and the college-educated class do not support democratic reforms in the U.S.. He contrasts this situation to that of Europe where students are among the leaders of democratic and radical groups. One solution that Leggett sees to the problem is the proposed system of "common schools," public schools being established in this period, as a means to avoid this indoctrination and provide a democratic education. But it will be important in these schools "to guard carefully against the introduction of the distinctive literature and the individual philosophy."[17] Leggett's position on literature here is a remarkable endpoint for someone who began his writing career with aspirations to be a poet and who admired Byron, probably the most individual and heroic cultural figure of the era.

A survey of Leggett's literary career will show how his political ideology runs through his work and develops as it does. In his career as a writer, Leggett moves from poetry and short stories to literary criticism to political critique and polemic. But

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[16] William Leggett, "Aristocratic Education," *The Examiner*, August 1 1837, 2.
[17] Leggett, "Aristocratic Education."

in all these literary modes, Leggett show his interest in thinking about democracy and culture. In the literary culture of Leggett's time combining writing about politics and literature was not itself a novelty. Poets, like Whitman and Bryant, edited partisan newspapers; novelists, like Hawthorne, wrote campaign biographies for presidential candidates. The novel element of Leggett's work is his rigorousness (you might say obsessiveness) in applying the key ideas of Jacksonian democracy to his cultural criticism. He applied an ideology shaped by Enlightement thinkers like Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham to a literary culture already under the influence of Romanticism, which led him to the anti-Romantic position already noted. His work illustrates incompatibilities that would be faced by writers and critics who inherited his political views (Whitman being this most famous). His work also shows how clearly the idea of the public audience for literature was connected to ideas about the publics that made up economic markets and democratic electorates. Whether he is writing about literature or free trade Leggett approaches the question of the individual and the mass in terms borrowed from Adam Smith, that is he thinks in terms of aggregate behavior and not of individual heroic action.

The various genres that Leggett wrote in reveal his attempts to find a place for himself in the literary culture of the time. His move away from the conventional poetry of his youth to the short stories he began publishing in New York magazines and newspapers was a move toward a more democratic form in several senses: the stories were literally more democratic in that they were published in media with mass audiences and read by more people; they were ideologically more democratic through their use of characteristically American types and settings such as the frontier. The

later move to literary criticism and eventually to political writing is also more democratic in both literal and ideological senses. In his criticism Leggett starts to directly address the role of culture in a democratic society and think about what a truly democratic culture might mean. The bulk of his newspaper writing was newspaper devoted to the ideological struggle for democracy, equal rights, and free trade, but the question of culture remains a central part of his project.

Early Literary Work

Some of Leggett's thinking is clearly shaped by the political and economic forces that dominated his own life and career. He was interested in a literary career from an early age, only to have his ambitions diverted by the economic failure of his father. The experience of this failure does not make him a critic of the instability of inequity of capitalism as it might have; instead he becomes a defender of the free market system, or as he sees it a reformer of that system because he wants to correct the abuses that lead to misfortunes like those of his father. His commitment to standing against authorities who abuse their power is strengthened by his experiences in the Navy. His first-hand experiences of harsh punishment in the Navy provide the subject of some of his first political editorials. He also wrote short stories and poetry that drew on this experience, and which often include an element of political commentary. His poems on the Navy comment on social and material conditions and show his skepticism of the idea of gentlemanly honor and the aristocratic nostalgia that underlay it. But as he makes this move his work becomes more attuned to the relationships between society, ideology, and culture.

The first and perhaps most significant impact of the change in his family's circumstances was that Leggett had to leave college. After a childhood spent growing up in New York City, Leggett left the city at fifteen to begin his studies at Georgetown College.[18] He probably thought of pursuing a course of study that would help him become a man of letters. It's probably safe to assume that he was an aspiring writer at this early stage because in only a few years he would have a volume of poetry published and be a contributor of poems to newspapers. Whatever his studies were, Leggett had only been at Georgetown for a year when his father's business failed and he had to drop out because the family could no longer afford the expenses.[19]

The cutting short of his studies prevented Leggett from pursuing the future he had imagined for himself or at least from doing so by the traditional path he had likely imagined. A sense of loss and hardship is evident in his early poems. He doesn't feel too sorry for himself, which is admirable considering his experiences up to that point in his life. At fifteen he had to leave college and return home to face the consequences of his father's business failure. Three years later the whole family relocated to the frontier country of Illinois. In poems written before he turned twenty,

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[18] Leggett's family moved to New York City when he was four or five, and he was actually born in Savannah, GA. See family histories in Abraham Leggett, *The Narrative of Major Abraham Leggett, of the Army of the Revolution, Now First Printed from the Original Manuscript, Written by Himself.*, ed. Charles I. Bushnell (New York: Privately Printed, 1865), 69. and Theodore A. Leggett and A. Hatfield, Jr., *Early Settlers of West Farms, Westchester County, N. Y.* (New York: 1913), 51. Note that, even though he presumably knew him fairly well, Bryant thought Leggett was born in New York City. See William Cullen Bryant, "Political Portraits in Pen and Pencil, No. Xiii: William Leggett," *Democratic Review* 6, no. 19 (1839): 20. Some profiles of Leggett, probably following Bryant, give his birth place as New York City.

[19] Bryant, "Political Portraits in Pen and Pencil, No. Xiii: William Leggett," 20.

Leggett refers to the death of two of his sisters and a close acquaintance. After a few years in Illinois and some local successes in his writing, Leggett had to prepare to change situations again and say goodbye to his family as he prepared to leave for the Navy (where his life would not get any better).

In his first collection of poems, published in New York toward the end of this tour in the Navy, we see personal poems that bear the imprint of the conventions of the era. The poems are often concerned with two themes that are pillars of middle-class Victorian-era culture: military honor and grief over the death of angelic young women. The poems on military honor, such as *"*Death of Allen," which consoles the family of a sailor who was killed by pirates, are in some ways sincere but give voice to varying degrees of skepticism on their subject. In *"*Death of Allen," Leggett tries his best to provide some consolation to the family of the sailor who died in the engagement with the pirates, but there is little in the way of heroism in the poem. The sailor is described as simply doing his duty and dying in the process. The poem refers in passing to the deaths by disease of sailors. The reference is something of a non sequitur since Allen is described as being killed by *"*ruffian hordes,"[20] and Allen's family, if they ever read this poem, might have wondered why it was there. The reference to the deadly conditions on navy ships in a poem to honor the death of a individual sailor shows an ambivalence to the heroic military life and a tendency even at this stage in Leggett's work to move from the individual to the social. The book's title, *Leisure Hours as Sea*, captures this ambivalence and casts the narrator more as an unenthusiastic functionary than as a young man eager for military glory.

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[20] William Leggett, *Leisure Hours at Sea: By a Midshipman of the United States' Navy* (New York: George C. Morgan and E. Bliss and E. White, 1825), 21-23.

A poem on dueling reveals similar themes as well as an emerging note of protest. Leggett describes the death in a duel of a young man he knew as a tragic waste and criticizes the practice for its barbarity and hypocrisy. The social hypocrisy surrounding dueling is that the young man was obliged by social standards of masculinity and honor to respond to the duel, but because the practice was also seen as wrong the fallen man's family must, Leggett notes at the end of the poem, visit his grave in secret.[21] His approach to dueling also reveals some of his political identity. Dueling serves as a site for engaging the conflict between the rationalist-Enlightenment vision of America (an early version of American exceptionalism that cast the United States as leaving Europe's feudal and aristocratic ways behind for rational laws and equal rights) versus the conservative-Anglophilic vision (which saw the United States continuing Anglo legal and social traditions). In this poem Leggett clearly leans toward a critique of the later view with his skepticism about its chivalric ideals.

In spite of their conventionality, the poems that touch on his grief over the deaths of three young women he was close to are poignant, though admittedly that sentiment depends on a familiarity his biography and sympathy for his experiences. In *"*To My Sister," he bids farewell to one of his surviving sisters as he prepares to leave for the Navy, noting that they have endured the deaths of their sisters and their friend *"*Eliza" together but now he has to leave and perhaps never see her again. He writes on the same topic in *"*Stanzas, written on leaving a place where the author had resided several years;" this time finding solace in the thought that he will he reunited

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[21] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 30-31.

with his loved ones in the afterlife. The last two stanzas show the themes that recur through out this volume:

> I have not number'd twenty years;
> Yet oft at sorrow's shrine I've bow'd,
> To shed the offering my tears,
> And kiss affliction's chastening rod.
> Lov'd, blighted lost ones! low ye lie
> Where prairie wild-flow'rs dress the sod;
> Your sinless souls have flown on high,
> To dwell forever with their God.
>
> I go to brave the ocean's storms--
> But memory oft at starry even,
> Will call to view those blighted forms,
> While on our trackless course we're driven;
> And still the tear of deep regret
> To worth like theirs must e'er be given:
> Affection mourns their absence yet,
> Though angels now, their home is heaven.[22]

This piety and his depiction of the dead young women as angelic spirits are the most conventional element in these poems. In *"*Verses, written under the name of a young lady, in an album, soon after her death," Leggett writes that he hopes the *"*young lady," who presumably is the same as the *"*Eliza" referred to elsewhere, watches over him and visits him.[23] There is always a risk in assuming that the subject matter of poems is auto-biographical, but in this case the title and many of the poems ask us to read them as such. Also the deaths of his sisters and of "Eliza" are mentioned so often that their autobiographical significance seems certain. One of Leggett's older sisters, Louisa, did die in Illinois in 1820, a few days before he turned nineteen.[24] Two poems in the collection address Louisa directly by name. The family

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[22] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 25-30.
[23] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 18-19.
[24] Leggett, *The Narrative of Major Abraham Leggett*, 69.

records don't indicate the death of a second sister during Leggett's lifetime, though of course the reference to "sister" need not refer to a literal sister.

The conventional Christianity is contrasted with a skeptical note in one case. One poem called "Hope" ends on the jarring note that hope is a "deceiver" and that in being swayed by hope we become "The dupes of Hope forever!".[25] Just a few pages earlier a poem titled "Memory" begins along the same lines as "Hope" by noting that "Memory, like Hope, still mocks the heart / With visions sweet—but fleeting too!" However in this case this despair is answered by religious faith:

> But Faith points out your radiant heaven,
> And bids the mourner not despair;
> Whispering, "afflictions are but given,
> "Like angel-wings, to waft you there!"[26]

This assertion of faith is so sunny that it almost borders on satire, especially when read against the conclusion of "Hope." There is, however, not much basis for reading either poem as insincere or satirical. These poems read more as the work of a young writer finding his voice in the literary conventions of his time than as the work of a poet who can self-consciously play with those conventions. These two poems likely each represent his genuine reactions to the tragic events in his life. "Hope" was published in the *Edwardsville Spectator*, a local Illinois paper, a year and a half after his sister Louisa's death. The more uplifting poem on memory and another called "The Moment of Woe" were published a half year later in the same paper.[27] Something of this juxtaposition of skepticism and belief will endure in his later

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[25] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 55-56.
[26] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 42-43.
[27] Page S. Procter, "William Leggett (1801-1839): Journalist and Literator," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 44 (1950): 245.

political writing, with Leggett displaying both deep suspicion (of political power) and naïve faith (in the wisdom of market forces).

The idea that "afflictions" are "given, / Like angel-wings to waft" us to Heaven is a good example of the sort of sentimental Christianity of the period that Ann Douglas so roundly criticizes in *The Feminization of American Culture* for its nostalgia and social irrelevance.[28] Although the social commitment of evangelical Christians and writers of sentimental fiction has been defended by Jane Tompkins and others, Leggett's social and political critique does not come out of his Christianity. The sentimental Christianity of his early poems is very close to the superficial sort that Douglas identifies. His later social and political writing rarely if ever refers to God or the afterlife. And where his early social and political views appear in his poetry they do not draw on religion. His critique is rooted in Enlightenment discourse as it was transmitted to him through Jeffersonian republicanism. The political and ideological touchstones in his early life were the various republican movements in Europe and the politics associated with the Romantic poets.

The influence of the Romantics is clear in many of the poems and the importance of the political element of that influence comes through fairly insistently. Just the locations of some of the Navy poems; Elba, Roman ruins in Italy, and the Alps are enough to bring the Romantics to mind. The poem "Lines, Written on the Island of Elba" reflects on his life up to that point and concludes that he has been foolish to leave behind the people and places he loved to find fame at sea. This lesson is taught to him by the example of Napoleon the iconically ambitious and world-

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[28] Ann Douglas, *Feminization of America Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 11-12.

shaking figure who is now half-forgotten by the common people of the island.[29] The poetry, though it borrows images from the Romantic poets, usually does not follow those images through to the ideas that the Romantics associated with them. For example, the following poem to his dead sister, "There is a Voice" dwells on the voice and presence of his sister, which haunts him, and considers the solution:

> Oh! who shall bind the chainless mind?
> Oh! who shall curb the spirit's soar?
> He who can still the raving wind
> And hush the ocean's angry roar,
> His hand alone from my breast can tear
> Thy image, fondly cherish'd there.[30]

The images of the "chainless mind" and the "spirit's soar" recall the Romantics. But where Wordsworth would look to imagination or the sublime, Leggett's stanza turns at the end to the traditional kind Christian God.

The instances of Leggett moving toward the republican politics of the Romantics are clearer than his moves toward their spiritual and philosophical ideas. He writes a poem called "The Grecian Warrior" which admiringly describes the death of a Greek fighter in the war for independence from the Ottoman Empire.[31] This is not a surprising topic for a young poet who admired Byron. (Many of the epigrams in his 1834 short story collection *Naval Stories* are from Byron.) Leggett's description of the Greek warrior's bravery is more straightforwardly admiring of military glory than any of the poems that deal with the Navy. His skepticism about military glory is set aside here out of his admiration for this heroic cause; or to look at it another way,

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[29] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 117-20.
[30] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 130-31.
[31] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 49-50.

his realistic appraisal of militarism fails him when he considers the idealized republican struggle of the Greeks. In another case, Leggett's political views take over an ostensibly personal poem. The poem titled "To My Sister, Written During a Calm, on the Coast of Italy" digresses from his description of the calm night to a lament on the subjugation of Italian republicans by monarchists and the Austro-Hungarian empire. Looking at the moonlight shining on the Italian shore, Leggett is compelled to observe that the country is not as heroic as in its past. He says of its men that "The hero's son's a soulless slave!" and of Italy in general: "Thou seem'st to sleep—but thou art dead!"[32] These are presumably references to efforts in 1821 to get a constitution in Peidmont which were defeated by Austrian and Sardinian forces at the Battle of Novara. Leggett's political sympathy for both the Italian and Greek causes drew from nationalism as well as republicanism. Though he is invested in these political views, Leggett's poetry and fiction do not venture into the more scandalous territory explored by the Romantics. He holds steadily and sometimes obsessively to the standards of propriety of the period's bourgeois literary culture.

This propriety is evident through out his first collection of short stories, *Tales and Sketches, by a Country Schoolmaster,* with the notable exception of two stories set at sea, which will discussed more below. Conventional religious faith is an important theme in his first successful story, "The Rifle," first published in the literary annual *Atlantic Souvenir*, and reprinted in this collection. It is a proto-detective story set on the frontier that draws on Leggett's experiences in Illinois. The story contains auto-biographical elements such as the description of a frontier family

[32] Leggett, *Leisure Hours*, 67-68.

with a history very much like Leggett's. The story centers on an innocent young doctor falsely accused of murder and proved innocent and saved at the last moment by the detective work (and forensic science) of a young sheriff. The young doctor does not despair when he is convicted and refuses to run away when his friends try to spring him from jail; he is sure all along that God will vindicate him. He is of course vindicated, and at the end of the story one of the characters says that God has made "goodness its own reward."[33]

Other stories dealing with romantic love and the frailties of women are built entirely around tediously obvious moral lessons. In "The Lie of Benevolence" the friends of a recently-married young woman lie to her to help her through a nervous ailment by telling her that her husband who is a lieutenant in the Navy has been heard from and is doing well. They try to keep this lie up even after they learn of his death in battle, but inevitably she learns the truth in the end and dies on the spot. The narrator says he hopes the obvious moral lesson will be drawn from this story.[34] Another obvious, and patently silly, moral lesson is offered in "Near-Sighted" in which a young woman has her suitor rescind his proposal after it is discovered that she had misled him about being near-sighted. Even though she is very rich and beautiful we are told she is doomed to spinsterhood because of this slip.[35]

One opportunity that Leggett had to avoid these standards of propriety was in the naval adventure stories where the conventions of the genre allowed for a more lax moral universe. This opportunity would be taken by Richard Henry Dana and Herman

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[33] William Leggett, *Tales and Sketches. By a Country Schoolmaster* (New York: J & J Harper, 1829), 146-87.
[34] Leggett, *Tales and Sketches*, 139-45.
[35] Leggett, *Tales and Sketches*, 188-204.

Melville among others in this period. The story immediately following "Near-Sighted" in the collection is the naval story "A Watch in the Main-Top," and the contrast between the moral universes of the two stories is astounding. In the naval story the character Jack Gunn is described as an admired sailor, and, even though he was rumored to have done some smuggling and piracy, the narrator feels that Jack was good nonetheless because he was never "deliberately cruel," and the vices he engaged in were excusable lapses under the circumstances.[36] There is a moral lesson in this story also, but this lesson is drawn from Leggett's political sympathies. Jack defends the innocent cabin boy against the tyrannical abuse of power of another officer. In doing so he risks his life, falling overboard in a fight to the death with the tyrannical officer. In the end, Jack wins the fight and is rescued at sea by the cabin boy who sails back for him. Evil is punished in this story and the good guys win, but this is not the same simple moral universe as we see in the other land-bound stories. The hero is something of an outlaw and the villain is an authority figure. Leggett's next and last collection of short stories would consist entirely of naval adventure stories.

After his success publishing these stories and other pieces, Leggett begins the next phase of his career in June 1828 with the publication of the first issue of his weekly magazine *The Critic*. The paper was almost entirely a one-man production. William Cullen Bryant said that Leggett "earned a reputation for talent and industry by his conduct of the *Critic*, a weekly journal, several of the last number of which were written entirely by himself, put in type with his own hand, and delivered by

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[36] Leggett, *Tales and Sketches*, 207-08.

himself to the subscriber…" and it was this reputation that led Bryant to hire Leggett as an editor at the *Evening Post.*[37] The prefatory remarks in the first issue of *The Critic* refer to the single creator of the magazine, and Leggett tries to make a literary virtue out of his necessity by saying that having all the reviews and essays in the magazine written by one person will ensure a coherent critical perspective, something that larger magazines try unsuccessfully to achieve.[38] Bryant was probably exaggerating a bit in his description of Leggett's "industry." Bryant was writing decades after Leggett's death about someone he saw as a talented writer and protégé, so some amount of burnishing is to be expected. While it is true that virtually every word of the magazines was written by Leggett, they were not all written from week to week. In almost every issue he reprinted short stories, essays, and poems that he had written years earlier and published elsewhere. The stories often took up half of the magazine.[39] Also, following the practice of the period the reviews often cited very long passages from the works reviewed, sometimes several pages of prose or full length poems. Still the editing, much of the production, and plenty of writing were done by Leggett alone from week to week.

Clearly William Leggett wanted very much to succeed in the literary world. Even after having to leave college and move with his family to Illinois he wrote and had poems published in the local paper and had a book of poems printed. He turned his Naval service to literary account also. What did it mean for someone of Leggett's

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[37] William Cullen Bryant, "Reminices of the "Evening Post"," in *William Cullen Bryant*, ed. John Bigelow (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890), 326.
[38] William Leggett, "Prefatory Remarks," *The Critic*, Nov. 1 1828.
[39] For a bibliography that lists Leggett's reprinting of his fiction and poetry see Procter, "William Leggett."

background to want to become a literary man? He was probably aware that his background was different from that of most of the notables of American literature at the time. The most famous figures came from well-off land-owning families and could cultivate an identity as a gentlemanly dabbler in literature as distinguished from the newspaper writers who wrote for money.[40] Very often these writers had legal training and worked as lawyers early in their careers. Irving and Bryant are notable examples, but this lawyer-literateur connection was common, particularly in New York City. Thomas Bender, in his history of New York City's intellectual culture identifies this period as that of the transition from this gentleman-lawyer cultural establishment to one of a more diverse character whose members developed a "new and self-conscious social identity as writers, even as an intelligentsia."[41] Leggett would work to form a new identity for writers also, but not along the lines the Bender describes. The kind of modern intelligentsia that Bender describes assumes a distinction between the people and its intellectual or literary class that, as we have seen, Leggett would come to strongly reject as elitist and aristocratic, but his earliest criticism, much like his early poetry, follows a conventional mold.

With his aborted education and his father's financial failure the path of a gentleman lawyer was never open to Leggett. His father, Abraham Leggett, was apprenticed to a blacksmith as a boy, and even though he rose enough socially, in part through his commission as an officer in the Revolutionary War, to participate in some (never specified) business he was never solidly established in the middle class. Also,

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[40] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale*, 68-88.
[41] Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 130-48.

judging from his narrative of his experiences in the Revolutionary War, which he wrote late in his life, Abraham Leggett had little formal education; his writing is full of non-standard forms and phonetic spellings.[42] William Leggett in his early critical prose does not present himself as a populist voice or identify with the artisan class. He is adopts the prose style, opinions, and social class of the literary establishment.

The conventional elements in *The Critic* sometimes seem to be merely perfunctory nods in the direction of propriety. In the prospectus at the beginning of the magazine's first issue Leggett offers a roundabout apology for his plan to review theater, which some of his readers may have reservations about because of the immoral character of the theater. He defends the theater by noting that immorality can come about any time there is a large gathering of people and that the theater itself is not responsible for immorality.[43] This is a conventional anti-mob view which would surely be rejected by Leggett later in his career. Even at this time there is little in his actual theater reviews that shows that he is in any way really concerned about the alleged immorality of the theater.

At times he lends support to the idea that only gentlemen have the refinement needed to write literature. A review of *Fanshawe,* Nathaniel Hawthorne's anonymously published first novel, provides an example of Leggett's aping of genteel literary discourse.[44] Leggett praises the author for the careful depiction of social

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[42] Leggett, *The Narrative of Major Abraham Leggett*.
[43] Leggett, "Prefatory Remarks."
[44] Leggett deserves credit for his powers of literary-critical prediction in this review when he writes of the author of *Fanshawe* that "The mind that produced this little, interesting volume, is capable of making great and rich additions to our native literature…" Of course later in his career Leggett might have revised his opinion of the value of those additions.

interactions between his characters. These interactions prove that the author is a gentleman, Leggett claims, "for none but a gentleman understands these things." He adds that "we are full persuaded that it takes a gentleman to describe a gentleman. Your common writers make such stiff, such tape and buckram creatures of them, that they are truly unsupportable."[45] These lines are at odds with the anti-aristocratic strains in Leggett's later writing and even with the republican politics found in his early poetry. Also it is hard to read these lines and not see them in part as a self-critique: Leggett was right that Hawthorne was from a privileged background and knew more about the social interactions of the upper class than he did. On some level, Leggett must have realized that he was much closer to the category of "common writer" than he was to "gentleman." Do what degree did Leggett see the term "common writer" as pejorative? His own fiction does not depict the society of gentlemen but that of sailors and frontier settlers, with which he was familiar.

Some hints of impatience with the conventional morality of the period's fiction also comes through in *The Critic.* In a profile of Washington Irving that is mostly laudatory, Leggett suggests at the end that perhaps Irving presents the world with "too uniform sweetness."[46] And in his very admiring review of *Fanshawe,* Leggett quibbles over the improbable plot and "too much villany" in the bad characters.[47] Leggett would shortly move away from some of these conventional views and style, but only when he moved from writing literary criticism and started

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[45] William Leggett, Review of *Fanshawe, a Tale*, *The Critic,* Nov. 22, 53-54.
[46] William Leggett, "Washington Irving," *The Critic*, Jan. 17 1829.
[47] Leggett, Review of *Fanshawe, a Tale*.

writing political editorials. At that point he would become an implacable and influential critic of the genteel culture than underlay those views.[48]

Leggett was hired at the *Evening Post* in 1829, and even though, according to the paper's editor, William Cullen Bryant, Leggett insists on being hired that he not be asked to write political editorials, within a few months he is doing so. This political writing quickly became the focus of this work and the source of his reputation among his contemporaries. His literary career does not end when he starts writing political editorials for the *Evening Post*. He publishes at least eight short stories over the next few years, mostly in the *New York Mirror*, all but one of which were published in his last collection *Naval Stories*. His literary career seems to only come to end in 1834, the year in which he takes over editorship of the *Post* on Bryant's departure for Europe and sees *Naval Stories* published. [49]

In his later short stories and his journalism, Leggett proves to have a more distinctive voice in his prose than he did in his poetry. He also develops a more

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[48] One exception to this is Leggett's views on women which seemed to stay in the conventional mold for his whole career. The exacting and infantilizing vision of feminine morality seen in his early short stories (such as "Near-Sighted") is still evident in a late review of Burke in *The Plaindealer.* In that review, Leggett is happy to see that a new expurgated version of Burke's *Aesthetics* is now available which will finally make the work appropriate for the education of women and children. (around May-June '37). These traditional views of sexual morality may account for Leggett's tendency to refer to the political views of Byron but not of Shelley, who would seem to be just as appropriate an influence but who was associated with "free love" views that scandalized Christians and moralists of the day. For an instance of Leggett specifically disclaiming the influence of Shelley's "free love" views on the Locofocos see William Leggett, *Democratick Editorials: Essays in Jacksonian Political Economy by William Leggett*, ed. Lawrence H. White (Indianapolis: LibertyPress, 1984), 258-60.

[49] Bryant, "Reminices," 326 and Procter, "William Leggett."

coherent voice. The stories collected in *Naval Storie*s engage more with society and sometimes directly with politics than his earlier work did.

In *Naval Stories,* the connection with the Romantics appears again; and again, as in the poetry, those connections are to the politics associated with Byron and not to the pan-theism or neo-Platonism of Shelley or Wordsworth. As noted earlier, most of the epigrams to the stories in this collection are from Byron. Heroic republican revolutionaries are central to one story, "The Mess-Chest," which depicts the aftermath of a failed constitutionalist movement in Spain in the early 1820s. The narrator notes admiringly the heroism of Rafael de Riego, the Spanish general who lead the movement that established a parliamentary government over parts of Spain, called the Cortes, which banned the Inquisition and supported public education and some land reforms. Within three years, however, the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, with the help of a French army provided by Louis XVIII, toppled the Cortes government and had Reigo executed. In Leggett's story, some American Navy officers are ashore in Spain to witness the public celebrations as Ferdinand returns to power. The narrator tells us that it is clear that the people are not happy about Ferdinand's return and are lighting bonfires only because a national celebration has been ordered.[50] The story relates the secret efforts of one of the officers to help a constitutionalist escape from Royalist forces. This effort is secret even from the narrator, the officer's best friend, because of the risk involved in stowing the refugee aboard a U.S. Navy ship when the U.S. is officially neutral in the Spanish affair.[51] The political view Leggett expresses in this story may be retrospective; he may be

[50] William Leggett, *Naval Stories* (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1834), 89.
[51] Leggett, *Naval Stories,* 87-108.

applying the political consciousness he had developed by the early 1830s to his experiences in the Navy ten years earlier. In any case, his writing in this story takes a different perspective on political events than his early poetry did. In the poems he was a chronicler of the successes or failures of the republican movements, but now he is imagining his autobiographical sailor characters as participants in these movements, actively aiding them. The understanding of the nature of the struggle is more mature also. It is no longer a question of a manly military struggle in which one faces glorious success as in his poem on the Greek fighter or shameful failure as in his scathing lines on Italy. "The Mess-Chest" acknowledges failure and presents the struggle as one of tactics, cunning, and perseverance. In escaping to the U.S., the Spanish republican has forgone a heroic death to survive and continue the fight. That he is disguised as a woman in the course of his escape underlines the rejection of the traditional ideas of masculine military honor between the early poems and these stories. Also the devotion to the republican movement transcends nationalism. The American sailor breaks the rules of the U.S. Navy and U.S. law to help the Spanish republican escape. The Spaniard in turn is an outlaw in his own country but can count on support from an international community of compatriots.

Leggett generally depicts the struggle for democracy as an international or at least trans-Atlantic one. "The Mess-Chest" expresses his support for this struggle fairly directly and indirectly criticizes the U.S. policy of neutrality in that struggle. He supports the Italian and Greek independence movements in his early poetry and casts his American political cause in the rhetorical terms of the republican struggle in Europe. He consistently refers to his political opponents as aristocrats and as

attempting to establish aristocracy in the U.S. This was a familiar rhetorical strategy: the Democrats had accused their enemies of aristocratic and monarchic sentiments since the time of Jefferson and Hamilton.[52] But Leggett seemed to genuinely fear that the legal privileges of charters, banks, other special legislation would lead to an essentially aristocratic or feudal system. He seems to be sincere when he argues in one piece that the granting of such legal privileges could be attacked on the grounds that it violates the provision in the Constitution forbidding the granting of titles of nobility.[53]

On some level Leggett probably realized that Democrats in the U.S. were not likely to meet the same fate as Rafael de Reigo and other European radicals, but he draws on the comparisons to Europe regularly. In the "Aristocratic Education" piece discussed at the beginning of the chapter, Leggett says that in France and Germany college students have sided with republican movements, but in the U.S. "the colleges are the very nurseries of young aristocrats," and most of the students are Whigs.[54] He also compares the palaces of Genoa to the grand buildings of Wall Street and declares that the "Serfs of free America!" are under the power of the country's "exchequer barons."[55] And when he defends the rights of workers to organize he notes that workers in the U.S. and "almost all of Europe" are organized against

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[52] Hamilton was regularly accused in the partisan press of colluding with the king of England to have himself installed as ruler of America. That Jefferson's up-bringing and life as the inheritor of a large plantation was far more aristocratic than Hamilton's fairly humble beginnings as a clerk and immigrant was generally elided by Democratic partisan writers (Leggett included).

[53] William Leggett, "American Nobility" in *Democratick Editorials: Essays in Jacksonian Political Economy by William Leggett*, ed. Lawrence H. White (Indianapolis: LibertyPress, 1984), 252.

[54] Leggett, "Aristocratic Education."

[55] Leggett, "The Street of the Palaces" in *Democratick Editorials,* 250-52.

"monopoly and corporate privileges"[56] (though in this case it is hard to know what basis Leggett had for imagining this international workers' movement).

The trans-Atlantic view extends to Leggett's comparisons of European culture to American culture and contributes to his critique of distinctive culture as aristocratic. This view is a challenge to the cultural nationalism espoused by so many other Democrats in that era, though I don't think Leggett ever says so directly. In defending the suffrage of the "laboring classes" Leggett as usual ties his criticism of his opponents to European aristocracy, but he then extends the comparison from democratic politics to democratic access to knowledge. Countering the Whig argument that the laboring classes are too ignorant to be allowed to vote, Leggett asserts that those classes might have been kept ignorant in the Old World but that in the United States that objection does not apply because knowledge has been distributed so widely. In making this argument he makes two interesting points. First, he makes a virtue out the country's lack of great scientific accomplishments in a way that is analogous to his criticism of "distinctive" literature—as Leggett puts it, "Great scholars and profound philosophers are more scarce than ever in these times, while the general diffusion of intelligence is a hundred degrees greater. We have no Lockes, nor Newtons, nor Bacons; but we have a whole people imbued with the seeds of useful knowledge."[57] Second, he stresses that the working people of America. possess useful knowledge and distinguishes that from book knowledge, which he associates with anti-democratic, elitist views. Useful practical knowledge is what is needed in this era and book knowledge is insubstantial and removed from everyday life. Leggett

[56] Leggett, "Rich and Poor" in *Democratick Editorials*, 248-49.
[57] Leggett, "The Democracy."

also connects book knowledge to that great Jacksonian evil, paper money and scrip (private bank notes), offering paper and print as an over-arching image for the forces that oppose democracy and the people. This curious image will be discussed further in the section on democracy and culture. The first point is important now for what Leggett's celebration of cultural leveling says about his nationalism.

Actually Leggett could be said to exhibit something like *anationalism*, at least when compared to other Jacksonian Democrats. The idea of cultural nationalism becomes very important to Democrats in this era, most notably to the Young America circle of writers and editors. Such a belief was part of John Louis O'Sullivan's manifesto for the *Democratic Review*. The literary democrats were hoping that democratic society could give rise to a great and democratic literature.[58] But this is not a goal that interests Leggett, who of course sees cultural distinction as deeply suspect. He comes to embrace the idea that a democracy will *not* enjoy the great cultural accomplishments found in aristocratic/monarchic Europe. He defends democracy by arguing that the "uniformity" and "monotony" of its culture is preferable because it is available to far more people than in non-democracies.[59] His argument draws from Jeremy Bentham whose axiom that government should provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number is cited often by Leggett. His views here are a defiant response to the cultural conservatives who worried about the fate of culture under the rule of an ignorant and uncultured people. Leggett's view is pointedly different both from those conservatives and from the nationalists who were awaiting the great poet of democracy. He proposes that great literature and art may be

[58] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale*, 110-12.
[59] Leggett, "Theory and Practice" in *Democratick Editorials,* 165-70.

the price we pay for a democratic society but that democracy is still worth it because it allows for greater happiness overall. Leggett holds that popular governments have been happiest, even if they have not necessarily the grandest.[60]

Leggett even displays skepticism at the trappings of one of the wellsprings of republican nationalism: the Revolutionary War. In 1834, he objects to New York City's Board of Assistant Alderman voting to give $100 to all surviving veterans of the Revolutionary War. He holds to his limited government principles and says that the board has no right to spend tax dollars this way. His own father, he points out, would benefit from the money, but for him the principle here is not letting sentiment lead to an abuse of the law. He counters the sentiment by pointing out that many of the veterans entered the war "with no higher motives than animate the soldier in every contest" but because the war is so celebrated now they are all seen "a band of disinterested, exalted, incorruptible and invincible patriots."[61] This critique exhibits, aside from his characteristic disagreeableness, Leggett's insistence that public discourse and government be guided by reason. His Enlightenment belief in reason and the universalism that underlies it is the basis for his trans-national view of the republican cause and his resistance to some elements of nationalism and the Romantic ideas that celebrated the subjective and individual.

While Leggett expresses some skepticism about nationalism, it is important to point out that he did not reject the national project of expansion. When he defends the poor European immigrants that are arriving in New York City, he does so on the grounds that they can contribute a great deal to the country by working, settling land

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[60] Leggett, *Democratick Editorials*, 167.
[61] Leggett, "Revolutionary Pensioners" in *Democratick Editorials,* 296-97.

in the frontier, and farming.[62] Leggett doesn't romanticize the frontier like other writers in the Northeast (perhaps because he actually lived in a frontier town). For him settlement and expansion are all about eliminating the United States' trade imbalance with Europe. He nonetheless unquestioningly endorses manifest destiny as a national goal. His comments on the removal of the Native American tribes East of the Mississippi reveal a conflict between his rationalism and the national (and political) ideology in which he is involved. In late 1829, he comments on an appeal that some activists have signed requesting that Congress act to stop the "injustice and oppression" the Cherokees are being subjected to. Leggett finds that these activists are making too much fuss about the issue; he says that "The subject has been treated by some, as if the Indians were to be forcibly removed."[63] A few years later, after the passage of the Indian Removal Act, he is still treating the issue as though the Cherokees can count on the legal system to resolve their complaint. He says that the government should uphold any treaties it has made with them and seems to be confident that it will.[64] In his comments on the issue, Leggett is a bit exasperated that the Cherokees and some white reformers persist in complaining. It is hard to say whether Leggett's confidence that the Cherokees will be treated justly is due to ignorance or disingenuousness (or both). His responses are of course a partisan defense of his political idol President Andrew Jackson who pushed strongly for Indian removal. Leggett's views on Native Americans are similar to his initial views on abolition and slavery: he defends the Democratic party's position on slavery which

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[62] William Leggett, "Paupers," *The Examiner*, June 14, 1837.
[63] William Leggett, Editorial, *New-York Evening Post*, Dec. 29, 1829.
[64] William Leggett, Editorial, *New-York Evening Post*, July 1, 1831.

faults abolitionists for being extremists who complain too much about the issue and whose aims violate states' rights. But the issue of abolition eventually has an impact closer to home than the issue of Indian removal ever could. His response to abolition becomes one of the defining moves of his career.

Leggett gradually developed his abolitionist views out of his initial support for the free speech rights of abolitionists. He defended them against censorship by the post office and the harassment by mobs that abolitionists in New York faced in the 1830s. At this stage he is still careful to say that he does not support the views of the abolitionists only their right to express those views. His main objection to them (and the standard objection of the Democratic party) is that the abolitionists are extremists whose calls for the eradication of slavery are unconstitutional because they violate the rights of the slave states and whose pursuit of these goals will lead to turmoil in the country.[65] But his attempts to support the abolitionists and disagree with them at the same time in order to stay on the right side of party doctrine lead him into contradictions. One article from 1835 reveals the incoherence of his and his party's views on the abolitionists. Responding to a statement from the governor of South Carolina, Leggett denies that "the democracy" supports abolitionists' views in the North. He claims that abolitionists like Garrison are aristocrats who are not concerned with the white working class in the Northeast and who would like to the slaves freed because they would be a source of cheap labor that would undermine the white working class and lower wages everywhere. This article is one of the most cynical that Leggett ever wrote. He is arguing in essence that the democrats in the North East

[65] Leggett, "Riot at the Chatham-Street Chapel" and "The Abolitionists" in *Democratick Editorials*, 191-92 and 197-98.

do not oppose slavery because freed slaves would hurt the interests of their constituency, white laborers. And that this political interest comes before the equal rights which even in this article he asserts is the party's guiding principle.[66] The cynicism and racism that Leggett attributes to the Democrats' anti-abolition views is actually fairly accurate, but his presentation of those views in this article represents a level of disingenuousness that Leggett can't keep up for long.

Over the rest of that year Leggett tries to articulate a position that opposes slavery on principle and supports the rights of the abolitionists while disagreeing with the radical demands of the abolitionist in keeping with the Democratic states rights position. He seems to have been driven to these views in reaction to the behavior of Southern defenders of slavery. When abolitionist mail is seized by the post office in South Carolina, Leggett calls it an "outrage" and defends the abolitionists as decent men who are merely "misguided" on one issue.[67] He is outraged again when a New Orleans paper offers a reward for the kidnapping of the noted abolitionists and New Yorker, Arthur Tappan.[68] But the last straw, and the point on which he tries to win over his democratic readership in the *Evening Post* to his brand of quasi-abolitionism, is when he reads Southern newspapers arguing that slavery is not an evil and that wanting gradual and eventual emancipation (as Leggett does) is as bad and offensive as wanting it immediately (as the abolitionists do). In his response to this, he refers to slavery as "the foulest stigma on our national escutcheon" and invokes Jefferson and Madison who, even though they owned slaves, hoped that the practice would some

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[66] Leggett, "Governor McDuffie's Message" in *Democratick Editorials,* 193-96.
[67] Leggett, "The Abolitionists" in *Democratick Editorials*, 197-98.
[68] Leggett, "Reward for Arthur Tappan" in *Democratick Editorials*, 199-201.

day be eliminated. He ends this piece by saying that he would rather let the union be broken than maintain it on the condition of silence on and indefinite acceptance of slavery.[69] He picks up the discussion of slavery from this point a few years later in his own paper *The Plaindealer*,[70] but this is already to far for an established Democratic paper like the *Post*.

Leggett's views on slavery were a violation not merely of a party principle but of a virtual taboo among Democrats. This is made clear in the profile Bryant wrote of Leggett for the *Democratic Review* shortly after Leggett's death. Bryant leads into the discussion by referring to the anti-abolitionist riots in 1835 and the stand that the *Evening Post* took in defense of the rights of the abolitionists. Bryant touches on the frankness of Leggett's abolitionist views in the following oblique fashion: "Mr. Leggett's impetuous and uncompromising abhorrence of lawless violence, and of any attempt to impose the slightest restraint upon the widest and boldest freedom of discussion, thus led him, a certain extent, in a direction much deprecated for its indiscretion, by most of his friends…" Bryant adds though that Leggett still kept his anti-slavery views within the bounds of "State-Rights Democracy" by denying that the Federal government had the power to make slavery illegal.[71] Bryant doesn't

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[69] Leggett, "Slavery No Evil" in *Democratick Editorials*, 208-12.
[70] In *The Plaindealer*, Leggett makes the identification of the slaves cause with that of the founders more explicit as his outrage over slavery and its defenders grows. He writes "The oppression which our fathers suffered from Great Britain was nothing in comparison with that which the negroes experience at the hands of the slaveholders." He notes with disgust that a slave rebellion would be put down by fighters under the American flag, making the flag "a standard of oppression," and that he would rather have his right arm cut off and be mutilated than fight against slaves who want freedom. He would be sad to see such a conflict come, but he would hope for victory for the slaves. Leggett, "Abolition Insolence" in *Democratick Editorials*, 228-30.
[71] Bryant, "Political Portraits," 24.

mention in this posthumous tribute that Leggett's anti-slavery views contributed to his being removed as editor of the *Post.*

Leggett's views on abolition show that, like many political writers, he could be very bad at politics. In another instance of this in 1834, Leggett essentially dares the Democratic party to withdraw the patronage that it provides to the *Evening Post*, adding that it only amounts to $40 or $50 per year in advertising anyway. He didn't do this because the party had criticized him but because it had praised him. In a recent official party announcement, the Democrats had praised first the fairly recently established *New York Times*[72] and then the *Post* for their support of the party. Leggett sees this endorsement as an insult to his intellectual independence because it implies that he is only a political functionary or, worse, that his political views can be bought for only $40 a year. He is particularly galled by having his paper lumped in with the *Times* which he sees as more slavishly orthodox in its support of the party and as only *"*a paper of yesterday" compared with the well-established *Post.*[73]

This odd episode illustrates the intense devotion Leggett had for the republican ideal of the independent individual. He regularly asserts the independence of his views, and a few years after the above challenge to the Democrats, the party did withdraw its patronage from the *Evening Post* (in part because of Leggett's pro-abolitionist views).[74] Strident intellectual independence could be a liability in the newspaper business of Leggett's time (and in ours for that matter). Leggett's career as

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[72] Not related to today's *Times*, which was founded in 1851, but an earlier paper with the same name.
[73] William Leggett, *A Collection of the Political Writings of William Leggett* (New York: Taylor & Dodd, 1840), 44-47.
[74] Bryant, "Reminices of the "Evening Post"," 331-32.

a writer might prove that one could be truly independent-minded, but the course of his life and the history of the period show that Leggett's belief in independence was very much an act of faith. He insisted on the ability of the individual to control his own destiny in spite of the fact that the economic disasters and political machinations he spent so much time criticizing proved over and over that a great many people had very little control over their fates.

Leggett's own early history illustrates this lack of control in the face of the economic turmoil of the era. His family experienced the failure of this father's business and a reduction in their circumstances. As David Reynolds has pointed out, this experience of a "failed father" was shared by many in this period, including many noted writers, and it was often the result of economic upheavals.[75] Melville, Whitman, and others had to face at a relatively young age the failure of their father's businesses and a reduction in their circumstances and perhaps opportunities. This shared experience underscores the insecurity that marked the economy of the U.S. at this early stage of its development into a market economy. In a study that sees this economic change as the defining feature of the period, Charles Sellers finds that the more radical supporters of democracy in the early republic were reacting against the instability of the market.[76] Leggett's political and cultural critique may have been formed by the damaging effects of market capitalism but he always sees the solution to society's problems in free market ideology.

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[75] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 22.
[76] Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 30-32.

The high value and great faith that Leggett placed on independence shows his allegiance to an important element in the republican ideology of the time. A belief in independence was an important component of the ideology of republicans in New York City and other cities in the Northeast. These were the artisans of the city, who claimed Jefferson as their intellectual forbear and Jackson as their hero, and who made up the audience and constituency that Leggett, like many other journalists, imagined for his work. Even though Leggett himself was not an artisan or laborer, the class identity developed by activists and leaders of this population was central to his ideas about democracy and to his conception of the role of the writer and artist in a democratic society. The application of ideas about the market to reformist democratic ideas was engaged in by many others at this time, and the relationship between Leggett and his contemporaries in this regard is worth tracing.

In his study of working class movements in New York City in this period, Sean Wilentz describes the central importance of independence as a component of republican ideology and traces the way this idea is adapted to the changing economics and labor relations in this period. He notes that independence was one of the basic principles of republican beliefs (along with social contribution, virtue, and equality).[77] The independence being considered here is independence from the influence of others, the kind of independence that a true citizen of the republic needs to have in order to play a role in the governing of the state—in other words in order to

[77] Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 14, 90-94.

vote. The issue of independence was raised by those who opposed extending the vote to the laboring class.[78]

The laboring classes were accused by conservatives of lacking independence because they lacked money or property, and as a result their decisions about government would be based on their material needs instead of enlightened reason. Leggett's response to these criticisms in a series of articles in the *Evening Post* in 1834 shows the connections he makes between artisan independence and free market economics. Leggett makes the curious gambit of defending the independence of the laboring classes by asserting the *dependence* of the classes on each other. As he sees it, no class is truly independent of the other. "That all mankind in the social state are more or less dependent on each other," he writes "is a truth that no one will dispute. Their mutual wants make them so, and create a community of interests, which is the great foundation of the social system." And, since the laboring classes produce the country's food and national wealth, the rich are actually more dependent on the laborers than vice versa.[79]

Leggett's roundabout defense of worker independence exemplifies two economic ideas that were important in the conceptualization of worker's rights in this period. One is the Ricardian labor theory of value; the English economist David Ricardo proposed that the value of goods depended on the amount of labor required to produce them. Ricardian ideas about producers were widely adopted in England and

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[78] I am deliberately (though perhaps not entirely consistently) avoiding the phrase "working class" because it is so strongly associated with the Marxian ideas of class consciousness and the proletariat. I want to avoid those associations in order to present the ideas about labor and class identity under consideration on their own terms. The phrase "laboring class" is the one used most often by Leggett.

[79] Leggett, "The Democracy."

the U.S. by labor activists and their sympathizers, who extended these ideas, as Leggett did, to argue that all of a nation's wealth ultimately derives from its laborers. The other idea is that of a free market composed of economic actors each pursuing their own interests. Leggett's "community of interests" comes out of the idea of the interdependent market that Adam Smith proposes in *Wealth of Nations.* Leggett follows Smith in holding that the community of interests can be in balance if the laws of the market are allowed to operate.[80]

Labor activists adapted these economic ideas to defend their rights to organize and demand better working conditions and wages. Wilentz notes this development in the case of the General Trades Union (GTU), a large and important labor organization that grew in New York in 1830s. The GTU's theory of labor was rooted in concepts of property rights and free markets. They held that the laborer had the right to demand a price for his labor and to not have that labor stolen through exploitation or underpayment. They criticized existing labor relations for not operating according to market principles on the grounds that when labor was scarce wages should have gone up, but they had not. Wilentz sees the unions at this stage adapting republicanism with its roots in craft and artisan organization to a more modern capitalist/industrial labor relations. The connection to artisan Republican ideology was made by a GTU leader who argued that the independence of the worker is threatened when the worker was degraded by low wages or poor working conditions. The idea that the worker had

[80] Leggett often acknowledged the influence of Smith on this thinking. He wrote once that Smith "taught a lesson of freedom which mankind will never forget." Leggett, "A Little Free-Trade Crazy" in *Democratick Editorials,* 288.

a right to demand fair wages and conditions was rooted in the idea that his labor was his property and that exploitation of his labor infringed on his property rights.[81]

This early form of free labor ideology, which would later play an important role in the Republican party, has met with a variety of interpretations. Wilentz finds that the analysis of labor relations developed by the GTU and other labor activists at this time was distinct from but just as valuable as any developed by their contemporaries in Europe.[82] This evaluation by Wilentz is an indirect critique of the tendency he identifies in his introduction of historians' looking in the beginnings of industrial organization in the U.S. for signs of class consciousness that fit a particular model. He calls this tendency "essentialist" and generally it amounts to looking for signs of Marxian class identity and either finding it where it didn't exist or expressing disappointment at its absence.[83] The current discussion does not need to stray too far into the history of labor movements however. It is more relevant to consider the relationship between the labor movements and a free market inspired political group that broke away from the mainstream Tammany Hall Democrats, the Locofocos, officially known as the Equal Rights Party.

William Leggett is commonly referred to as "one of [the] chief prophets and forerunners,"[84] "intellectual leader,"[85] or "ideological patron saint"[86] of the Locofocos. When his name is mentioned in histories of New York City or of politics

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[81] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic,* 240-45.
[82] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 243.
[83] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 15-16.
[84] John Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of "Young America*," 18.
[85] Richard Hofstadter, "William Leggett, Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy," *Political Science Quarterly* 58 (1943): 582.
[86] Bender, *New York Intellect,* 147.

it is generally in reference to his intellectual influence on this political movement and through it his indirect influence on the direction of the Democratic party in the decades before the Civil War. Leggett, however, was never a member of the Locofoco party or even a participant in its activities. As we've seen, Leggett was willing to criticize mainstream Democratic leaders and opinion makers, and it was his insistent criticism of the Tammany Democrats on free market and equal rights grounds that inspired some to challenge and ultimately break away from the party. The central issues for the Locofocos, following Leggett, were corporate charters and banking: they opposed the granting of special corporate charters by the New York State legislature, which often granted monopolies and special privileges to those corporations, and they opposed state run banks. Tammany Hall Democrats supported equal rights and free markets in principle but the granting of charters was an important source of political power, and they resisted changing the process. Likewise, the Democrats, like all good followers of Andrew Jackson, were opposed to state-run banks, at least in the case of the federally-sponsored Bank of the United States. But the banks established by New York State, which Leggett and his cohort found just as obnoxious on principle, were to state politicians less troubling, because of course their operation involved a great deal of local power and influence.[87] The Locofocos pushed for laws to establish general incorporation and private banking that would

[87] Hofstadter, "William Leggett, Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy," 586 and passim.

enable investors and capitalists to establish corporations and banks without having to get a specific grant from the state legislature.[88]

Clearly these issues did not directly effect the laboring class whose cause Leggett and other reformist Democrats purportedly took up. As they saw it, existing system of banking and corporate charters was wrong in principle because it gave the elite and politically connected rights that everyone else did not have. It was also wrong in practice since the chartered businesses and banks were protected from market forces: a business with a state-granted monopoly could charge what it liked because it had no competitors, which lead to higher prices for workers; the banks extended too much credit which lead to panics and crashes, and they only lent money to those who were politically connected denying credit to artisans who wanted to expand their businesses.[89]

The relationship between the Locofocos and the labor movements is complicated, but it is worth noting the degree to which they both shared similar beliefs in free labor and the market, which Leggett played an important role in popularizing. The party is generally credited with influencing the Democrats adoption of free banking and anti-monopoly rhetoric and some moderate versions of their reforms, although there was a popular movement against the existing bank system in

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[88] Bray Hammond, "Free Banks and Corporations: The New York Free Banking Act of 1838," *The Journal of Political Economy* 44, no. 2 (1936): 184-93.

[89] For a précis of Leggett's criticism of the banking system's many failings, see Leggett, "The Monopoly Banking System" in *Democratick Editorials*, 74-83. For a defense of democratic availability of credit see Leggett, "The Credit System and the Aristocracy" in *Democratick Editorials*, 180-85. For a criticism of monopolies in general see Leggett, "The Ferry Monopoly" in *Democratick Editorials*, 301-04.

New York State after the Panic of 1837, which contributed to the push for reforms.[90] Discussions of the Locofocos tend to revolve around the degree to which they were or were not a working class or labor movement.[91] Even though the Locofocos occupy the sidelines of Wilentz' study (which focuses on groups more directly concerned with labor issues) he shows their connections to the labor movements through common party membership and leaders and through a shared adherence to the free market/free labor ideas (influenced by Ricardian economics) that extolled the "productive" members of society. The important class distinction in this period was between the producers and the non-producers in society.[92] For my purposes this producer class identity is the most interesting connection because of the implications it has for Leggett's cultural criticism.

There is a corollary to the labor theory of value and the admiration of the productive laboring classes that is important in Leggett's work: if the work of laborers constitutes the value of all the nation's goods then the work of the elites (the

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[90] Hammond, "Free Banks and Corporations," 194.

[91] The Locofoco's political legacy, while interesting, is not directly relevant here. They are credited (or blamed) with legal changes that shaped modern banking in the United States and helped establish the corporation as a dominant legal form. See Hammond, "Free Banks and Corporations," 184-209. Degler sees their contributions to industrial organization as inadvertent; the Locofocos were actually after an updated version of Jeffersonian agrarianism, Carl N. Degler, "The Locofocos: Urban "Agrarians"," *Journal of Economic History* 16, no. 3 (1956). Dorfman, like Wilentz, notes their use of Ricardian labor value theory but questions the association of Locofocos with a labor movement in the way that term is understood in the twentieth century. Joseph Dorfman, "The Jackson Wage-Earner Thesis," *American Historical Review* 54, no. 2 (1949). Hugins on the other hand treats the Locofocos as a reincarnated form of the short-lived Workingmen's party. Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford: 1960). Wilentz disagrees with Hugins and makes a point of establishing the differences between the Locofocos and the labor movements.

[92] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 17, 70-71.

gentility, the aristocrats, etc.) contributes nothing to national wealth or to society. Leggett and many others held this view. It was part of the artisan culture of the time. Wilentz cites a toast that went: "Less respect to the consuming speculator, who wallows in luxury, then [sic?] to the productive mechanic, who struggles with indigence."[93] And he notes that radicals like Skidmore (who was the more radical agrarian of the founders of the Workingmen's Party) and Fanny Wright made use of the producer-consumer distinction.[94] It was not always clear who qualified as a producer; farmers and workers in construction or small manufacturing firms clearly qualified, but sometimes the term could be extended to shopkeepers or clerks.[95] But it was usually clear who the non-producers were. The most common examples are the lawyer, banker, and merchant. Since these people don't produce any actual goods they don't contribute to the wealth of the society. This criticism fed the anti-bank and anti-monopoly sentiment among Jacksonian Democrats. Also, as we've seen Leggett's defense of the voting rights of the laboring classes relies in part on the workers' contributions to society as producers. These contributions don't in themselves entitle laborers to vote (Leggett felt this was a natural right, not one earned by productivity). However, the productivity argument establishes that laborers have a stake in the community, which is something that the Whigs denied. Their status as producers also establishes their independence (in Leggett's roundabout manner of arguing this) by showing that the rich are actually dependent on the

[93] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 70-71.
[94] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 176-78, 85-88.
[95] Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, Ch. 4.

laboring classes because the workers produce the goods that meet the country's needs and constitute its wealth.

Leggett used this distinction to sketch out his overview of the development of two major political parties since the early republic; as he sees it the party of Jefferson and Jackson has traditionally been composed of the producers, and their opponents have consisted of the "rich, the proud, the privileged."[96] It was also an important element in his defense of the suffrage rights of the laboring classes. However it is important to point out that even though Leggett relies on this labor-centric idea in his analysis of society he was not a consistent supporter of unions. At some points he supports union organization as a key to countering the power of the rich. In 1834, he advises workers that some of the abuses they suffer can be countered by union organization, or "COMBINATION," a word he says has "magic" in it. He adds "Why are the producers of all the wealth of society the poorest, most despised and most down-trodden class of men? ...because they are ignorant of their own strength."[97] Leggett supports the unions as they grow during the 1830s.[98] However, in the immediate aftermath of the Panic of 1837 he become more critical of them. When a protest over the price of flour turns into a small riot, Leggett blames the General Trades Union for the unrest and says that they can hardly criticize merchants for

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[96] Leggett, "The Despotism of Andrew Jackson" in *Democratick Editorials,* 244.
[97] Leggett, "Uncurrent Bank Notes" in *Democratick Editorials,* 85-86.
[98] The piece by Leggett just cited was written about a year before the labor crisis of 1836 during which the local national guard was called to break a strike and a New York State judge convicted a tailor's union of conspiracy for organizing. (Wilentz, *Chants Democratic,* 288-94) There are no comments from Leggett on this crisis because he was seriously ill for most of 1836 and didn't publish. (See Bryant, "Political Portraits in Pen and Pencil," 24.) However, the *Evening Post* did support the laborers in spite of the prevailing opinion against them. (See Bryant, "Reminices of the "Evening Post"," 331-32.)

conspiring to drive up the price of flour when they have conspired to drive up the price of labor.[99] Even after Leggett's enthusiasm for labor organization fails he still adheres to the producer-consumer class division in his analysis of society.

At times he takes this idea of class division so far that he seems to run against the Smithian idea of interdependence that is ostensibly the basis for his political economy. Vilifying the lawyer-banker class as good-for-nothing leeches who contribute no value to the economy of course served a political and ideological purpose. However it apparently overlooks the important point that the producers are dependant on the non-producers on the most basic level to buy the goods they produce. And, as any Adam Smith free market booster ought to point out, they need the bankers, merchants, and lawyers to fund their farms and factories and trade their goods. This interdependence between the self-interested actors in the economy is the basic principle of Adam Smith's theory.

As noted above, Leggett did at times express his belief in economic interdependence and "the community of interests," but two factors drove him away from seeing society as a collection of self-interested actors. One, was his anger at the greedy and anti-democratic practices he saw in the elites. The other was the idea that a government that responded to interest groups would rob its citizens of their independence. In a piece called "True Functions of Government," Leggett addresses these basic issues, though without directly mentioning Smith. He discusses the balance between "the selfish feeling" and "the social feeling" in society. The selfish feeling, "in its proper exercise, is the parent of all worldly good, and, in its excesses,

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[99] Leggett, "The Way to Cheapen Flour" in *Democratick Editorials,* 109-11.

the root of all evil."[100] The reference to the benefits of self-interest is a nod to Smith's influence. However, it's clear that Leggett has reservations about a model of politics based on the selfish interest. He hopes that the social feeling might apply more. Specifically, he says that a government that responded to the lobbying of various interest groups would become a corrupt dispenser of favors that would favor some groups over others. This practice would be a "disguised despotism" which would rob the citizen of his independence by making him dependent on the whims of government.[101] His opposition to this version of interest group politics makes it clear that however much Leggett might extol competition and the market his political ideal is dependent on a belief in the cooperative communitarian spirit. This spirit, the "social feeling," is what Leggett hopes a democratic culture will promote. Recall that when Leggett objects to distinctive literature and aristocratic history he does so precisely because they contribute to the growth of the "selfish feeling."

The idea of "selfish feeling" is what allows Leggett to vilify the rich while still believing in the communitarian ideas that underlie his belief in democracy. The rich, the aristocrats, are not part of the natural community since their selfish feeling is in excess, not properly balanced with the social feeling. Their selfishness and their status as non-producers allows him to write them almost completely out of society.

Leggett's denigration of the work that the elites do returns us to the central issue of democracy and culture. Now we can look at what sort of work is it that these elites do, and what the relationship is between that work and culture. Leggett's denigration of their work was not just metaphorical. He seems to be entirely serious

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[100] Leggett, "True Functions of Government" in *Democratick Editorials,* 3.
[101] Leggett, "True Functions of Government" in *Democratick Editorials,* 4-6.

and literal when he describes bankers, for example, as doing no work. He writes in one piece of the "bankers and others, who choose to live in idleness by their wits rather than earn an honest livelihood by the useful employment of their faculties.…" He is complaining about the government favors handed out to this class of people at the expense of the genuinely productive and "useful" laboring classes.[102] It is curious to see Leggett, a writer and (in our terms) an intellectual, criticizing those who live by their wits, but that is just the point of the criticism. Nonetheless the bankers were doing something in their offices day after day, as were the lawyers and merchants. Portraying them as idle means seeing them as merely using up the paper, lamp oil, and food that the producers of the country had generated. But these workers were consuming something aside from physical resources that nineteenth-century political economy does not do a good job of accounting for: information.

The key distinction between the work of the artisan-mechanic class and that of bankers, lawyers, and merchants is that the later worked with and produced information. They were what we might today call knowledge-workers, and their work involved the interpretation as well as the consumption of information. So the artisan republican identity is built in part as an opposition to the role of consumer-interpreter. This identity would seem to create problems for a writer and intellectual like Leggett. How can he do this non-productive informational-interpretive work without becoming one of those parasitical paper-pusher that he criticizes? Leggett, it seems, never stops to ask that question. He simply assumes that a writer can assume the

[102] Leggett, "The Inequality of the Human Condition" in *Democratick Editorials,* 255.

artisan producer identity and develops his ideas about writing and culture from that point.

The piece on education, which began this chapter, shows one consequence of Leggett's thinking about artisan identity and culture. The idea of literary "distinctiveness" is aligned with the aristocrats. The writing of the artisan writer is expected to be in some way indistinct or everyday. This literature would be like the scientific knowledge or artistic accomplishments in the U.S. as Leggett describes them. It would not reach the great heights that European art or science had but it would reach more people, benefiting more of humanity and being more democratic. It would accord with the Benthamite principle of doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. By contrast, the distinctive literature, along with aristocratic history and "individual" philosophy bring out the "selfish feelings of the mind" which would only promote the creation of more aristocrats who will not feel their shared humanity with the lower classes. The non-distinctive literature would do more to promote this feeling of community because it would be familiar and resemble the life of its readers and would allow them to see each other and to recognize their common fate.[103]

But even this claim for literature and writing may be going too far, ascribing a central role to literature that Leggett did not believe it played. We have already seen how Leggett values the practical knowledge of laborers and mechanics over the paper

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[103] One of the great legacies of the Locofocos and other reformers of this period in New York was the creation of a college on these principles. They envisioned a higher educational institution in which artisans would be educated not in the culture of the upper-classes but in their own culture. Their education would be integrated into their working life. The eventual result of this movement was the Free Academy, which became today's City University of New York. Bender, *New York Intellect,* 104-05.

and book knowledge of the banker-lawyer class. And how the image of paper is used to align the flimsiness of bank notes to that of the paper knowledge of books. The end of Leggett's thinking about writing and democracy is to remove writing from the work of producing knowledge and make it as much like physical productive work as possible.

Leggett's views on copyright law show his attempt to establish the writer as a producer and not as an interpreter and manipulator of symbols. He sees writers producing a physical object, a manuscript. He thinks that a writer only has rights to the physical property of his writing, which means that a writer would own only the actual manuscript he or she produces. Once the work is published the writer loses any property claim on the words or language. The approach preserves writers' property rights to their work but places those rights on the same level as those of laborers. Leggett makes this connection explicitly. He points out that just as everyone can copy the work of a carpenter or the designs of a lace-worker they can also copy the work of a writer. He also cites Bentham in support of this argument since this system would mean cheaper royalty-free books and greater accessibility of books to the public. [104] Leggett's position against copyright is in keeping with that of other Democrats in this period, but the argument he uses is idiosyncratic. Other Democrats, like O'Sullivan at the *Democratic Review*, based their opposition to copyright on cultural nationalism.

Much of Leggett's own work, as a writer for penny newspapers, was made widely and inexpensively available. He spent the most significant part of his journalistic career at the *Evening Post* as an editor and writer. The *Post* was a large

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[104] Leggett, "Rights of Authors" in *Democratick Editorials,* 391-94.

enough paper that he was somewhat removed from the actual production of copies. However, his publishing projects before and after the *Post* were one-man operations in which he was much more involved in the actual production of the paper. He attempts one-man publication at the beginning of his career with the *Critic* and later after leaving the *Evening Post* with the *Plaindealer* and the *Examiner.* This mode was the ideal one for Leggett in that it allowed him to present himself as completely independent and also as engaged in an almost artisanal way in the production of the paper.

At almost the same time that Leggett is trying to democratize writing and make the writer into a laborer, other leading intellectuals in the city are trying to establish the modern understanding of the writer and artist as distinct and separate from everyday business. A leading figure in this movement in the arts was Samuel F. B. Morse, who founded National Academy of Design as part of a strategy to have artists judge either other's work by their own professional standards. Morse argued that artists were professionals and their own standards for art were the ones that mattered. The goal was to free artists from the standards of their patrician patrons on one side and from the public (or the market) on the other side.[105] A few years later the same idea would be applied to literature in one of the magazines of the Young America Democrats.[106] Like Morse, the Young America writers were trying to establish a place for art that was free of the city's patrician elite. But they also wanted freedom from the tastes and whims of a democratic mass audience.

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[105] Bender, *New York Intellect*, 121-30.
[106] Miller, *The Raven and the Whale*, 88.

The Young America writers are sometimes referred to as Leggett's heirs.[107] But whatever influence his politics had on them, they rejected his anti-Romantic view of art and literature. The one writer in the coming decades who adopts the Romantic-nationalist mode while at the same time taking-up Leggett's challenge to create a truly democratic literature is Walt Whitman. As we will see in a later chapter, Whitman deals the key issues that Leggett does: the artisan-producer identity and the communitarian-market ideas of society. He tries to work around the incompatibilities between the these ideas and Romantic view of the individual and the nation.

[107] Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of "Young America,"* 18.

Chapter 2: Horace Greeley: Labor, Individuality, and Literary Culture

Over the course of his long career as a newspaper editor and writer, Horace Greeley criticized some of the social changes brought about by modernization and the development of the market economy and embraced others. He welcomed the material improvements of modernization and the progress of technology and science, but he was anxious about the moral impact that these changes could have on society. In particular, he viewed greater participation in democratic politics and increased access to books and periodicals with ambivalence and even suspicion. His social critique was in some ways radically reforming and progressive and in others anti-democratic and reactionary. He could be enthusiastic about the technological progress of the age but at the same time propose a political vision that depended on a fantasy of a simple agrarian society. His thinking about both society and culture revolved around his beliefs about individual morality and the moral order of the universe. Individual morality for Greeley was a moral struggle for discipline and self-control, one that was increasingly difficult in the face of modern phenomena like the market or urbanization in which individual moral action might seem insignificant. His writing and thought on culture and society never stray far from this personal struggle.

The central question for this discussion of Greeley is how his values influenced his views on literary culture. Greater access to books and periodicals could be interpreted as a democratization of literary culture, as it was by Democrats like Leggett. But it could also be interpreted, as it was by Greeley, as threatening to

subordinate truth and morality to the amoral forces of the market and the questionable tastes of the general public. The basis of the market—both the literary kind and in general—is appealing to people's wants. The public buys what interest or pleases them, and writer or producers in general try to meet this public demand.

This mechanism of public wants and markets runs directly counter to the individual moral struggle that Greeley believes in. The essence of this struggle is our ability to resist our base sensual wants, which are just what the market appeals to. The ability to resist these wants is directly related to our discipline and work ethic—our capacity to labor. For this reason, among others, labor was another essential component of Greeley's moral outlook. The connection between literary culture and labor was as important to Greeley as it was to Leggett, but Greeley used the connection in service of a dramatically different political outlook from that of Leggett. In spite of their radically different political views, both tended define individual identity in a democratic society through labor and independence. Looking beyond individual morality, Greeley's moral system rested on a belief that the universe rewards goodness, that, despite appearances to the contrary, the world is operating in accordance with God's will and so is just. This larger view and the individual principles of discipline and labor shape his understanding of society and culture.

One starting point for looking at the connection between labor and writing in Greeley's work is an unusual habit of his: he often refers to how hard he works, and he specifically discusses writing in terms of physical labor and effort. The basic impetus for this habit comes from his interest in presenting himself as a good hard-

working person. For Greeley, being good largely *mean*s being hard-working. The connection between morality and labor runs very deep and is virtually the fundamental principle of this life and thought. So when he connects writing to labor he reveals the role he sees for writing and for intellectual work in general. In casting literary work as physical labor, Greeley creates an identity for himself as a writer and in the process suggests the identity he envisions for all writers. This identity is tied up with all the issues of that era involving identity, labor, masculinity, independence, and democracy. It carries with it an idea of what function literature and intellectual work generally should have in society. Greeley's at times anti-democratic reform ideas follow from his idea of the identity of the writer-intellectual.

Greeley goes to great lengths to impress on his readers that the intellectual work of writing and editing also involves demanding physical work. In one instance he recalls working so hard on a campaign paper for the New York state Whig party that he got boils.[1] He often tells stories like this, though not always so extreme, in his memoirs *Recollections of a Busy Life.* (And of course the very title of his memoir attests to his work ethics and to its importance to his identity.) In describing his first job in New York City as a printer's assistant, he notes how much his eyes were strained setting the tiny type of an edition of the New Testament.[2] He regularly begins his reform essays and lectures by noting how busy he is with his other work.

Greeley used this tactic to distance himself from literary and intellectual culture. In a talk to students at Hamilton College, Greeley begins by saying that he has been so busy that he has not had much time to think about the subject of his talk.

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[1] Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869), 167.
[2] Ibid., 86.

Also in the preface to an early collection of his reform writing he disclaims any literary value for his writing and notes how busy he was when they were written. He casts this non-literariness as a strength saying that "this work has a loftier and worthier aim than that of fine writing."[3] Those who engage in fine writing are not working for moral aims (or at least not for aims as moral as his). There is an implication that such efforts are incompatible with higher aims.

The Hamilton College talk is an especially interesting example of Greeley's relationship to intellectual work since his subject in that talk is the role of education and intellectual work in society (and his audience belongs to the educated class). We will return to the Hamilton College talk and other pieces in which Greeley specifically deals with literature after a discussion of the moral principles that surround Greeley's view of labor. An understanding of these principles will allow us to see how they shaped his ideas for social reform, including his critiques of private property and free trade and how his ideas about literature follow from the same principles.

Human Impulses

For Greeley the primary struggle, in some ways the only struggle, that individuals engaged in was the struggle to resist our bodily wants and temptations. His evaluations of democracy, literature, and the laboring classes are all cast in terms of this struggle. The question of the impulses that control our actions appears to have been an element of Greeley's thinking and personality from a very early age, at least to judge from his own accounts of his childhood. It began with his interest in

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[3] Horace Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms, in Lectures, Addresses, and Other Writings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1853), 7-8.

temperance as a boy and recurred through out his career in sometimes surprising contexts. The idea plays an important role in his thoughts on social reform and on the role of literature in society.

In *Recollections,* Greeley describes the dramatic consequences of his decision at a young age to give up drinking. After describing how central drinking was to the social life of the rural Scotch-Irish community he grew up in, he tells us that at a young age he decided that he would not drink anymore and announced his decision to his family. Next he describes an incident in which a few boys at a sheep-washing, one of the many rural social events at which drinking was practically required, held him down and forced liquor of some kind down his throat. Greeley adds to this recollection that this treatment was "understood to be the end of my foolish attempt at singularity."[4] This story allows Greeley to show off his singularity, his own independence and strength of will in the face of community opposition. It also highlights how the personal struggle against immoral impulses is often one of the individual against the public or the mob.

In his writing on literature, Greeley consistently finds fault with writers who he perceives as writing for the public because in doing so they have given in to their "sensual appetite." Such writers are guilty of writing primarily to make money or win acclaim. These interests, like an interest in drinking, are prompted by our appetites and desires. And like alcohol these interests lead to moral downfall. Greeley describes the problem with selling your writing abilities as follows: "The natural drift, therefore, of sending your head into the market for sale is toward moral indifference

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[4] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 100-01.

and debasement, — toward the sale of your talents for the most they will fetch, without regard to what use they will be required to subserve." You can try to resist but this problem is always there: "Sensual appetite is always ready to pay generously for a present gratification; while Virtue is constitutionally austere and provident."[5] This is a characteristic moral line from Greeley about our appetites and implicitly the importance of resisting them and the heroic efforts required of those who succeed in doing so. One notable example that Greeley gives of this literary flaw is Shakespeare, whom Greeley admits to admiring in spite of what he sees as an unfortunate habit to appeal to the crowd. Greeley's take on Shakespeare, like all of his literary criticism, rests on his moral beliefs. His writing on Shakespeare makes a good case study of his literary criticism because he finds him to be a problematic author. So we will return to it after the discussion of Greeley's morals.

Skepticism about others who appeal to the masses implies skepticism about the morals of the masses. The mass of people may not be immoral but Greeley assumes that all people are prone to making bad decisions based on their impulses. We can see the root of this sentiment in a comment he made during the financial panic of 1837 about those who were moving away from New York City to settle in the West or the South in the hope of doing better. Greeley writes that "The man who is comfortably situated where he is should not cast himself among strangers from a mere love of change or impelled by a vague hope of improving his conditions."[6] Here in one of his earliest comments on social problems is the same suspicion of human nature that we find in his comments on writing: the people who are "impelled" to

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[5] Ibid., 445.
[6] Horace Greeley, "Winter Prospects," *The New-Yorker*, October 7 1837.

move West are suspected of acting unwisely or rashly, or, to use the terms that Greeley applied to writers, seeking some "present gratification" instead of being "austere and provident."

Greeley applies this thinking to the political sphere also in comments that reveal his skepticism about democracy and the people. He criticized political influence and democracy in terms of stimulation and passions. In a lecture called "The Emancipation of Labor" from the 1840s that addresses the problems faced by the laboring classes, Greeley notes that politicians give speeches in which they praise the workers. Sometimes workers in the audience will believe this praise when they are moved by a speaker's "silvery tones," but by the next morning they are "in a sober and practical mood."[7] The moral consequences of populist or demagogic political rhetoric is clear here. It is not just the cynical politicians who are to blame for using it. The audience is faulted for yielding to the temptation of this pleasing rhetoric. In another piece, Greeley makes this point more explicitly by comparing demagogues to the courtiers who flatter kings and lead them to make bad decisions. His point in that case is that the people, just like a king, can be wrong when they give into flattering rhetoric.[8] The fundamental issue of personal morality and vice are connected through metaphors of sobriety and drunkenness to describe the influence of demagogic speeches on the hypothetical working man.

Greeley applies these moral views with special force to debt. He devotes a chapter of *Recollections* to his own experiences early in his career with debt. Being in

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[7] Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms*, 14.
[8] Horace Greeley, *Why I Am a Whig: Reply to an Inquiring Friend* (New York: Tribune Company, 1852), 2.

debt is related to the most debased and humbling experiences : "Hunger, cold, rags, hard work, contempt, suspicion, unjust reproach, are disagreeable; but debt is infinitely worse than them all."[9] Greeley is writing about the debts related to *The New-Yorker*, a weekly paper that he and a partner started publishing in 1834. The paper did well for a few years—its circulation reached 9,000—but like many other business it struggled during the financial panic of 1837-38. In 1837, Greeley tells us, the paper was running a debt of $100 per week.[10] His strong feelings about debt come up when he talks about running the paper during this difficult period. Some of the debt he is concerned with are the subscription fees that are owed to the paper. These debts were probably only a few dollars each, but it's understandable that they would have bothered Greeley considering he went through such hard times financially that could have been alleviated had these debtors, some of whom were friends and acquaintances, paid their subscriptions. The more significant debt, both financially and morally, is Greeley's own debt. He owed money to friends, investors, and suppliers that he had an obligation to repay. He also owed all his paid subscribers a newspaper every week (or a refund if he had stopped publication). The pressure of these obligations contribute to his feelings about the condition of debt. But the intensity of those feelings comes from the guilt that he associates with the serious moral failure of not meeting one's obligations. This failure is seen as an individual moral failing, a result of not working hard enough or being disciplined enough.

Considering that Greeley wrote and thought about the consequences of the Panic of 1837, it might seem that he would have understood that if the *New-Yorker*

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[9] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 96.
[10] Ibid., 95.

had folded that he was not individually responsible, that the Panic and the economic climate and rendered all his obligations impossible. Or at least that these circumstances provided some moral excuse for him. But he didn't see it that way. If anything, the events of the panic strengthened his belief that the control of wants is essential to personal, moral, and professional success. The chapter in *Recollections* on 1837 and debt is followed by the chapter on temperance. Chronologically, temperance was part of Greeley's life before 1837, but perhaps the order was meant to provide moral instruction.

Moral Significance of Labor

The moral significance of labor is related to Greeley's idea of resistance to sensual appetite. Labor is centrally important because Greeley thinks of it in terms of its biblical origins. Labor is "the first of punishments and therefore first also of mercies."[11] he writes referring to the fate of Adam after the Fall when God declares that he must leave the Garden of Eden where everything was provided for him and go into the world where he will have to provide for himself by working.[12] In terms of social reform this moral view of labor means that for Greeley ensuring that there is work for everyone is not an intermediate step in improving people's standard of living. Labor is an end unto itself. To work is to obey God's commandment, and reform is needed to ensure that there is work for everyone.

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[11] Horace Greeley, *An Address before the Literary Societies of Hamilton College, July 23, 1844* (New York: William H. Graham, 1844), 12.

[12] Greeley mentions only Adam, not Eve. Like Leggett, Greeley only discusses labor in terms of the work that men do. He avoids not only a discussion of women in his vision of society but sexuality generally. This is one element of our "sensual appetites" on which he doesn't dwell.

Greeley thinks we have a natural tendency to resist our appetites and work honestly for our gains. However, it's important to keep in mind what *natural* means for Greeley. He doesn't mean natural in any biological or Darwinian sense; he means that this tendency was put there by God. This means that anyone who does not appear to have this habit of work has gone away from the divine plan for humanity. Greeley does not simply condemn those who don't work as sinners. He makes some allowance for environment and bad influence, but the relationship between environment and personal morality is complicated in Greeley's thinking. Discussing the use of leisure time among young boys he writes that: "Each human being, properly trained, works as freely and naturally as he eats; only the victims of parental neglect or misguidance hate work, and prefer hunger and rags with idleness, to thrift won by industry and patient effort."[13]. In this case the individual may be poor and lazy because they were not brought up well, but some moral blame will still fall on them. Greeley feels that they will be poor not because of economic conditions or simple bad luck but out of a misguided preference.

Greeley's socialism, at least according to his own account, developed out of his views on the vital importance of labor. In *Recollections*, he says that he became interested in socialist, or associationist, ideas following the economic panic of 1837. He was disturbed to see so many people unable to find work, and in the years after the panic he comes to see the principles of association as a solution.[14] When he describes his socialist principles in *Recollections* the first two principles he gives have to do

[13] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 116.
[14] Ibid., 145.

with the importance of finding employment for everyone.[15] He is struck by the absurdity of there existing workers who wish to work and sellers and businessmen who wish to sell and do business, but all parties being unable to proceed because of the state of the economy. He captures this situation in a description of a hungry man outside a store looking through the window at the goods he cannot buy and the store owner on the other side wishing he could sell them.[16] As we will see, Greeley thought the essential problem with the economy was a lack of organization or guidance. He believed that problems like those of the hungry man and the shopkeeper can be solved by reformers just as he believed that the moral responsibility for labor applies regardless of how bad the economy is doing. He believed that moral principles win out over any temporal conditions. This belief originates in his belief in the moral importance of labor where labor is seen not as a hardship but as a promise of redemption.

In his early social reform ideas, Greeley envisioned a radically reformed world structured around work and not property. An early idea of his for land reform shows his unusual combination of anti-egalitarian and anti-aristocratic ideas. He was anti-egalitarian in that he believed that those people who were willing and able to work hard were the best people to direct the organization of industry and resources. But his belief in work, and in a moral system that rewarded work, made him anti-aristocratic and provided the basis for his critique of private property that appears in his early socialist reform writing.

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[15] Ibid., 147-48.
[16] Ibid., 507.

His critique of property, and his earliest discussions of the socialist community he envisions, appeared in a piece called "The Emancipation of Labor." Here, Greeley proposed a land reform system that set a limit on the total number of acres that a person could own. When landowners exceeded this limit—Greeley suggested 320 acres—the excess land would be sold off when they died to prevent them from passing the land on to their children. The principle here is anti-aristocratic, opposed to the amassing of large wealth in property or land through family. This proposal also rights the wrong that Greeley felt is inherent in private property. He felt that all people have a natural right to own the land on which they labor and that land reforms that secure them this right would improve their conditions.[17] This proposal rests on faith, which Greeley had, that one's hard work would be rewarded.

His land reform proposal also rests ultimately on individual moral choices; even though he proposes social reforms he makes it clear that the poor and laboring classes are still responsible for their moral decisions. He makes it clear in other words that he was not a social constructionist. He believes that reforms can provide an environment in which they could make better decisions, but, he concedes that this moral improvement might not come to pass. As Greeley puts it:

> Let us have a fair and full trial of a Laboring Class thoroughly educated, not overworked, fairly remunerated, with ample leisure, and adequate opportunities for Social, Moral, and Intellectual culture and enjoyment, and then, if the hard-handed multitude shall still persist in squandering their leisure and their means in riot and dissipation, we

[17] Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms*, 19-20.

> must sadly, reluctantly, but utterly, abandon all hope of a better day coming for the Toiling Millions.…[18]

We see that he thinks the laboring class currently squanders its time and behaves badly and that he holds out the possibility that they might not be improvable. In this context it is clear just how distinct the "us" in that sentence is from the laboring class who are the object of the reforms. The "us" is the class whose members have the moral and intellectual capacity to administer these plans for a better society.

Faith in Hierarchy

What is the basis for Greeley's confidence that the most successful members of society were the most capable of guiding it or that hard work will be rewarded? While all of Greeley's major beliefs about society are related to his religious beliefs, this idea is rooted in the particular religious movement of Universalism, which Greeley was attracted to upon moving to New York City in the 1830s. Greeley's explanation for his faith that hard work is rewarded was based on the Universalist belief in a universal divine justice. This belief is essential to his social reform ideas and to his understanding of culture.

Greeley believed that the work and human suffering that post-Lapsarian man must endure are provided by God as both punishments and mercies. Greeley summarizes his beliefs in *Recollections* as follows: Universalists believe that "...all suffering is disciplinary and transitional, and shall ultimately result in universal holiness and consequent happiness."[19] This view of suffering solves the "dark

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[18] Ibid., 33-34.
[19] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 69 –71.

problem of Evil" because from this perspective "all evil becomes phenomenal and preparative."[20]

This view of evil is related to the religious view that Greeley took of labor. God commanded Adam to work and this command can't have been meaningless or impossible to obey. He argues that it must be possible to create jobs for everyone because "The precept 'Six days shalt thou labor' implies and predicts work for all...." He says also that "…God is good, and has not created men and women to starve for want of work."[21] The belief that redemption is assured for individuals carries with it a belief that it is assured for society.

From this belief in "universal holiness" stems Greeley's belief that holiness and justice guide human history in general and the workings of his own society in particular. This understanding leads to his non-egalitarian idea of reform in which he envisions a society in which each member would play the role appropriate to their abilities.

Before he was exposed to socialism and associationism, Greeley struggled to articulate possible solutions, but without any system or theory of how the economy might be organized, his suggestions had a fairly desperate tone. Even so they do reveal some of the tendencies in his thinking that would make associationism appealing to him. He wrote editorials for his paper *The New-Yorker* in 1837 and 1838 in which he urges the city to act to alleviate the hardships that have hit the city following the panic. He calls for action but he doesn't have a clear idea of what that action might be. He writes, "there must be concerted and resolute action on the part of

[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] Ibid., 508.

the wealthy and benevolent this winter—if times do not otherwise mend—to give employment to all who desire it."[22] This is nonsensical proposal really since, as Greeley himself pointed out in another piece, the panic had lead to a great many business failures and bankruptcies.[23] That this suggestion is made in desperation is underlined by the hopeless tone of the ending. Greeley asks, "Will not some one whose character would give weight to it act on this suggestion?"[24] Greeley's earnest plea for help shows his approach to social problems: he clearly feels that the solutions to the hardships faced by the poor lies in the hands of those citizens who have good character and wealth. In his social vision these would be (or ought to be) the same people.

Greeley made his plea in October of 1837 in anticipation of the hard times that were to come in the Winter. By the following January he felt the need to offer a more thorough and lasting solution that went beyond the charity and poor relief that the city had provided. He lays out the work that the relief committees in each ward ought to do to provide relief, but he goes beyond this to suggest a more lasting solution. He writes, if the efforts of the relief committees, which Greeley was himself actively involved in,[25] were carried out then "perhaps all will have been done that can reasonably by expected for the immediate relief of the poor. Yet this is not all that is wanted. There ought to be a regular and permanent organization of all the benevolent and good in our city."[26] Greeley calls for a "universal philanthropy" that would

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[22] Greeley, "Winter Prospects" *The New-Yorker,* October 7, 1837.
[23] Greeley, "The Morals of Debt," *The New-Yorker*, October 28, 1837.
[24] Greeley, "Winter Prospects."
[25] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 145.
[26] Greeley, "The Relief of the Poor," *The New-Yorker*, January 20 1838.

ensure full employment. This plan would consist of an organization, which Greeley refers to as an "association," that would run factories and workshops to provide jobs. It would also educate the children of the poor. This ambitious suggestion is capped with another tentative ending. Greeley writes, "is not the idea worth a thought, if that only?"[27]

In the following years his reform ideas develop and he develops a clearer vision of the alternative society that these reforms would create. The ultimate reform that he has in mind would not get rid of social or economic disparities. There would still be people who worked less or were less talented and those people would still be poor. However, they would be better off in a morally-improved society, and they would come to recognize that the divisions in society are the result of divine justice working itself out. This vision shows Greeley's position in relation to other egalitarian radicals. His program for reform envisions a moral reform in which wealth would be understood as a good only in so far as it allowed us to do good.[28] When this ultimate goal of reform is reached then

> …vanish at once the privations and the envious discontent of the Poor — the dreams and the desire of Agrarian equality — since the most abject must then recognize the wisdom and beneficence of the dispensation which qualifies some to be the almoners and benefactors of the less gifted or provident millions, while the more fortunate would

[27] Ibid.
[28] Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms*, 83.

> learn to feel, in extending the amplest encouragement and aid to the lowly, some faint reflection of the rapture of Creative goodness.[29]

This is a good summary of Greeley's odd and sometimes inconsistent combinations of social ideas. He holds on to the idea that the good and hard working end up with the most money and the poor are relatively bad and lazy. But the social utopia he imagines would at least impel everyone to use their wealth for the good of the community not of the individual, so that the poor would not be jealous, angry and miserable. Both the rich and the poor would see that God's plan is to have some people—those who are better, more talented, more disciplined, less prone to vice, and so on—rule over the rest of humanity.

The work of the talented members of society also for Greeley drives economic development and progress. He believes that economic development, like scientific and literary achievement, happens through the work of great men. This belief is an important part of his opposition to free trade ideas. For a free marketer like Leggett, social good is the product of aggregate social gains: this comes out of ideas of Bentham and Smith where social and material progress emerges from the action of a whole community. This view is exemplified in the frequently-cited passage from *Wealth of Nations* in which Smith explains that society is provided with food because all the individual butchers, brewers, and bakers, pursue their own self-interest and not because they are all devoted to providing for society or because there is a coordinated effort to supply society with these goods.[30] However, for Greeley, development must

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[29] Ibid., 83-84.
[30] Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations, Books I-III* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 118-19.

be directed and focused, and this direction and focus is provided by the talented and hard-working members of society.

Greeley's socialism is based on planning by a class of leaders. Greeley admires the scientific approach of the utopian socialist leaders and thinkers, and the idea of being able to rationally plan a whole community and all of economic activity appeals to him. He refers to the importance of leadership in "The Emancipation of Labor" when he describes the organization of a phalanx. He writes that organization increases human efficiency and that thirty thousand people "whose efforts are controlled and directed by a few superior minds" produce much more than one hundred thousand could produce who work individually.[31] Another example he gives of this principle is of a disciplined army conquering a much larger unorganized population.[32] In another lecture in this period he argues that such people would be rare because they would have to overcome the educational systems and social organization which tell us that humans are and ought to be selfish. Greeley, of course, links this view to the free trade and free market ideology. He says that we will need a "race of Heroes" to overcome this selfish training and remake society.[33]

Greeley's religious beliefs lead him to believe that the ideal social system that he envisions not only can be but *will* be achieved here on Earth. One of his objections

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[31] Reading these comments, it is easy to see the basis for Marx's critique of associationist socialism, which he refers to as "Critical-Utopian" socialism. In the "Communist Manifesto," Marx criticized these socialist thinkers and their followers for their devotion to their own elaborate plans, which leads them to "bitterly oppose all political action of the working class." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader,* ed. Richard Tucker (New York, Norton, 1978), 498-99.

[32] Greeley, "The Emancipation of Labor" in *Hints toward Reforms*, 41.

[33] Greeley, "Life—The Ideal and the Actual" in *Hints toward Reforms,* 59-62.

to the promoters of free trade is their adherence to a pragmatic Benthamite idea of social progress. While criticizing the beliefs of free trade advocates he adds in passing, "...I insist that it is not the good of the greatest number but of the whole number which communities and governments are bound unceasingly to seek and to secure."[34] The "bound" here presumably means that we are bound by God's commandment to labor to pursue this end. His belief in social perfectibility and the sacredness of labor are both tied to a solemn moral obligation.

Hamilton College Talk

In 1844 Greeley gave a lecture to a group of students at Hamilton College in which he discussed in depth his ideas about work and in particular his views on literary/intellectual work. The topic of this talk was the role of the educated classes in society, and in it Greeley applies both the individual moral principles of labor and discipline and the social principle of hierarchy to education. The talk also reveals some of his ideas about the identity of those who do literary work.

Greeley opens his talk by telling the audience that he is so busy that he has not had much time to think about the subject on which he is going to talk.[35] The subject was the role of the scholar in society, and Greeley's self-deprecation is to some extent a rhetorical move; he also notes that he, unlike the students he is addressing, is not a scholar. He puts himself down and praises his audience before criticizing them. But it is more than just rhetorical self-deprecation. He establishes his work ethic because of the moral value he places on it, and because the critique he

[34] Greeley, *An Address*, 19.
[35] Ibid., 6.

intends to make of these representatives of the educated class has to do with the role of labor in their lives.

Greeley describes himself as being part of "that large class sometimes termed the self-educated, by others (perhaps more properly) the uneducated," and he says the characteristics of this class are "essential" and "intrinsic," so he can't leave them behind even if he wanted to.[36] Educational background is an inescapable and deeply-rooted trait which Greeley compares to racial traits. He compares himself to an Indian who has been asked to speak to this group and who would be expected to speak out of his experiences and identity. This description of his class might seem to run counter to his belief in social hierarchy: if Greeley believes that there are some intrinsic class differences how can he also believe that hard work will be rewarded by increased standing in society? The answer is that the intrinsic class traits that Greeley might have shaped his views but did not limit his place in society. He contributes to society by advancing his political ideas as a writer, lecturer, and editor, while at the same time he is involved in the practical life of business in putting out his paper.

The practice of both contributing to society and also doing real work is the essential point of his talk to the students. He wants them to follow the same practice because he feels that too often the educated classes only engage in intellectual work and as a result are removed from society because they can't relate to most people. Greeley's opening un-intellectual pose and reference to his class traits is a set-up and apology of sorts for the emphasis he will put on integrating intellectual with physical work.

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[36] Ibid., 5-6.

Greeley valued labor as we've seen because of the divine command that it represents but also because it is essential to how we establish our identity. In the Hamilton College address, Greeley assumes audience is not as experienced with work as he was, so he makes a strong case for the importance of labor in forming identity. Labor helps to establish their identities as leaders in society. Greeley makes this moral argument about labor when he discusses his political views on economics. He explains his opposition to free trade and support for protectionism and improvements initially through pragmatic economic arguments. But he stresses that his objection to free trade is not just based on these economic grounds: "my objection," he writes, "is deeper, broader, and more vital." "I object," he continues, "that it regards Labor only as a necessary means of supplying Man's sensual wants, and not at all as Divinely appointed for the discipline and development of our Race." It only looks at the materials produced by industry "and takes no account of that nobler product, the Man."[37] Free trade theories were founded on the idea of competition among self-interested actors and regarded humans as selfish economic actors all trying to maximize their return on their labor. For Greeley this represents an abhorrent reduction of human potential and of the significance of labor. He writes that "The man whose only stimulant to exertion in any field is the hope of individual gain, can hardly have risen above the condition of a slave."[38] When Greeley uses the phrase "individual gain" here he is not objecting to the individual part. His objection is to the gain, to the idea that human action is and ought to be guided by our material wants. The Romantic element in Greeley's thinking appears here: our labor has greater moral

[37] Ibid., 22.
[38] Ibid., 11-12.

value than the free traders' rationalist system allows for. He wants to impress on the students that labor is a special individual effort with a spiritual and personal value beyond what it contributes to the economy. The Smithian view robs labor and human activity of this specialness and individualism.

Greeley's comparison of the self-interested worker to a slave shows the importance of labor in forming individual identity especially political identity. There was a tradition that dated back to the 18th Century Republicanism that used the rhetoric of slavery and enslavement to discuss democracy. The citizen in a republic needed to be independent in order to make decisions about the country's government. This rhetoric was employed by Jacksonians who saw themselves guarding the independence of the common man. And it would be used in the decades before the Civil War by those who opposed the extension of slavery. Greeley's comparison makes morally-purposeful labor a requirement for a true citizen in a democracy. But Greeley is not making an egalitarian claim here as the Jacksonians might that labor entitles one to rights as a citizen. His argument is that only those who labor for some goal aside from their own wants can rise "above the condition of a slave" and be a truly independent participant in democratic society. This anti-egalitarian tendency also shaped some of his proposals for reform.

Labor establishes independence, and independence is the key to Greeley's overall point about the role of the educated in society. If the educated classes only perform intellectual work for a living then they will never be truly independent. They will have to place their thinking and learning in the service of their material needs.

But the educated and working classes will have a larger dependence on each other as long as their work is separated. Greeley summarizes his point as follows:

> Not till we shall have emancipated the Many from the subjection of taking their thoughts at second-hand from the Few, may we hope to accomplish much for the upraising of the long trampled masses. Not till we have emancipated the Few from the equally degrading necessity of subsisting on the fruits of the physical toil of the Many, can we secure to the more cultivated and intellectual their proper and healthful ascendancy over the less affluent in mental wealth.[39]

He stresses the moral stakes of independence for the educated class with politically-loaded terms like "subjection," "emancipated," "degraded." The educated should want to labor for themselves to save themselves from this condition. He gives a specific example later when he points out that a minister who relies on his congregation to pay is salary and support his family will hardly be in the position to really criticize the congregation's moral failings.[40]

In referring to the "ascendancy" of the educated class and in casting them metaphorically as ministers (and the people as sinners), Greeley makes clear how important he feels the stakes are for establishing the true independence of that class. He believes very strongly that the development of the country depends on the leadership of this class. "General good," he says, "is only to be attained through

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[39] Ibid., 13.
[40] Ibid., 13-14, 35.

general effort — systematic, harmonious and far-sighted."[41] The key word here is "systematic." There needs to be someone creating the system that Greeley envisions. He notes that canals and railroads will not construct themselves if one just leaves such things up to market forces, as the free trade argument would have it. Greeley finds this argument absurd, a point he wants to impress on the students: "To repeat, then, the parrot phrase that 'Trade will regulate itself,' meaning that individual avarice and anarchical competition will work out the most beneficent general results, is a futility unworthy of this enlightened age."[42] Here it is clear that the free trade position runs afoul of Greeley's faith in progress as well as his morals. For him the general good will be achieved by individuals who have the talents to apply the latest scientific learning to social problems, industry, and farming in order to better human kind and won't allow their desire for money or power or anything else to distract them from this noble work. And Greeley has a particular message for the students regarding their role in this scheme.

His Hamilton College talk provides perhaps the most explicit connection between his economic and social ideas and his views on culture. After laying out his arguments against free trade, in both economic and moral terms, Greeley explains the role he thinks the educated elite should have in society. He proposes reforms in the educations and lives of the educated class that he hopes will increase their influence over society. Specifically, he wants their education to include some element of manual labor so that the educated truly understand the value of labor. They do not see the connection between their intellectual work and the work done to produce the

[41] Ibid., 22.
[42] Ibid.

materials around them and they as a result fail to integrate their education into the society and fail to provide the kind of benefit to society that the might and they will fail to have the proper influence over public opinion. That they currently don't have such influence reveals the problem with the current methods of education.

Literary Culture and Society

In spite of the ideas that Greeley sets out in the Hamilton College talk on the role of the cultured and educated he only gives limited examples of how this influence could be exercised. He thinks the educated should have more influence on society, but he doesn‘t think they gain it by influencing the general public through public discourse. Greeley avoids the whole idea of a public discourse or market place of ideas. It runs counter to his belief in universal moral justice. Greeley saw intellectual accomplishment and education as following the same universalist law as labor and morality. The hierarchy of literary accomplishment is a hierarchy of moral accomplishment. This hierarchy, like the social hierarchy, occurs naturally: good books and ideas become read and acclaimed; bad ones don’t. He believes that good ideas win out because they are true not because they are most appealing to the general public. Though he doesn’t make the comparison himself, Greeley finds the market place of ideas objectionable for the same reasons that he finds the idea of the market so objectionable. Both rely on an impersonal aggregate principle and discount the role of individuals. Both are also driven by the wants of the public and not necessarily by morals. His literary criticism and his writing on the role of journalism are based on this moral outlook.

Since Greeley is working from the same basic principles, he writes his cultural criticism in terms that are almost indistinguishable from those he uses to discusses social reforms. He is against the practice of making unauthorized copies of the works of English writers, in part because it is unfair to the English authors. In the context of Greeley's views, if it is unfair there must be some consequences. For Greeley those consequences are that native American writers are forced to pander to the local audience in order to compete with the cheaper English books, which lowers the moral character of the culture in general. Greeley gives the general lesson to be learned from all this as follows: "The day will yet dawn wherein Man everywhere shall profoundly realize that no essential advantage can ever be obtained through injustice, — that the constitution of the Universe is such that no product of human effort can be obtained cheaper than by honestly buying and fairly paying for it."[43]

The working out of literary success for Greeley follows the same principles as the working out of economic success, so neither are ever the result of luck or circumstance. Discussing those writers who complain about their lack of success and are resentful of the success of others, he writes, "He who fancies greatness an accident, a lucky hit, a stroke of good fortune, does sadly degrade the achievement contemplated, and undervalue the unerring wisdom and inflexible justice wherewith the universe is ruled."[44] The preceding quote appears in a piece called "Literature as Vocation," but it could just as easily have appeared in one of Greeley's lectures on economic justice or reform where the "greatness" referred to was wealth or social standing.

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[43] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 448.
[44] Ibid., 454.

When Greeley refers to greatness in literary or intellectual work he is not concerned with aesthetics or any criteria other than his moral standard. It's hard to imagine what other standards he might apply. As seen in the Hamilton College talk he is opposed to intellectual work being an end unto itself. In his own writing, he stresses his labor and his unconcern with literary or intellectual effort.

In "Literature as Vocation," Greeley discusses literary careers, as might be expected, in terms of his principles of human impulses and the importance of labor, but he also links these principles to class identity and masculinity. On the subject of independence, Greeley advises writers (just as he advised the students at Hamilton) to get a good practical job so that they will have some source of income and will not have to rely on their writing to support them.[45] His vision is one of independent artisans and small farmers who are moved to contribute their ideas and knowledge to the community out of a commitment to the truth. Without an independent source of income a writer would be dependant on his writing and will almost unavoidably be compelled to write whatever will sell, selling out his beliefs in the process. This advice is similar to the advice he gave to the students at Hamilton College, but in that context the class difference was more explicitly a problem and Greeley made it clear that the educated classes who were engaged in intellectual work were always in danger of subverting the truth to the immediate needs to keep their jobs and make a living. That discussion also raised the question of identity: those who worked only for personal gain were slaves. This threat to one's identity and independence is implicitly

[45] Ibid., 446.

a threat to one's identity as a man. In "Literature as Vocation" the association between intellectual independence as masculine identity is made more explicit.

When he discusses the great number of aspiring poets out there, Greeley says that many bad poets are only poets because they are too lazy work and are afraid of "getting up and swinging an axe in the morning."[46] Literary merit is here aligned with work ethic. If the bad poets are the ones who are too lazy to do honest work then the good ones by implication are hard workers or at least would not mind swinging an axe now and then.[47] Like much of the rest of Greeley's literary criticism this comment is based on pat moralizing and clichés. The poetic type that Greeley is playing off is the image of the poet as an effeminate day-dreamer.[48] The joke collapses his views on work ethic, labor, masculinity, and class. Making fun of the lazy poets allows him to align himself with the hard-working, wood-chopping portion of the population. This is done mainly to show off his own moral standing as a hard worker, but it also allows him to identify with traditional masculinity and the laboring classes.

Greeley employs a kind of anti-intellectualism in these comments on labor and writing that was common in the political discourse of his contemporaries across the political spectrum. As we've seen, William Leggett whose ideology ran counter to

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[46] Ibid., 436.

[47] By Greeley's standards this is a fairly scathing critique, but note that Whitman cultivates almost exactly this persona of the lazy lounging poet in the opening lines of "Song of Myself." In adopting this persona, Whitman's poetry and poetic identity formed a dismissive critique of the view of labor we see in Greeley.

[48] This is the Keats-figure of the poet, and not surprisingly Greeley's comments on Keats adhere strictly to this stereotype: Keats was a "dreamy and sensitive youth" killed by "harsh and withering criticism." See "Poets and Poetry" in Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life,* 478.

most of Greeley's beliefs, also extolled labor over intellectual work. Both tried to characterize their literary work as something like physical labor. They did so, however, for markedly different reasons. Leggett stressed how his work as a writer was no more noble or special than the work of carpenters or sailors out of his egalitarian impulse to democratize cultural work. Greeley, on the other hand, talked about writing in terms of labor out of an impulse to count himself among the minority of humanity that is able to overcome the human impulse to laziness and indulgence. The one thing that Greeley and Leggett have in common when they make this move is that they both want to escape the conception of the writer as a gentlemanly man of leisure; Leggett because he doesn't think there should be a literary class, Greeley because he believes there will be a literary class, and he wants that class—the class that has the greatest role in influencing the culture—to be defined by its hard work and virtue and not by its genteel avoidance of work. In spite of their different theories about labor, clearly class shaped these two writers' unease over intellectual work, especially their own. Both came from artisan or laboring class backgrounds, and their problems with the symbolic work of writing originate in key values of that class. One was independence. writing for a mass medium meant possibly losing a measure of independence by having to depend on the audience. The second was the idea that physical labor was the source of all wealth and that those who did other work were suspect.[49]

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[49] The anti-intellectualism of Leggett and Greeley was not ubiquitous. In the same period there existed a counter-trend to assert the professionalism of intellectuals and artists, which also spanned the political spectrum. Samuel Morse, the painter and telegraph-inventor, advanced this view (as discussed in chapter 1) and was one of the most reactionary figures in New York City at the time. He ran for mayor in 1836 on

The connection between masculinity, independence and class had deep roots in Greeley's personal experience. It appears in his account of his father's financial problems. When Greeley was young, the family farm in New Hampshire was repossessed because of debt, and the family had to leave the state because his father was in danger of being arrested for the debt that remained even after the farm was taken. (Greeley blamed the economic hardships of this period on competition from cheap English labor and credits the experience with the beginning of his opposition to free trade.) The family moved to Vermont where his father cleared forests for a large land-owner. Greeley wrote of this time: "We now made the acquaintance of genuine poverty, – not beggary, nor dependence, but that manly American sort."[50] Masculine identity can endure through poverty and hardship and even through debt as long as some independence can be maintained and there is some honest work to do. After running out of work in Vermont, the family moved (this time without Horace who stayed behind to continue his printing career) to a frontier area of Eire County, Pennsylvania where they spent years clearing the forest. Wood-chopping was a familiar image of country and especially settler life, but Greeley's identification of wood-chopping with masculinity must have been partly influenced by the experience of his father. Here the actions of the market, which Greeley attributes to free trade, are enough of a threat to the identity of himself and his family that he assures us

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the anti-immigration anti-Catholic Native American ticket. On the other side, the writers associated with the Young America movement, notably Herman Melville and Evert Augustus Duyckinck, thought that literary work should be a full-time activity. They were particularly interested in the U.S. having a distinctive literary culture. They were also Democrats who sympathized with the republican movements of Europe.

[50] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 55-56.

defensively of their manly endurance of it. Even the hardest labor is better than dependence.

Greeley's objection to the effects of the market on intellectual independence and its relationship to masculine identity can be illuminated by Ann Douglas' work on these areas in *The Feminization of American Culture.* Douglas argues that the culture of this period became "feminized" when a market developed for cultural products because cultural producers such as ministers, novelists, or newspaper writers were forced to serve an audience. In order to appeal to this audience these producers were pushed to adopt sentimentality and other crowd-pleasing methods. Or to put it another way, the writers and lecturers who were most successful in this cultural market were those who most effectively used these methods. Douglas show how this development was commonly discussed in terms of masculinity. Specifically the need to appeal to an audience was seen as emasculating because it was associated with the perceived feminine traits of flattery and implied a subservience to the audience.[51] That women made up an increasingly larger portion of this expanding audience added to the anxiety over masculinity.

Greeley didn't make the connection between masculinity and the market's threat to intellectual independence quite as explicitly as many of the commentators that Douglas cites. And, even though he often complained about the moral dangers of appealing to the crowd, there is very little reason to think that Greeley was especially bothered by the emotionalism, moralism and nostalgia that Douglas finds to be the worst features of sentimentalism. Greeley wrote approvingly of Harriet Beecher

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[51] Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture,* 18-22, 45-46.

Stowe, one the primary targets of Douglas' critique, and of Felicia Hemans. He admired Hemans specifically for her moralistic and sentimental traits. He saw her as a welcome counter-weight to the tendency toward sensuality and vice among the Romantic poets, most notably and notoriously in Byron.[52] In religion and preaching, Greeley did voice concern about the problem of preachers shying away from moral critiques of their congregations out of fear for their livelihood, a point he raised in the Hamilton College talk as emblematic of the problem of intellectuals needing to earn a living through their intellectual work.[53] In this he is in agreement with the larger historical point that Douglas makes, which is that the tendency toward sentiment and popular appeal began among preachers and ministers who, after the disestablishment of the churches in the early republic, needed to appeal to the churchgoers that could no longer be compelled to worship.

In his own publishing business, he was not averse to appealing to the growing audience of women. After hiring Margaret Fuller as an editor he was evidently considering putting out an edition of the *Tribune* that would be geared toward families. It would have featured the paper's literary reviews and content and excluded its editorials and political reporting. Fuller, as the paper's literary editor, would essentially have been the editor of this periodical. When she left the paper to pursue an opportunity to travel to Europe plans for this family edition of the *Tribune* were dropped and it never appeared.[54]

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[52] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 482.
[53] Greeley, *An Address,* 35.
[54] Margaret Fuller, *Margaret Fuller's New York Journalism: A Biographical Essay and Key Writings*, ed. Catherine C. Mitchell (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1995), 16, 24.

Though the construction of identity in the market is cast in terms of masculinity, Greeley generally does not address the role of gender in identity directly. The joke about lazy poets and the comment about the enslaving dehumanizing effects of selfish labor and debt are examples of his deploying the typical discourse on identity and masculinity. These images connect political identity and masculinity through a long-standing tradition of political rhetoric, and Greeley employs them fairly un-reflectively. Even where he supported women's causes, he did so in his usual terms of labor and independence and not gender. For example, he supported the work of Margaret Fuller (and considered her a good friend), but he found her work in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* to be a bit too metaphysical. He felt that women need to have material independence before they can have intellectual or spiritual.[55] In other words women, just like men, need to be able to work in order to have moral independence.

So, while Greeley is concerned with the threat that a cultural market poses to one's intellectual independence and manhood, he is not objecting to sentimentalism or calling for a more sophisticated literary and intellectual culture. In fact, it's hard to determine what kind of culture Greeley would like aside from one that promoted what he saw as the right moral view.

Greeley is open and self-effacing about his limited approach to literature. He says in the preface to *Hints Toward Reforms* that he is not much of a stylist and that the goal of his book is not beauty or literary acclaim but political truth and social reform. This self-effacement is similar to that which Greeley offers in his Hamilton

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[55] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 175.

College address. In preface to *Hints* he also notes how very busy he is and how these essays were written only in his spare moments.[56] After disclaiming literary merit he says that in trying to advance society "this work has a loftier and worthier aim than that of fine writing."[57] His promotion of social and political concerns over aesthetic or artistic ones is made clear in another funny self-effacing comment. Greeley writes, "I have as little taste as faculty for fine writing; as little appetite as aptitude for mere sentimentality: if I were to attempt even a love-story, I have no doubt it would insensibly grow into a socialist harangue or a dissertation on the causes and cure of human destitution."[58] This is not much of an exaggeration and it certainly describes the point of view that he brings to his writing about literature.

Even though he is interested in individual moral efforts involved in authentic, true writing he has only a passing interest in individual effort of literary merit or achievement. His discussions of literature have to do with dogma and cultural progress more than with the accomplishments of individual writers. There are exceptions, but he does not really seem interested in spelling out or writing about those individual literary achievements. One remarkable consequence of Greeley's ideas is that he evades the question of how writers and social reformers can influence the public. His belief in universal justice obviates the need for any explanation of how ideas are adopted or transmitted.

Poetry, for Greeley, is almost by definition on the side of good. In fact it seems at times that the definition works the other way around: writing that is on the

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[56] Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms*, 7-8.
[57] Ibid., 8.
[58] Ibid., 385.

side of good is what Greeley considers to be true poetry. The lyrical conclusion to his essay "Poets and Poetry" makes this point clear enough and makes the expected connection to his ideas of universal divine justice and the impermanence of evil:

> ...to the patriot in his exile, the slave in his unjust bondage, the martyr at the stake, the voice of Poetry comes freighted with hope and cheer, giving assurance that, while Evil is but for a moment, Good is for ever and ever; that all the forces of the Universe are at last on the side of Justice; that the seeming triumphs of Iniquity are but a mirage, Divinely permitted to test our virtue and our faith; and that all things work together to fulfil [sic] the counsels and establish the kingdom of the all-seeing and omnipotent God.[59]

In this excerpt the question of literature becomes secondary to the exposition of the workings of divine justice. The words "Reform" or "Democracy" could be substituted for "Poetry" in the above passage without altering the meaning much at all.

Greeley's views lead him to a vision of culture that is limited to it's value for moral and material progress. One consequence of this limitation is that there is hardly any mention of how laborers and the general public might benefit from reading literature. Greeley mentions often that working people would benefit from having a books about farming which would make that activity more intellectually rewarding and efficient. In telling his own story of leaving the farm for the city, he notes that many farmers' sons leave farming because it is "mindless, monotonous drudgery,

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[59] Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 496.

instead of an ennobling, liberalizing, intellectual pursuit." He notes that his family never had regular success with a crop and he had never seen a book or periodical that would have helped him learn more about farming.[60] This is the closest he comes to discussing the benefits of literacy and the increased availability of books. Even when Greeley looks back on the accomplishments of the *Tribune* in his memoirs, he makes no mention of it having served or improved the laboring classes. He notes that the role of a daily paper is to provide basic information about the world to its readers, which allows the "lawyer, the merchant, the banker, the forwarder, the economist, the author, the politician, etc.," to be better informed.[61] There is no mention of the mechanic or the citizen. The information of the newspaper only helps the managerial class do their jobs better.

Greeley's narrow and muddled view of the role of the *Tribune* comes across when he tries in *Recollections* to articulate the paper's social agenda. After noting that the paper has never make that much money, he adds that his investors are happy with the work the paper does because of its mission.

> …they [the investors] realize and accept the fact, that a journal radically hostile to the gainful arts whereby the cunning and powerful few live sumptuously without useful labor, and often amass wealth, by pandering to lawless sensuality and popular vice, can never hope to enrich its publishers so rapidly nor so vastly as though it had a soft side for the Liquor Traffic, and for all kindred allurements to carnal appetite and sensual indulgence.[62]

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[60] Ibid., 59-60.
[61] Ibid., 142.
[62] Ibid., 143.

This curiously entangled passage seems at first to lean toward the populist rhetoric of someone like Leggett but in the end it is pure Greeley and says a lot less than it seems to about the social agenda of the *Tribune*. The "powerful few" sounds like it refers to the privileged class of society, and the *Tribune* distinguishes itself by being "radically hostile" to the "gainful arts" that this class employs. But what are these arts? Greeley doesn't say that the paper is opposed to their control of business or their abuse of human rights or exploitation of workers. The only thing he refers to is their "pandering to…sensuality…and…vice." But sensuality and vice are the problems that Greeley identifies with the other journals out there which might make his investors more money. In that case the "powerful few" are the people who run the other newspapers. Even if the "powerful few" refers to business men in general he is still just saying that the *Tribune* is hostile to the "gainful arts" employed by those who run other less-enlightened business. If that's the case then the *Tribune's* social agenda is fairly limited. There is no suggestion that it has been active in changing society only that it has *not* been engaged in the prevalent immoral practices. The values that Greeley is concerned with mostly are those of the paper's own moral conduct.

Greeley's use of rhetoric like the "powerful few" who live "without useful labor," seems to make a populist or Jacksonian social critique, but the social ills referred to here stem from the personal moral ills of sensuality, vice, and carnal appetite. There is no reference here to liberty, justice, equal rights and so on. The idea of the non-laboring upper class which persists from labor activists and Jacksonians like Leggett is here stripped of the logic that underlay that earlier use of it. For the free labor Jacksonians, the laborers were entitled to their political rights as a matter of

economic justice since they contributed so much to society by creating national wealth, and, conversely, the idle elites received undemocratic and unrepublican privileges even though they did not contribute to the country's wealth. The only reference to the people in Greeley's comment on the *Tribune* is to "popular vice." The general public are one of the forces that the *Tribune* has had to struggle against.

Part of the problem that Greeley has with explaining the function of his popular writing has already been referred to: he associates any such writing with the writer having given in to his base desires for fame and money. Greeley's writing on Shakespeare provides an example of this, but it also provides a look at a break in Greeley's dogmatic approach to literature. He admires Shakespeare even though he is offended by Shakespeare's politics and thinks he was a "literary hack."[63] The root of Greeley's problem with Shakespeare's politics is that Shakespeare's aristocratic views deny the social flexibility that is central to Greeley's social and religious beliefs. There is no prospect for upward mobility or social transformation in the world that Shakespeare portrays. Greeley's discussions of Shakespeare illustrates his views on literature and democratic culture as well as his limitations as a critic and intellectual.

Greeley says he admires Shakespeare as a writer for his great insights into humanity and can't deny that he was a genius, but, he adds, "[I] profoundly hate his Toryism."[64] It is typical of Greeley's literary criticism that the more interesting element of this evaluation has to do with politics. The assertion that Shakespeare was a genius and that his work features great insights into human psychology and character were clichés even in Greeley's day, and he does not give examples or spend

[63] Ibid., 441.
[64] Ibid., 473.

much time discussing these features of Shakespeare's work. But he has plenty to say about Toryism.

By Toryism Greeley means the tendency in Shakespeare to assume that the mass of humanity is base and to regard the common people as pawns in the doings of the nobles.[65] Greeley writes:

> In his [Shakespeare's] game, only the court-cards count; all the rest go for nothing. We, the untitled, undistinguished masses, are not merely clowns and poltroons, fit only for butts for knightly jests, and hardly good enough to be meat for knightly swords, but there is a constant, though quiet, assumption that this, as it ever has been, must continue to be forever. [66]

Greeley's objection is not to a belief in social hierarchy of course since Greeley himself holds such a belief. What most bothers Greeley about Shakespeare's outlook is that it discounts the ability of the members of the "untitled...masses" to improve or distinguish themselves. The idea that this social arrangement "must continue to be forever" runs counter to the idea of universal justice and perfectibility that Greeley holds. The point which Greeley ends on in his comment on Shakespeare is the key point because it relates to his whole reform platform. He objects to the social inflexibility that he sees implied in Shakespeare's scheme. This inflexibility is an affront to Greeley's idea of human development. It is also of course an affront to Greeley's own life and history, and when he writes about the Shakespeare's jokes at

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[65] Ibid., 473-74.
[66] Ibid., 474.

the expense of the "untitled…masses," he identifies himself with these masses, and his tone is one of personal affront.

Greeley's evaluation of Shakespeare's outlook on society is itself an example of the progress that Greeley sees in civilization. He sees the people in general, human character, as having improved in the centuries between Shakespeare's time and his own. So by the nineteenth century one is able to see social progress and flexibility that Shakespeare failed to see. He faults Shakespeare for not much noting the discovery of the New World or recognizing the potential that it offered for a better more egalitarian human future.[67] Greeley refers to the literature of Shakespeare's time as coming at the dawn of civilization, or at least at the dawn of Protestant civilization (which for Greeley is essentially the same thing). In his sweeping overview of literature he says that great works date to the "infancy of Society," and that Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton date to "the infancy of modern civilization, or of the Protestant development thereof."[68] Of these three only Milton appeals to Greeley, and Milton is approved for his religious views. Milton shows that "evil is phenomenal and transitory," and Greeley feels that expressing this truth is "the burden of all true Literature, as of true Prophecy."[69]

Greeley's acknowledgement of Shakespeare's genius and importance is perhaps perfunctory since he has less praise than criticism for him. His criticism of Shakespeare's popular appeal does not dwell much on literary matters. It is addressed in purely within his political/moral scheme. He refers to Shakespeare as a hack who

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 461.
[69] Ibid., 440.

wrote well but who did so for money and would have done a good job at some other profession if that was what he had ended up doing. Specifically he objects to the way Shakespeare combines his deep insights into humanity with his low humor, puns, and "ordinary play-house rubbish"[70] The important point here is that Greeley does not object to the puns and low humor because of what they say about Shakespeare's audience or because he is prudish about such matters or even because he has an aesthetic objection to them (he might, but he doesn't make this objection in aesthetic terms). The problem with this stuff is not the material itself but Shakespeare's motivation for using it. He uses it because he wants to sell tickets to his plays; his appeal to the public shows that the motivation for his writing is to make money and be materially successful. In doing this Shakespeare was guilty of the central sin of Greeley's moral system: he placed the gratification of his sensual desires before other higher callings such as using his talents to improve humanity.

Greeley's intellectual failure is that he is content to be flummoxed by Shakespeare. Shakespeare: "a riddle entirely too hard for me. I read him; I admire him; but I do not know him."[71] Greeley does not attempt to resolve the two objections that the makes to Shakespeare–that he is a Tory and a panderer–even though those two traits would seem to invite a resolution. For instance does Shakespeare appeal to the lowest common denominator in his "play-house rubbish" because he relates to his mass audience or because he looks down on them? Is his pandering an example of his Toryism or a notable exception to it? These questions don't occur to Greeley because

[70] Ibid., 440, 473.
[71] Ibid., 440.

he does not have the tendency, which Democrats like Leggett and Whitman do, to think of literature in terms of its availability to a mass audience.

This view allows Greeley to reject the role of the market in the sale of books or papers or the dissemination of ideas. There are a few reasons he might want to avoid this topic. His own political views had been rejected politically early in his political career. He can not, as Jacksonians could, claim that his social and political program is widely supported by the electorate. He is a political operative himself and believes enough in democratic ideology to want to avoid a discussion that would lead him to conclude that the masses are ignorant and wrong. It is far better to say that the fault lies in the writers and politicians who appeal to their baser instincts. In fact his own political calculations, as revealed in *Recollections*, show that he viewed electoral politics very realistically and at times even cynically.

There would also appear to be a contradiction or at least an irony in Greeley's work as a partisan newspaper editor. He opposed appeals to the masses in politics and literature, but he was a pioneer in the use of mass media in politics. One way to approach this contradiction is to look at the way that Greeley discussed his partisan newspaper work. He tends to think about the work on these campaign papers as heroic individual efforts. Some of his more dramatic examples of this have been discussed above. When he discusses the papers he does so in terms of the role that party leaders, donors, and operatives like himself play. He hardly ever talks about these papers in populist terms; he doesn't describe the papers as empowering the populace to make an informed decision or to learn about a candidate. His discussions of the role of newspapers in politics are pragmatic, bordering on cynical. Horace

Greeley, one of the most influential public intellectuals of his time, had no theory of public discourse and had no need for one. He had faith.

Chapter 3: Margaret Fuller: Radical and Ultra-Protestant

Margaret Fuller was the literary critic for Greeley's *Tribune* for around two years from 1845 to 1847. She came to that position, after an excursion to the frontier, from the intellectual circle of Boston, where she had, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, founded and edited the Transcendentalist journal the *Dial.* Between the *Dial* and the *Tribune* there was a great difference in perspective and voice. The *Dial* was a journal devoted to literary criticism and philosophy with a small, elite readership who were among the most educated people in the country. The *Tribune* was a daily paper devoted to news and politics that reached an audience across the country of tens of thousands. Fuller's writing for the *Tribune* provided a bridge between the world of New England intellectual life, best known through the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, and that of New York working and middle class mass media.

To the regular book reviews of one of the country's leading papers Fuller brought the work of her peers in New England as well as her formidable knowledge of the full range of European literature, art, and thought. What insight did her learning bring to the question of literature and democracy? Though Fuller shared some of Greeley's reformist Whig views, she was not the dogmatic partisan that he was. Her thoughts about literature and democracy were the result of her struggle to constantly reexamine and challenge her ideas. Searching for truth and questioning received wisdom was part of the ideology of the Transcendentalists, and the most engaging intellectual struggles in Fuller's work reflect the struggles that existed within

Transcendentalism. The overarching struggle of this movement was between subjectivity—represented by Emerson's classic statements on faith in the individual's access to knowledge and truth—and objectivity—represented by the liberal Protestant intellectuals who believed in the power of reason in the study of faith.

One form this tension took in Fuller's work was a debate over the relative critical value of genius and expression. When Fuller wrote about popular literature and politics she valued expression (of the individual or of the people), but she was also captivated by the idea of genius, of the Romantic hero who can express his or her time and place. These two views conflict in that expression is available to everyone, but genius appears only in a select minority of humanity. Expression is an essential component of the Romantic nationalism that inspired some of the republican revolutionaries of 1848 and the cultural nationalism of many of Fuller's American contemporaries. During and before the revolutionary period in Europe, Fuller strongly supported the republican movement, and she was concerned about the creation of a national cultural identity in the U.S. However, her nationalism was not rooted in a belief in grass roots political or cultural expression. Fuller, in her politics as in her criticism, looked to genius first.

The objective/subjective struggle informed Fuller's thinking in other ways. Though she valued artistic genius she also held artists to objective formalist critical standards. Though she praised democracy and wrote critically about social conditions, Fuller understood historical change in Romantic and thoroughly non-materialistic terms.

The origins of the intellectual conflicts in Fuller's work can best be seen in her religious beliefs. Religion was the most important and enduring influence on her personal and intellectual life. She was raised, like virtually all of her New England contemporaries, in a traditional Calvinist-inflected Protestantism. And like the rest of the Transcendentalists she was influenced by the liberal theologians of Unitarianism who rejected many of the tenets of Calvinism. Most notably they rejected the idea of the depravity of mankind and asserted that reason was a divine gift that gave human beings access to truth. Where Fuller differed from those contemporaries whose work we read today, like Emerson and Thoreau, was in her commitment to religious views. Fuller thought and wrote in explicitly Christian terms throughout her career. The work of Emerson and Thoreau has a spiritual element—in fact their work is more dedicated to spirituality and morality than Fuller's, which most often dealt with literature and politics. However, their spirituality is the pantheistic spirituality of Transcendentalism in which the divine is to be found throughout all of nature. It is not cast in Christian terms. When Emerson or Thoreau refer to Jesus for instance they regard him as a great man and moral teacher, but they do not talk about him as the son of God nor do they talk about the second coming as Fuller does.

This view of Jesus as a great and possibly perfect human being was a component of the beliefs of Unitarianism. The controversy over Jesus' divinity was a defining issue in the split between the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians because it raised the question of how far rational inquiry ought to go in questioning traditional Christian doctrines. Emerson's 1837 address to the Harvard Divinity School was at the center of this controversy. Emerson, like Thoreau, had been educated at Harvard

by Unitarians, and he began his career as a Unitarian minister. The divinity school address was part of Emerson's move away from the religious elements of Unitarianism.

Like many other Unitarians, Emerson denied the divinity of Jesus. But Emerson went further than they did in denying the specialness of Jesus and of Christianity in revealing truth. He felt that all people had the potential to arrive at great spiritual truths and that there were other figures on world history that had done so. Jesus was a great man, Emerson said, whose claim on divinity was no greater than that of any of the rest of humanity.[1] Emerson's comments on Jesus were not the most controversial part of the Divinity School Address. That distinction falls to his comments on miracles. Emerson rejects, in an evasive and ambiguous way, a literal belief in the miracles described in the Bible. He suggests that the real miracles we must believe in are not the magical events described in the Bible but the experiences of "man's life."[2] These comments were controversial of course because the Unitarian ministers and future ministers who made up the audience for Emerson's talk, however much they supported rational inquiry into faith, believed in miracles.

Fuller differed with Emerson on these religious questions. That difference is evident in the more conventional ways that she discussed religion in her writing. It also appears in the form of a struggle in her work over the question of faith and reason that persisted throughout her career.

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 67.
[2] Emerson, *Essential Writings,* 68.

Fuller's best know work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century,* features some of this tension between faith and reason. The thesis that the book offers about the natures of men and women is built around the idea of such a tension. She wrote that "The especial genius of Woman I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency." Woman she continues "excels not so easily in classification."[3] Man, she implies has a more rationalist empirical nature, and the goal of her book is to propose how this "great radical dualism" can be resolved.[4]

One solution to this split exists within woman's nature. Fuller writes that Woman's nature is composed of two aspects, Muse and Minerva, which must balance each other. The Muse is the intuitive side. She writes, "What I mean by the Muse is that unimpeded clearness of the intuitive powers, which a perfectly truthful adherence to every admonition of the higher instincts would bring to a finely organized human being."[5] This statement is a virtual summary of the key principles of Romanticism. Fuller qualifies her Romanticism as she discusses how we must interpret the inspiration that the Muse provides. She quotes a writer she refers to only as "a poet-man" who writes that we get insights on nature through "radiant intimations and as it were sheaves of light" but that "it is necessary with earnestness to verify the knowledge we gain by these flashes of light."[6] Fuller tries to follow this advice, but she struggles with the question of how much our intuitive insights can or need to be verified.

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[3] Margaret Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, ed. Perry Miller (Glouster, MA: Peter Smith, 1969), 171.
[4] Ibid., 172.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 173.

Intuitive insights about the nature of Woman and Man are the basis of Fuller's system in *Woman*. They are based on what she believes about human nature. Fuller does try to establish some degree of objective truth for these claims by giving examples and in a few cases by referring what she considered a scientific. She acknowledges that the traits she associates with men and women are not absolute by citing a claim by the French socialist Charles Fourier that one third of all individuals will not exhibit the usual traits of their sex and will be inclined to the activities of the opposite sex.[7] Fourier, the promoter of a utopian socialist system, promoted his ideas as a scientific and rational system for understanding human nature and society, and Fuller likely saw this reference as an instance of verifying her intuitive knowledge. In referring Fourier's claim, Fuller is employing a rationalist system to try to verify her otherwise Romantic and almost mystical idea about the essences of Man and Woman.

Fuller also uses examples from contemporary society to establish her claims.[8] These references are secondary to the intuitive facts. Fuller doesn't, for instance, cite any kind of social scientific findings to establish what the natures of Woman and Man are in the first place. She was willing to cite Fourier to acknowledge that there are exceptions to those natures, but she would probably have not accepted the idea that any social scientific finding could disprove that such natures exist. Scientific knowledge can verify but not create knowledge. The spiritual must come before the material.[9]

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[7] Ibid., 172, 188-87.
[8] See her critique of the spiritual failings of men and women in her society that lead to the problem of prostitution and a class of outcast women. Ibid., 175-82.
[9] Years later while visiting France, Fuller would critique Fourier's work on just these grounds. Though she admired his vision for a radically reformed society, she finds his

Another telling example of the conflict between intuition and verification appears in Fuller's discussion of the Muse. As an example of the intuitive knowledge that the Muse provides, Fuller tells a story about how the daughter of Carolus Linneaus, the eighteenth century botanist, saw the red spirit of a red lily floating above the flower. In a footnote, Fuller offers the rationalist debunking of this story by acknowledging that the appearance of the flower's spirit may have been "an optical illusion." But this rationalist interpretation does not rob the story of its value. Fuller writes that even if the vision was an illusion "its poetic beauty and meaning would even then make it valuable as an illustration of the spiritual fact."[10] Fuller is committed to using reason to verify intuitive knowledge and acknowledging the skeptical, scientific critique, but she still maintains the value of the subjective experience of the illusion.

Another small instance of this that applies to her own times appears a few years later in a short article she wrote in the *Tribune* on the water cure. Fuller describes the work of the German doctor Robert Wesselhoeft, the main practioner of the water cure who claimed his approach could cure a wide variety of diseases. She notes that he takes the patient's whole history into account and doesn't treat the individual "as a mere machine," which she finds appealing. "We think there is something very attractive in the thorough transfusion of substance proposed by the Water Cure. It would be agreeable indeed, to have a new body drawn from pure air,

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work "tainted" by the "gross materialism" of the age; "...he commits the error of making soul the result of health of body, instead of body the clothing of the soul..." Margaret Fuller, *"These Sad but Glorious Days" Dispatches from Europe, 1846-1850*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds and Susan Belasco Smith (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 120.

[10] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, 173.

pure water and milk."[11] Fuller is drawn to the spiritual implications of the Water Cure approach, but she doesn't go any further than admiring the idea. She never makes any claim that it works and she doesn't endorse it. She is careful to keep her comments on it conditional, as in the sentence above, saying that it *would* be nice to have a medical system that functioned in this way.

It appears in these and other comments from Fuller that she wants to believe in the existence of spiritual facts even if her education and skeptical intellect lead her to question the examples that she finds of it. For her, being committed to faith and to spiritual facts means resisting the rationalist explanations. Fuller described the tension between the Enlightenment's rationalism and the Romantic era's search for the infinite in terms of a temptation. In an article on Goethe in the *Dial,* Fuller gives the following historical interpretation of *Faust* (which might also be read as a Faustian interpretation of history). She writes that "the Methistopheles of the eighteenth century bade the finite strive to compass the infinite, and the intellect attempt to solve all the problems of the soul."[12] It is this temptation that Fuller is resisting when she makes her carefully balanced comments on the spirit of the lily or the water cure. Her intellect might allow her to dismiss or be skeptical of these phenomenon but she holds on to a faith that they may express something about the "infinite" or the "soul" that reason has no sway over.

Fuller's approach to on reason and spiritual facts doesn't lead Fuller to the same skeptical views on Jesus and miracles as Emerson. Fuller maintains her traditional Christian beliefs. Her articles in the *Tribune* commonly refer to Jesus and

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[11] "The Water Cure" *Tribune* June 21, 1845.
[12] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, 92.

the Second Coming and divine will in her discussions of social reform and the destiny of the country. In an article that surveys the country's moral failings Fuller writes, "Yet we cannot lightly be discouraged or alarmed as to the destiny of our Country. The whole history of its discovery and early progress indicates too clearly the purposes of Heaven with regard to it."[13] A few years later, on the occasion of the end of the U.S.-Mexico War, Fuller laments that such a terrible injustice should have been committed by the country "which all omens marked out as the dominion where the hopes of the Prince of Peace might be realized," and she still holds out hope that society can be reformed according to the teachings of Jesus.[14] In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* Fuller is concerned about the practical issues of women having opportunities for education and employment, but she is most concerned with the spiritual lives of men and women. She writes "I wish Woman to live first for God's sake."[15] As will be seen in the later discussions, Fuller's religious views also shaped her understanding of class, social change and revolution.

The balance between the subjective and the objective, between the spiritual fact and the material, is important in Fuller's literary criticism. It appears in an article titled "Short Essay on Critics," first published in the *Dial,* in which Fuller discusses the approaches to literary criticism. There are, she proposes, three kinds of critics: the subjective, the apprehensive, and the comprehensive. The subjective critics just write their own opinions and as a result they only reflect the views of their time and place;

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[13] Margaret Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic: Writings from the New-York Tribune, 1844-1846*, ed. Judith Mattson Bean and Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia UP, 2000), 16.
[14] Ibid., 424-25.
[15] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, 188.

they don't concern themselves with doing research or with universal standards of truth and beauty. This is the common approach taken in periodical reviews of the time, and, as a result, Fuller finds, "The long review, the eloquent article by the man of the nineteenth century, are of no value by themselves considered, but only as samples of their kind."[16] Somewhat better, but still less than ideal, are the apprehensive critics who are capable of truly understanding whatever they are reviewing and are able to communicate that understanding to their readers. They are better than the subjective critics, but they are so fully engaged in the subjects they write about that they can't evaluate those subjects from a broad critical perspective. This is the task of the comprehensive critics.

Before discussing the comprehensive critics, I would like to note that Fuller's approach in this piece is fairly straightforwardly dialectical, reflecting the influence of German thought on her work at this early stage of her career as a writer. This influence is still evident in her later writing, but it is not so obvious as in this case. Here the dialectic is fairly clunky and contrived: Fuller has some interesting comments to make about the subjective critics, and it's clear from her comments about the "man of the nineteenth century" that she is thinking of the actual criticism of many of her contemporaries, but she only devotes a paragraph to her discussion of the apprehensive critics and doesn't give any examples of this kind of criticism. The apprehensive critics seem to be introduced mostly as a strawman antithesis to the subjective critics. And that pairing sets up the synthesis represented by the comprehensive critics.

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[16] Margaret Fuller, *Literature and Art by Margaret S. Fuller* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1852), 1:2.

The comprehensive critics are the ideal critic. They can do what the apprehensive critics do, fully understand the art they are writing about, but they can also see beyond it to evaluate its place in the larger sphere of art and universal truth. The interests of these critics is much broader and more significant than the narrow and local perspective of the subjective critics that Fuller criticizes. A critic can only be truly comprehensive when he[17] "perceives the analogies of the universe, and how they are regulated by an absolute, invariable principle."[18] This ideal critic plays an important role: "The maker is divine; the critic sees this divine, but brings it down to humanity by the analytic process."[19] This critic has "a love of ideal perfection"[20] but also has a connection to actual life.

Fuller stresses the importance of great universal truths in criticism, but this must be balanced with an engagement with life and society. The subjective partisan critics do reflect something about the life of their society, but they provide a distorted and incomplete picture, Fuller argues, because they are ideologically blinded. Their partisanship leads them to exclude those elements of life that they disagree with. "An external consistency is thus produced," Fuller writes, "at the expense of all salient

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[17] Or "she," presumably, though Fuller adheres to the convention of her time and only uses the male pronoun. In fact she stresses the manly character that it required to be this ideal critic. Such critics must neither pander or lecture their readers, a trait Fuller describes as "manliness." She writes "It is this true manliness, this firmness in his own position, and this power of appreciating the position of others, that alone can make the critic our companion and friend. We would converse with him, secure that he will tell us all his thought, and speak as man to man." Fuller, *Literature and Art,* 1:7.

[18] Fuller, *Literature and Art*, 1:3.

[19] Ibid., 1:3-4.

[20] Ibid., 1:4.

thought, all genuine emotion of life, in short, and all living influence."[21] The critique of consistency echoes Emerson's line about "foolish consistency" in "Self-Reliance." There is similar common ground in the way that Fuller talks about the negative effects that this partisanship and consistency have had on the American public. The average reader has become "submissive" to these ideas, and "the greater part of what will be said at any public of private meeting can be foretold by any one who has read the leading periodical works for twenty years back."[22] This comment echoes another from "Self-Reliance," Emerson's comment that "If I know your sect I anticipate your argument."[23]

Though Emerson and Fuller identify similar problems in American intellectual culture, they offer different solutions. For Emerson, the solution to the bad faith of following the herd in your opinions and ideas is to have more trust in your own ability to know what is true; the solution is internal. For Fuller the solution is external; writers should be more in touch with real life and human experience, with "living influence." Though spiritual insight is important to Fuller she insists on the importance of balancing it with reality.

The difference in emphasis between Fuller and Emerson becomes more evident in Fuller's work a few years after the "Short Essay on Critics" piece in a review of Emerson's second collection of essays. In that review, which was her first for the *Tribune,* Fuller critiques Emerson's work for not balancing his great spiritual truths with experience of life. She writes:

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[21] Ibid., 1:6.
[22] Ibid., 1:5.
[23] Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Essential Writings,* 137.

> We miss what we expect in the work of the great poet, or the great philosopher, the liberal air of all the zones: the glow, uniform yet various in tint, which is given to a body by free circulation of the heart's blood from the hour of birth. Here is, undoubtedly, the man of ideas, but we want the ideal man also; want the heart and genius of human life to interpret it, and here our satisfaction is not so perfect. We doubt this friend raised himself too early to the perpendicular and did not lie along the ground long enough to hear the secret whispers of our parent life.[24]

Being a "man of ideas" is not enough by itself. It is admirable as she notes earlier in her review where she describes Emerson as one of the few Americans who really pursue truth. What is missing is a contact with the real world. In this case she doesn't describe the contact with the real world as simply confirming or verifying the ideal truths. The point here is more nuanced: Fuller wants the "ideal man" to have contact with the full range of human life in order to be able to interpret that life, to provide insights into all sides of our existence. She continues to discuss truth in terms of a balance between the ideal and the real (as she had done already in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*). The balance is clear when she illustrates her comments on Emerson with a reference to painting. Some painters paint on a red background, which is earthy and physical, and some on a gold, which is celestial and spiritual.

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[24] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 5.

Both approaches can produce valuable representations of human life.[25] To extend Fuller's metaphor, the ideal intellectual would be able to paint on both backgrounds.

Fuller also faults Emerson's collection of essays for lacking artistic unity. Emerson has not yet written "one good work," Fuller says, "if such a work be one where the whole commands more attention than the parts."[26] In making this critique, Fuller doesn't explicitly connect Emerson's lack of artistic unity and his failure to incorporate "all the zones" of human experience, but the artistic critique leads out of the philosophical one. The failures are analogous and perhaps the connection was too obvious to Fuller to state it. Emerson's artistic and philosophical successes are the same: the isolated sentences and passages in his work that reveal his great spiritual insights. His failures are in a sense also the same: those brilliant passages don't incorporate enough of external human life and they are not unified under a literary form—both failures have to do with the external objective world. Both of his successes have to do with the subjective and internal.

Fuller's insistence that intellectuals be engaged with real life leads her to conclude her "Short Essay on Critics" with an eloquent statement on the role of intellectuals in a democratic culture:

> Able and experienced men write for us, and we would know what they think, as they think it not for us but for themselves. We would live with them, rather than be taught by them how to live; we would catch the contagion of their mental activity, rather than have them direct us how to regulate our own. In books, in reviews, in the senate, in the

[25] Ibid., 5-6.
[26] Ibid., 5.

> pulpit, we wish to meet thinking men, not schoolmasters or pleaders. We wish that they should do full justice to their own view, but also that they should be frank with us, and, if now our superiors, treat us as if we might some time rise to be their equals.[27]

This statement illustrates the political and social consequences of Fuller's ideas about criticism and access to truth. The critic she imagines must have an Emersonian faith in his of her own beliefs and at the same time something like a Jacksonian belief that the rest of the public potentially has the same access to the truth. This is an optimistic vision of humanity and one which Fuller herself has trouble living up to.

Gardens and Grasses

While writing for the *Tribune*, Fuller reviewed two collections of poems by working class writers, which provided her an opportunity to revisit the issues of literature (and literary criticism) and democracy. Fuller sees a conflict between a democratic culture that offers greater opportunity for expression and a literary culture that values truth and beauty. As she did in her "Short Essay on Critics," Fuller approaches the problem dialectically. In a review of the work of a Scottish handloom weaver named William Thom, Fuller proposes two contrasting conceptions of literature.

One conception is the classicist/formalist one which insists on formal perfection. If we take this approach, "We may tolerate only what is excellent, and demand that whatever is consigned to print for the benefit of the human race should

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[27] Fuller, *Literature and Art*, 1:7.

exhibit fruits in perfect shape, color, and flavor, enclosing kernels of permanent value."[28]

The other conception is the more Romantic/expressivist one which values communication between people and truth above everything else. Taking this approach, "literature may be regarded as the great mutual system of interpretation between all kinds and classes of men"[29] in which case literature is judged according to how much it communicates and connects people. Any work "will have value, *first* in proportion to the degree of its revelation as to the life of its human soul, *second*, in proportion to the perfection of form in which that revelation is expressed."[30]

After dividing up literature this way, Fuller says that "In the like manner are there two modes of criticism." One mode of critical practice is the hyper-critical formalist mode that insists on the most perfect literary specimens and attacks anything that falls short. She describes this critical school using the image of the garden:

> It crashes to the earth without mercy all the humble buds of Phantasy, all the plants that, though green and fruitful, are also a prey to insects, or have suffered by drouth. It weeds well the garden, and cannot believe that the weed in its native soil may be a pretty graceful plant.[31]

The other mode takes into account the values of expression and communication. Fuller, continuing the nature imagery, describes it as follows:

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[28] Ibid., 2:2. (First published as "Thom's Poems" *New-York Daily Tribune.* 22 August 1845.)
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 2:2-3.
[31] Ibid., 2:3.

> There is another mode which enters into the natural history of every thing that breathes and lives, which believes no impulse to be entirely in vain, which scrutinizes circumstances, motive and object before it condemns, and believes there is a beauty in each natural form, if its law and purpose be understood. It does not consider a literature merely as the garden of the nation, but as the growth of the entire region, with all its variety of mountain, forest, pasture, and tillage lands. Those who observe in this spirit will often experience, from some humble offering to the Muses, the delight felt by the naturalist in the grasses and lichens of some otherwise barren spot. These are the earliest and humblest efforts of nature, but to a discerning eye they indicate the entire range of her energies.[32]

This description makes the familiar connections between nature and the ideal of human expression. It allows for the possibility that formal artistic perfection might not be the best indicator ideal truths. Such truths can be found if a work of art, even a flawed one, provides some connection between its creator and its audience or, as Fuller puts it, some "revelation as to the life of its human soul."[33]

The nature imagery that Fuller uses implies that the expressive critical approach applies not just to individual writers but to national cultures generally. In calling for consideration the "growth of the entire region" Fuller is arguing for a greater appreciation for the writing of people throughout the population of the

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 2:2.

country. Doing so would allow us to learn more about each other (to remain in the "spiritual presence one of another"[34]) and about the "entire range of [nature's] energies." For Fuller these are probably one in the same lesson since the more we learn about the internal lives of others through literature the more we will come to appreciate the great work of nature reflected in these other "human soul[s]."

The political meaning is clear from the images also. Fuller wants to make a case for the appreciation of the literary work of the working class. Fuller wants to explain her theoretical basis for valuing the work or a working class writer like Thom without having to say it was great poetry according to formal critical standards. Thom's background is established at the beginning of the piece through a long excerpt from his preface in which he refers to his experiences as a worker and explains that his aim is to allow the classes to better understand each other. Fuller uses the garden and nature images to illustrate the challenges that the poor face. She describes the plants that the gardener/critic "crashes to earth" as having been "prey to insects" or having "suffered by drouth." These natural hardships are analogous to the material and cultural disadvantages that the working class experience. She uses some form of the word "humble" twice in reference to the common literary "growths" of a country. There is a pandering and condescending tone to Fuller's discussion of the literary work of the people, but her earlier comments on the importance of external life to the work of critics and philosophers (like Emerson) establish that this something she genuinely believed in.

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[34] Ibid.

Fuller felt that the Romantic/expressivist approach to literature was most in keeping with the democratic tendencies of the times. She acknowledges that if taken to an extreme both approaches "have each their dangers." The classicist/formalist approach can lead to "hypercriticism and pedantry;" the romantic/expressivist approach to "indiscriminate indulgence and a leveling of the beautiful with what is merely tolerable."[35] In spite of these dangers however, Fuller is content that the current era leans more toward the democratic approach. These changes are impelled by the "spirit of the time, which is certainly seeking, though by many and strange ways, the greatest happiness for the greatest number..."[36] She notes that many social and technological changes have made it much easier for a greater number of people to have their work published.

Fuller is happy about this democratizing of literature for a few reasons. It is inherently good because it allows for greater expression and communication between people. It also good because of the larger benefit to national culture that it promises, and this point is where we can start to see the conflict between Fuller's support for egalitarian literature and her critical principles.

> We are not ourselves at all concerned, lest excellent expression should cease because the power of speech to some extent becomes more general. The larger the wave and the more fish it sweeps along, the likelier that some fine ones should enrich the net. It has always been so. The great efforts of art belong to artistic regions, where the boys in the street draw sketches on the wall and torment melodies on rude

[35] Ibid., 2:3-4.
[36] Ibid., 2:4.

> flutes; shoals of sonneteers follow in the wake of the great poet. The electricity which flashes with the thunderbolts of Jove must first pervade the whole atmosphere.[37]

Fuller did not see an egalitarian or democratic literature as an ultimate end. For a more radical egalitarian, such as William Leggett, democratization was an end to itself; it meant greater access to culture and greater opportunity for expression among the population. From this perspective, the emergence of a "great poet" was either beside the point or, at least for Leggett, antithetical to the cause of democracy. Fuller, true to her dialectical approach, tries to balance this egalitarian view with her formal and aesthetic standards. As much as Fuller appreciates the growth of democracy and what she sees as the democratizing effects of technology, the most exciting outcome she foresees from this change is the appearance of a "great poet." This great artist's appearance is not necessarily related to democratic ideals. He or she will appear only because it is "likelier" that there will be such a great artist in a country that has so many.

Fuller's ambivalence toward an egalitarian or democratic culture is highlighted by some confusion in the images uses in this passage. With the image of the fish-in-the-wave, Fuller implies that the great writer will be one person from the crowd (or school) of everyday poets. But the later image of the "shoals of sonneteers" reverses the idea that Fuller intends in her discussion of the spread of art. In that case, her image is that of the great poet sweeping through and being followed by all these minor poets. This great poet is, it seems, a bigger and more consequential fish than

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[37] Ibid.

the rest. And more importantly he somehow comes first and the others "follow" after in his wake. This order is the reverse of what Fuller is suggesting when she says that the "artistic regions" give rise to the "great efforts of art." The "boys in the street" and the "sonneteers" should come first with the great artists, presumably, emerging from among them. But this is too much egalitarianism for Fuller. She is committed to the ideal of the heroic Romantic artist, the great poet, and that designation means more than being a sonneteer who was in the right place at the right time. It is a special and, as the reference to "the thunderbolts of Jove" shows, a quasi-divine role. The image of the great poet following in the wake of the humble sonneteers is not one that Fuller would have thought to employ.

These comments also show one part of her ambiguous take on cultural nationalism. This passage like the passage quoted earlier on the "growth of the entire region" suggests that a country can have some collective artistic identity that is expressed through the cultural work of the people at large. But Fuller does not say that the expression of that collective identity is the ultimate purpose of culture or literature, which would be the position of a cultural nationalist. Fuller did take a typical cultural nationalist position on literature a months before the review of Thom's poems in a review of a book on Latin verse. She defends the study of this material because, even though the forms were not used in the current age, they expressed something about the essence of the cultures they belonged to.[38] When

[38] In this piece Fuller does add that knowing the forms would lead one to create poetry without "a mind deeply conscious of the universal harmony..." Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 122-23.

Fuller applauds the work of poets of the people like William Thom she is not make a similar claim for their work.

Fuller most admires Thom and other artists from the laboring class not for representing the essence of their country or of the age but for representing an important aspect of humanity. As some of her imagery suggests, Fuller thinks their work is valuable for what it reveals about what she imagines to be their humble or innocent nature. In particular, Fuller admires such artists for their docility and childishness. She takes these traits as evidence of the freedom that these artists have from the corruptions of modern life. They are free from the artificial standards of manners and thinking, what Fuller calls the factitiousness of life. In her review of Thom, after her discussion of the critical approaches to literature and the opening up of literature in the current era, Fuller moves on to discuss Thom and his work specifically. She admires him for not letting the hardships of his life make him bitter or angry. "One of the most remarkable things about him," Fuller writes, "is his disposition to look on the bright side, and the light and gentle playfulness with which he enlivened, when possible, the darkest pages of his life."[39] This trait is more remarkable than his actual poetry which Fuller only has modest praise for. "Thom has a poetical mind, rather than is a poet."[40]

Fuller makes a similar evaluation of John Critchley Prince, another laborer-turned-poet, in a review just a few weeks earlier. In that review Fuller begins by praising the great changes ushered in by this era which will eliminate the lower classes. She notes how great and "honorable" all kinds of labor are. She describes the

[39] Fuller, *Literature and Art*, 2:5.
[40] Ibid., 2:8.

terrible hardships that Prince endured (like Thom, he had to travel to find food and work and had a young child die because of lack of food and shelter). Still, Fuller is most impressed that "life has made but little impression on Prince." His gift is the ability to see the "happiness natural to Man" and to show his faith in God. Fuller feels that, "It is this childishness, rather this virginity of soul, that makes Prince's poems remarkable."[41]

This admiration of the childlike personality is not just reserved for poets Fuller admires as individuals but whose work she finds marginal. She applies it in at least one case to an artist she unreservedly admired. She uses similar terms to describe Ole Bull, an internationally known Norwegian violinist who played in New York on his American tour. In describing the nature of his talent she wrote that "The genius of Ole Bull is sweet, brilliant, romantic and tender, not grand, severe and commanding." He may not be technically perfect, but he can "dally with his art and do things with the light freedom of a child."[42] In keeping with this naturalness, his manners were "those of a princely child." Fuller admires his natural ways and wishes that more people had his manners "instead of automaton or merely conventional manners."[43] Bull's artistic genius and his personality are tied together. They both are a result of his freedom from the conventions of society, whether social or artistic. But freedom from social conventions does not mean rebellion of any kind; it means an innocence and acceptance with regard to the social world. When Fuller writes about

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[41] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 197.
[42] Ibid., 240.
[43] Ibid., 241.

society and class at the *Tribune*, the traits she admires in natural artists like Thom, Prince, and Bull are the same traits she finds most admirable in the poor.

Fuller wrote a pair of articles for the *Tribune* in the first half of 1846 called "The Rich Man—An Ideal Sketch" and "The Poor Man—An Ideal Sketch." By the time she wrote these articles, Fuller had been writing in New York City for more than a year, and these pieces were her response to living in the city and seeing its social problems. She had, a year earlier, written two pieces that reported on the conditions at some of what she called the city's charities, which included asylums, alms houses, and prisons. In these pieces, she described some of the sad cases of individuals in these institutions and called for greater sympathy from the public and for reforms.[44] A year later, in the "Ideal Sketches" Fuller gave a broader vision of social class and of what individuals can do to remedy social problems.

Fuller wrote the "The Rich Man—An Ideal Sketch" first. She begins with a curiously moderate call for "a radical reform" of society; there are a great many ills in society but Fuller stresses that "We prize the Past" and that she is not calling for all traditions to be discarded.[45] One change she does think is essential, however, is a change in the character of the rich, and Fuller runs through a list of desired attributes of the ideal rich man. He should be honest and should treat the people who work for him "not as mere tools of his purpose, but as human beings also." His house should be modern and smartly designed. His wife should be his intellectual peer. He should

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[44] Fuller, "Our City Charities..." and "Asylum for Discharge Female Convicts" in *Margaret Fuller, Critic,* 98-104, 136-37.
[45] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic,* 359.

appreciate the arts and literature, and he should be a non-smoker.[46] Having an upper class that meets these qualifications is important because that class should form a natural aristocracy for the country and use their influence and capabilities for good. Fuller writes, "Our nation is not silly for striving for an aristocracy. Humanity longs for its upper classes. But the silliness consists in making them out of clothes, equipage, and a servile imitation of foreign manners, instead of the genuine elegance and distinction that can only be produced by genuine culture."[47] Fuller's elitism here is not as thorough as that of a strict Whig like Greeley. She is presenting an ideal with the acknowledgment that a great deal of the rich people in the society fall far short of it. She doesn't suggest, as Greeley and other Whigs did that being rich in itself establishes that one has some of the genuine admirable qualities that she has in mind. Nonetheless, it's clear from this piece, and it's companion sketch of the poor, that any progress toward that that utopia depends far more on the action of the rich people described than of the poor.

In "The Poor Man—An Ideal Sketch," Fuller imagines a class that would respond to its condition with religious faith and acceptance. She acknowledges the hardships that the working poor suffer and the disadvantages they face,[48] but she finds that often the problems the poor face have spiritual and not material origins. They can be too caught up in material things. "It is astonishing," she writes, "to see the poor, no less than the rich, the slaves of externals." Fuller argues that the problems of the poor

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[46] Ibid., 360-66.
[47] Ibid., 361.
[48] Fuller notes that the poor she is referring to are low-paid working people and not to those who face the most extreme poverty. In that state, she writes, there is no "ideal." Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic,* 376.

call for a spiritual solution that must come from within the poor man or woman: "The poor man wants dignity, wants elevation of spirit. It is his own servility that forges the fetters that enslave him." The poor has as much access to these kinds of spiritual changes as the rich do. Anyone, whatever their job or status, can find salvation, so the poor should have faith in God and believe in themselves. Having faith in God means in part that the poor should accept the life that they have. The poor man can and should work to improve his situation, but until it improves, "He must accept his lot, while he is in it."[49] Fuller closes by describing the ideal poor that she has in mind as follows: "Such are the noble of the earth. They do not repine; they do not chafe, even in the inmost heart...."[50] The focus on the spiritual leads Fuller to a vision of the lower classes that is at odds with the working class movements of the time, among which there was plenty of chafing at the existing social conditions. Leggett's work is just one example of the Democratic rhetoric that inveighed against the upper classes. The Jacksonians also had a different outlook from Fuller on the differences between the classes and the needs of the working class. Where Fuller thought of these things in spiritual terms, they understood their constituency and their agenda in economic or materialistic terms.

Fuller's view of the urban poor is different from her view of the working class artists that she wrote about. The actual working people of New York City fell far short of the ideal that she imagined for that class, which she saw illustrated in the work of Thom and Prince. She admired the those poets for their innocence and their

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[49] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 377-79.
[50] Ibid., 382-83.

acceptance of the life that God had given to them, traits that the city's poor should emulate as far as Fuller was concerned.

Fuller's analysis of the spiritual and moral failings of the city's working masses influenced the last major piece Fuller published before leaving New York for Europe, a critical survey of the national literary scene called "American Literature." Fuller writes that intellectuals, in this case literary writers, journalists, reviewers and editors, have a responsibility to take a stand against mass opinion. Their worst failure in this regard is the widespread political partisanship of the country's magazines and reviews. As she did in her "Short Essay on Critics," Fuller criticizes partisanship as an intellectual failure that results from following the opinions of the herd. A journal should try to lead opinion; "...if instead it bows to the multitude, it will find the ostracism of democracy far more dangerous than the worst censure of a tyranny could be."[51] As Fuller sees it, democracy and the multitude are the source of the most serious problems that the country's intellectual culture faces.

Fuller is concerned about resisting the dominant ideology in the society, but there is no suggestion that this ideology is associated with the wealthy or ruling class. In other words there is no hint of the modern idea of ideology as the system of beliefs that underpinned class privilege. The most familiar version of this idea comes out of Marx's work in Europe around this same time. There was also the home-grown ideological critique of the Jacksonians, an extreme form of which was developed by William Leggett. For Fuller, the source of ideology is the multitude, and the greatest danger it presents is that it might distort a writer's judgment of truth and beauty. The

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[51] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, 245.

larger social consequence is that such distorted judgments will be transmitted to the people and will shape the culture and hurt its development. Fuller describes the process of intellectual independence and service to the public in heroic terms: "...only a noble fearlessness can give wings to the mind, with which to soar beyond the common ken and learn what may be of use to the crowd below. Writers have nothing to do but to love truth fervently, seek justice according to their ability, and then express what is in the mind..."[52]

The sentiment here of intellectuals' adhering to high ideals and serving the public seems laudable enough in some regards, but Fuller's references to the "common" understanding of the "crowd below" and to the "noble" courage of the writer establish that she sees this writer class, and presumably herself, as morally and intellectually distinct from the rest of the people. The key elements for this distinction are not class, which did not form part of Fuller's analysis in any modern sense of the term, but religion and what Fuller calls race.

Pure Blood and Natural Princes

As the discussions of her writing on working class writers showed, Fuller didn't think that the working class would be the source of intellectual leadership. At the same time, she doesn't believe that the upper class will necessarily provide that leadership either. Her rich and poor man sketches fault both classes for their spiritual failings. Intellectual and cultural leadership is tied to the spiritual values that Fuller associates with Protestantism and to what she refers to as the race that is descended from the early European settlers of New England. Her use of the term "race" is

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[52] Ibid., 246.

problematic. On the one hand it is a concept that she puts great stock in in her analyses of culture and society. She feels that cultures express the essential traits of the races that produce them. But she uses the terms inconsistently, sometimes to refer to European nationalities, other times to non-European people and their descendants, and often to the politically-defined population of the U.S.

In "American Literature," she opens with a discussion of the race of the U.S. because she feels the country's literature must express the character of that race. She contrasts the culture of the U.S. with that of England to establish that the U.S. needs to have a distinctive culture of its own.

> What suits Great Britain, with her insular position and consequent need to concentrate and intensify her life, her limited monarchy and spirit of trade, does not suit a mixed race continually enriched with new blood from other stocks the most unlike that of our first descent, with ample field and verge enough to range in and leave every impulse free, and abundant opportunity to develop a genius wide and full as our rivers, flowery, luxuriant, and impassioned as our vast prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan fathers landed.[53]

The country's cultural identity is related to its physical features and to its mythical Puritan history. It is also related to its diversity. Fuller refers to the U.S. as a "mixed race," though it appears she does not imagine race in this case in terms of skin color or the differences between European, African and Asian people. When Fuller says the American race is mixed because it is "continually enriched with new blood" she is

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[53] Ibid., 231.

referring to the large numbers of immigrants from Europe that were arriving all the time and not the African American and Native American population, who were of course already present in America. These European immigrants, mostly Irish and German, are changing the race because they are "most unlike" the original people of the country, who Fuller identifies through her reference at the end of this passage to the Puritans. The immigrants represent a challenge because they are so different from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock of New England, but Fuller accepts the challenge because she values the diversity that these immigrants represent. She sees diversity as a defining feature of the nation's identity and argues that the country's cultural identity will not really emerge "till the fusion of the races among us is more complete."[54]

Fuller's belief in some kind of multi-culturalism or pluralism was qualified by her concern about the challenge of assimilating these immigrants into the society while preserving the values that she associated with the early Protestant settlers. She is concerned because so many of the immigrants arriving in the country bring with them a range of moral flaws. Fuller makes this point bluntly in an article on ancient Italian culture. She contrasts the culture of the ancients and her own time as follows:

> It was the pride and greatness of ancient nations to keep their blood unmixed, but it must be ours to be willing to mingle, to accept in a generous spirit what each clime and race has to offer us. It is indeed the case that much diseased substance is offered to form this new body, and if there be not in ourselves a nucleus, a heart of force and

[54] Ibid.

> purity to assimilate these strange and various materials in a very high form of organic life; they must needs induce one distorted, corrupt and degraded beyond the example of other times and places.[55]

There is a jarring contrast between the openness and pluralism of the first sentence in this passage and the concern for racial purity and fear of degradation of the second. The image of impure blood in the second sentence is a recurring theme of Fuller's social criticism. When she wrote her article on the city's prisons and other institutions she argued that New York City should be a leader in reform of these kinds of programs because it has the ability to do so and more than any other city the greatest need to do so. New York has the money and talent "and *surely, need enough*" to institute such reforms, Fuller wrote (emphasis in the original). If the city failed to improve its social services, it could end up worse than London or Paris. "Such bane as is constantly poured into her veins demands powerful antidotes."[56] The poison that Fuller is concerned about is the influx of immigrants.

The problem that Fuller has with the current crop of immigrants is that they lack the spiritual values of the Protestant founders of the country, the "Puritan fathers" she refers to in her comment on the nation's character. Those early immigrants were seeking spiritual independence when they came to the New World, Fuller says, and their spiritual outlook shaped the country. It meant that the national identity was built on spiritual independence. This important trait was being threatened she felt by immigrants whose motivation for coming to the country were simply

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[55] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 253.
[56] Ibid., 103.

material. In immigrating, they sought only more food or money and so were not interested in spiritual independence. Also, as Catholics, they followed religious doctrines that did not allow for spiritual independence.

Fuller made the point about the importance of Puritan morals most clearly in a piece written on the occasion of New Year's Day of 1845. She describes the problem that the country is facing in having so many immigrants arriving constantly (again using the images of impurity, blood, and the body).

> The hands and lips of this great form [America] may be impure, but pure blood flows yet within her veins—the blood of the noble bands who first sought these shores from the British isles and France for conscience sake. Too many have come since for bread alone. We cannot blame—we must not reject them, but let us teach them, to prize that salt, too, without which all on earth must lose its savor.[57]

Fuller assumes that her readers see themselves, as she does, as representatives of the pure blood of those early Protestant settlers.[58] She sees this community as obliged to transmit their values to the poor immigrants. In this sentiment, Fuller shows that even though she is troubled by the immigrants she has some sympathy for their situation. As in her sketches of the ideal rich and poor man, Fuller sees a social problem as a moral or spiritual failure in the lower classes that can be remedied by the class of

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[57] Ibid., 17-18.

[58] Fuller may have been partly right in this assumption. Most of the readers of the Whig-leaning reformist *Tribune* were probably Protestants, but the paper did have some Catholic readers since it received letters from Catholics, including Archbishop Hughes, complaining about the anti-Catholic comments in some of her letters from Europe.

educated and well-off Protestants. She closes this New Year's piece, which refers to a range of other ills that the country faces, by referring specifically to Protestant religious values as an essential element of the country's greatness: "There is still hope, there is still an America, while private lives are ruled by the Puritan, by the Huguenot conscientiousness..."[59]

Fuller is concerned with religion in this case, but not necessarily with specific religious doctrine. In writing on the Irish Catholic immigrants for instance she did not think that adopting the values she espouses means they must all convert to Protestantism. She felt that under the influence of America their religious views will change to form an "American Catholicism," and they will develop the more liberated habits of mind that she associates with Protestants. Most importantly, they will defer less to the authority of the church hierarchy and priests.[60]

These views of the Irish appeared in two pieces on "Irish Character" that Fuller wrote in the spring of 1845, just a few months after the New Year's Day piece that expressed her concern about the new immigrants. She opens the first of these pieces with an evaluation of the good traits of the Irish character: they have a poetic nature, "natural eloquence," and generosity.[61] Fuller acknowledges the many flaws that are popularly associated with the Irish, their dishonesty, "Their extreme ignorance, their blind devotion to a priesthood, the pliancy in the hands of demagogues..."[62] But these flaws are not inherent in the people; they are the result,

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[59] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 18.
[60] Ibid., 157.
[61] Ibid., 146-47.
[62] Ibid., 148-49.

Fuller says, of being an "oppressed race."[63] She feels these behaviors, like the nature of the Catholicism the Irish practice, will change under the influence of America. One way to effect this influence, she advices her readers, is through their interaction with the Irish workers they encounter and domestic servants they employ. As she had done in her comments on the ideal poor man and the working class poets, Fuller compares the working Irish to children and urges her readers to be patient in teaching them.[64] This advice appears in the second article on the Irish, which is mostly a response to readers who wrote to complain that Fuller was too lenient on the Irish in her first article. She reiterates her materialist defense of the Irish; this time pointing out that their bad behavior is influenced by their current working conditions and poverty as well as the legacy of Irish history.[65]

When discussing the flaws of the Irish, Fuller takes a materialist view of what she calls race, but when she talks about their positive traits she takes a more essentialist view. She gives examples of the supposed natural eloquence and poetic nature of the Irish drawn from stories about the city's Irish poor, so these traits endure in spite of bad conditions. The idea of essential racial characteristics is an important element of Fuller's literary criticism. In a review of Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil,* Fuller describes him as "an educated Englishman, but with the blood of sunnier climes glowing and careering in his veins...."[66] She is referring to Disraeli's Italian-Jewish background. Disraeli was, as Fuller notes, educated and raised in England, and he had been baptized as a young man. In spite of this and the fact that he was two

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[63] Ibid., 148.
[64] Ibid., 157.
[65] Ibid., 155.
[66] Ibid., 139.

generations removed from the "sunnier climes" that Fuller refers to (his paternal grandfather had immigrated to England from Italy), Fuller thinks this background influences his writing. She takes a similar view of the traits of the African race in a review of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*. Fuller describes the book as "an excellent piece of writing" that demonstrates the abilities of the "Black Race, which Prejudice persists in disputing."[67] But it also was an example of a "peculiar element" of "the African races" that could provide a great advance to human culture and understanding. Fuller detects this trait in the work of the French-born writers Andre Dumas and Frederic Soulie. "The same torrid energy and saccharine fulness may be felt in the writing of this Douglass, though his life being one of action or resistance, was less favorable to such powers than one of more joyous flow might have been."[68] Fuller regards these traits as surpassing any social or linguistic differences in the writers. They are consistent even though Douglass was raised as a slave in Maryland and forbidden from learning to read and write and Dumas and Soulie were raised in the French middle class.

In her discussions of the national cultures of Europe, Fuller identifies similar enduring traits. The article she wrote on classical Italian culture in which she made the comment about the ancients' preference for racial purity was devoted to describing the nature of the Italian character. Fuller says that Italy shares with Greece the influence of its climate on its culture: "those sunny skies ripened their fruits

[67] Ibid., 131.
[68] Ibid., 132.

perfectly."[69] By contrast the English character, Fuller writes in "American Literature," "has the iron force of the Latins, but not the frankness and expansion."[70]

Fuller's serious deployment of these ideas about races and their characteristics is another significant example of her resistance to materialist approaches to society and culture and her tendency toward an idealist intellectual approach. Fuller believes that truth, whether it is the truth of national characteristics or of political progress or artistic greatness, has a source somewhere beyond the everyday facts of the world. Fuller tried in her social criticism as in everything else to consciously balance idealism with a more realist or materialist approach. She may have been prompted to do this through her experience in New York City and her attention to the city's social problems. She cannot however quite escape her idealism. Fuller may believe that the tendency of the age to toward a greater emphasis on the everyday facts of our lives (whether in literature or in politics), but she did not believe that those everyday facts—the experiences and actions of the common people—can produce great art or important historical change. Or at least she did not believe so before her experiences in Europe.

The last phase of Fuller's career, her letters to the *Tribune* from Europe before and during the revolutions there in 1848, is often described as making her more radical in her political views. Her views were certainly radical in the context of Europe at the time: she supported revolutionary movements to overthrow monarchies and establish democratic governments. But in the lead-up to the revolutions her ideas about revolution and political change operated on the same principles as her views on

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[69] Ibid., 255.
[70] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic*, 230.

genius and race. Fuller's religious idealism leads her to look for the source of historical change in some higher realm than the actual world. She does not see the revolutionary movements in Europe as the products of material conditions or as the actions of a large class of the population. Fuller sees these changes as having their source in the spirit of the age or the will of God, which for her are more or less synonymous. She makes this connection explicitly in a comment on the reform movements in England's industrial towns. After noting that these towns had the worst poverty that she had ever seen, she notes that in these places where "Where evil comes to an extreme, Heaven seems busy in providing means for the remedy" by promoting the necessary social changes.[71] A materialist of course would conclude, as Marx did, that the terrible conditions had led to the social reform movements. Fuller saw the historical changes of an earlier generation as directed by a supernatural or transcendent source, which transcended even the greatest of great men and heroic figures. In a discussion of Napoleon, Fuller notes the serious wrongs he was guilty of but finds that he is admirable for his talent and for "the work that the spirit of the time did through him...."[72]

Fuller's transcendental approach wins out in her work in spite of her dedication to exploring the real. In her early letters from England, Fuller reiterates the importance of paying attention to everyday experiences. She had faulted Emerson for failing to do so, and she tried to do so herself in some of her *Tribune* writing on social reform in New York. Early in her European trip, after seeing the work of some English reformers, she declares her conviction that being "engaged...in practical life"

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[71] Fuller, *"These Sad but Glorious Days" Dispatches from Europe, 1846-1850*, 79.
[72] Fuller, *Margaret Fuller, Critic*, 449.

is important to art.[73] When she spent a night lost on a mountain in Scotland she says it was "a never-to-be-forgotten presentation of stern, serene realities."[74] This dedication to reality in social criticism, just like her dedication to the everyday poetry of the people, is genuine, but it is generally trumped by her belief in spirit and genius.

Fuller's experiences in Europe did change her perspective on the relationship between people and history, but the change came slowly and only in response to her first-hand experience of revolution and war. In the Fall of 1847, as the revolutionary movement was developing, Fuller wrote a letter from Italy, in which she casts "the people" in the same subservient and childlike role that she cast for them in earlier writing about culture. She admires the people most for following their leaders, for their "wise docility."[75] Fuller writes that in the movements for social change, "From the people themselves the help must come, and not from princes; in the new state of things there will be none but natural princes, great men."[76] In revolution, as in art, natural princes and pure blood play a defining role. (As does religion; when the Pope, who was initially a moderate reformer, and other reactionary elements of the Church opposed the republican revolutionaries, Fuller gave full vent to her anti-Catholic sentiments.) In the aftermath of the revolution, when the short-lived Roman Republic was crushed and the authority of the Pope, the Austrian Empire and local kings reestablished in Italy, Fuller has more praise and respect for the people than for their leaders. Some of her admiration of course is guided by her religious prejudices. She is happy that the common Italian people have become disillusioned with the Pope and

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[73] Fuller, *"These Sad but Glorious Days" Dispatches from Europe, 1846-1850*, 47-48.
[74] Ibid., 76-77.
[75] Ibid., 155, 160.
[76] Ibid., 156.

the Church in general.[77] But more generally, she finds that the people have proved themselves through their actions in the revolution and that they were actually more advanced than their leaders in the push for change.[78] She is sharply critical of the English and American expatriates she encountered in Rome who didn't have faith in the Italians and were dismissive about the revolution.[79] These final letters from Europe serve as a post-mortem on the revolutions and as a rebuke of the American public they are addressed to for their country's failure to do more for the cause of democracy.

Those letters would also be Fuller's final critical statements. Whatever change in perspective they represented would never be developed further or applied to America's developing literary culture, but they are a testament to Fuller's intellectual tirelessness and her commitment to find a critical position that reconciled her concrete commitment to life and society and her religious/philosophical faith in the spirit and genius.

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[77] Ibid., 243, 250.
[78] Ibid., 234.
[79] Ibid., 256-57.

Chapter 4. Walt Whitman: From Partisan to Poet

Walt Whitman is known as the great poet of individualism, but his individualism is very different from that of a moralist like Horace Greeley or a Romantic like Margaret Fuller. Whitman, in his poetry and in his long career as a journalist, wrote regularly about the common people, democracy and American culture, but he rarely focused on the morality of the individual or on the individual's capacity to perform great actions or capture the general will (as Greeley and Fuller tended to do). Whitman's more egalitarian tendency was to think of people as having generally the same moral and intellectual capability. He stressed this in his early political writing as a newspaper editor at a string of papers in New York and Brooklyn and in the Preface and poetry of *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855. These egalitarian ideals shaped the role he envisioned for intellectuals and artists throughout his career, even as his thoughts on that role changed. His earliest writing as a partisan journalist negotiated the relationship between the journalist and the public. Whitman gave the people credit for their intelligence and intellectual capacity, but he also asserted the important social function of the press in presenting facts to a reasoning and thinking public. In response to the crises in the 1850s over the extension of slavery, Whitman loses faith in this rationalist model of discourse. In his thought and practice he asserts that the artist and poet have the central role in shaping society. This change of perspective appears first in his critical writing, then in an early form in his pre-*Leaves-of-Grass* poetry. In the course of this change Whitman gradually gives up the rhetorical role of activist or partisan. His earliest free verse poetry is informed by his

strong political allegiances, but by the time he writes the Preface and most of the poems of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman has adopted the rhetorical role of the great poet who transcends mundane political struggles. What Whitman retains in this change are the values that have become signature features of his work: his faith in the intellectual and spiritual capacity of the people.

The depiction of the "great poet" in the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* shows some influence of the Romantic idea of the artist. The "great poet" is a heroic figure who can capture the spirit of the age and of the people and communicate the great truths of the universe. This is consistent with the Romantic ideas of the artist found in Emerson and Fuller and many other American and European proponents of Romanticism. However, Whitman's "great poet" is different from many of these conceptions because he is seemingly so removed from being an individual personality. He is so in touch with his country, his fellow human beings, and the universe that he does not have his own identity. These traits are described in the Preface, but they are perhaps best captured in the image that closes the book's first long poem in which the great poet figure that narrates the poem describes himself gradually dissolving into the universe.

Whitman's poetry and his conception of the poet are his attempt to reconcile the tensions between the individual and the aggregate that formed an important part of the debates over democracy and culture in his period. These tensions, as we saw in the earlier chapters, bring with them questions about economics and labor, personal morality and intellectual independence. Whitman's tendency toward egalitarianism and his interest in labor were shaped by his political views, which were those of a

Jacksonian Democrat. His politics, though in a moderated form, were descended from the reformist Locofoco Democrats of William Leggett's time a generation earlier. He was also influenced by Romanticism through Emerson and other American writers and through the many European writers he read and reviewed. My reading of Whitman's criticism and early poetry, however, stresses the distance between Whitman's poetics and the Romanticism of a writer like Fuller, the way in which the poetic achievement of Whitman is his accommodation between the egalitarian/Enlightenment ideals of his politics and the Romanticism of his cultural era. This is an accommodation between two broadly different understandings of the self and the result is the striking self that Whitman creates in *Leaves of Grass.*

That Whitman's great poetry emerged from the political and social turmoil of the early 1850s is a familiar idea in Whitman criticism. Or at least it has been familiar for the past generation or so. The close connection between Whitman's radical politics and his perhaps more radical poetry is well established now, but it is a connection that Betsy Erkkila in her 1989 study *Whitman the Political Poet* had to painstakingly assert (beginning with her book's title).[1] Erkkila shows the resistance in the modernist critical tradition to taking Whitman's politics fully into account. Whitman's egalitarian political views were a liability for their own sake in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century when many of the leading American critics held far more conservative views. They were also a liability in the context of the modernist critical values that celebrated formal achievement and the ability to transcend or defy mundane moral and political views. Erkkila notes critical appraisals

[1] Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

of Whitman that tried to portray him as such an artist by examining the formal achievements of his verse.[2] Erkkila sets out to present the historical context behind Whitman's work in order to correct the literary historical record and also to defend Whitman's political ideals.

Many other scholars have, like Erkkila, addressed the historical and political roots of Whitman's poetry and illuminated different aspects of his response to his time and place. Erkkila herself stresses the formative influence of radical republican thought on Whitman's early life and his engagement in party politics and partisan journalism in the decade or so before *Leaves of Grass.* She sees this Jeffersonian political ideology giving Whitman a voice and an identity that allowed him to confront the disruptive social and economic changes of the time.[3] Those same historical changes inform Wynn Thomas' interpretation of Whitman in *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*. Thomas, like Erkkila, wants to historicize Whitman, but for not for the same reasons. He wants to show how *Leaves of Grass* comes from "shared historical experience" and not from some special "vision" on Whitman's part.[4] Thomas's Whitman is not the stable self that Erkkila describes who can comment on his times from the security of liberal democratic ideology. For Thomas, "shared historical experience" means Whitman's shared experience and identification with the New York City working class; the affirmations of the worth of laborers in *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's response to the alienation of capitalism.[5] Thomas reads

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[2] Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet.* 6-9.
[3] Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 21.
[4] M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 39.
[5] Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*, 25-33.

the opening lines of "Song of Myself," particularly the lines "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," as a critique of the bourgeois self and the possessiveness of capitalism.[6] The difference between Thomas and Erkkila on Whitman is a remarkable example of how critics today tread over very similar ground as Whitman and his contemporaries did when discussing the question of the relationship between the artist and society. Both critics' interpretations rest on their idea of the self, and those ideas reflect tensions that are defining features of Whitman's work: the self as a part of the aggregate; the self as a great individual voice.

The self of *Leaves of Grass* that I argue for here sounds like the one described by Thomas—non-individualistic, merging with the mass—but the self that I have in mind is a deliberate creation by Whitman, which is not what Thomas sees. His reading of the "I" in the opening lines of "Song of Myself" is convincing: those lines probably do represent, as Thomas argues, a response to conventional bourgeois values (as does the line about loafing, which flouts the value placed on hard work by someone like Greeley). I do not follow Thomas' fairly orthodox Marxist interpretation of much of Whitman. His readings are often insightful, but his historical interpretations rely on a few problematic logical leaps: first that history unfolds according to Marxist historical theory, second that the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* is an expression of Whitman's political views, and third that Whitman's views reflect shared experience of the working class. The second leap is the relevant one here. The self of the poetic voice is not, of course, the same thing as the self of the writer who wrote the poem (and who was at the same time writing newspaper articles

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[6] Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry,* 40-42.

in a very different voice). To a surprising degree, critics who write about the historical context of Whitman's poetry neglect this difference and write about what Whitman says in his journalism and Whitman says in "Song of Myself" as though the statements had the same relation to the actual Whitman. I don't mean to engage in post-modern gamesmanship here. I do think there was an actual Whitman and that historical research can allow us to make claims about what he intended to do in his writing. And Whitman's intention in writing "Song of Myself" is clearly to create a very different rhetorical persona (with a very different relationship to the reader) from the one he employed as an editor. The creation of that persona is arguably Whitman's signature achievement as a writer. His next greatest achievement is probably his success in actually becoming that persona. As many writers have documented, Whitman diligently shaped his public image through out his career by altering the physical format and text of *Leaves of Grass,* changing his style of dress, writing his own reviews early on and his biography later, and so on. Recognizing the distance between Whitman and his creation is not just a matter of semantics, especially when considering the relationship between the first appearance of poetry in the *Leaves of Grass* style and the journalism.

Erkkila's handling of that transition is worth looking at closely. Her key remark is that "Whitman's [Brooklyn] *Eagle* editorials were a prose dress rehearsal for the political text of his poems."[7] Her point here, which is well made, is that as a journalist Whitman thought about the role of the press in spreading republican values and that he engaged with a wide range of debates over challenges to those values. His

[7] Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 43.

poetry would be dedicated to essentially the same purpose.[8] Erkkila makes a valuable connection between the day-to-day substance of the editorial pages and the grandeur of the poetry. She arguably underrates Whitman's artistic accomplishment in her theatrical image, which suggests the poetry is the same "political text" presented to a new audience. (Poetry in this case becomes politics conducted by other means.) The more relevant point here is, to extend Erkkila's image, that Whitman's poetry represented a change in roles *and* an attempt to create a new audience. The question that the rest of this chapter takes up is why Whitman felt the need to create this new role and gamble on creating a new audience for his poetry. Why did he become dissatisfied with the established rhetorical role and public function of the newspaper editor?

Part of the answer is that the political crises of the 1850s, primarily over slavery, became so intense that Whitman lost faith that the traditional press could unite the country. He envisioned a national poet who would play that vital role. This development is described in detail by David Reynolds in his cultural biography of Whitman, the most wide-ranging and also most minute of the historicist studies. My discussion below of this process and of the earliest *Leaves of Grass* style poetry is informed by Reynolds' study, though as noted already my approach emphasizes the self-consciousness of Whitman's poetic persona, which draws attention to the fact that the earliest published poems in the mature style expressed intensely partisan viewpoints and were published in newspapers. Whitman developed this new style, as Reynolds points out, to express his disillusionment and anger at over the Compromise

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[8] Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 32-42.

of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law, and a general sense of political corruption.[9] At this point, however, Whitman's rhetorical position, medium, and audience for the poetry are essentially the same as they were for his journalism. Whitman's key accomplishment of the transcendent "Song of Myself" persona would take another few years and, significantly, would appear in a new medium, the distinctive form of the 1855 edition. Reynolds shows that Whitman's move away from intense political views was a consistent feature of his prose and his politics. He would occasionally get drawn toward an extreme political position, but he would return to the political middle ground.[10] Some examples of these changes in Whitman's politics are discussed further below, as are some of his literary critical comments on the role of the artist which shed some light on this change.

The question that remains is why Whitman's transcendent poet of national unity takes the form he does. Reynolds sees an extreme "dictatorial" individual in the poet, one who can live up to the task Whitman for himself of seeing and capturing the "entire cultural landscape" and expressing "the full range of voices and images America had to offer."[11] Some of Whitman's journalism hints at an acceptance of this kind of commanding hero figure. However, the most striking feature of the "I" of "Song of Myself" is his awareness of his own presence in print and in the hands of a reader. He is painfully aware that he is in a book and wishes he could be otherwise. Whitman thought this poetic creation could unite the country in the face of its pressing crises by representing a nation unified in a poetic vision that celebrated the

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[9] Reynolds, *Walt Whitman,* 148-50.
[10] Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 146, 148-50.
[11] Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 308.

individual freedom of its democratic subjects. His work however responded to a more long-standing worry over the mass print media in a democracy. For republicans like Whitman and Leggett the concern was the imbalance of power between the writer and the readers; their power over the readers called into question the readers' independence and capacity. The broader concern, which transcended politics to include an anti-populist like Greeley, was over question of labor and symbolic work. For these men from artisan and farming backgrounds physical labor represented the sum of one's moral and economic worth as a man. Another threat to masculine identity is the writer's dependence on the reading public. Whitman embraces these threats: the narrator from the first lines is a loafer and suggests he may belong to the reader. He insists on dissolving any hierarchy or division between himself and the reader. To begin to see how Whitman ends up confronting the problem of writing and democracy, we will look at his version of the Jacksonian views of his early papers.

Much of Whitman's early newspaper writing features political opinions typical of Jacksonian Democrats. In the well-established Democratic tradition, he attacks the bankers and deal-makers of Wall Street for their thieving ways. In an article for the *Aurora,*[12] which Whitman edited for a few months in 1842, he makes this critique in the form of a parable that compares the fate of a desperately poor man who steals some food to that of a pair of Wall Street bankers who steal a fortune through their dealings. The poor man is arrested for stealing and dies in jail while the rich bankers live well as admired members of the community. Whitman concludes with a comment about the unjust state of society that permits such disparities. He

[12] Walt Whitman, "Can This Be Justice?," in *The Journalism,* The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman, ed. Herbert Bergman (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 1:39-41.

does not pursue this critique of speculation with the same intensity as Leggett and others who wrote during the political battles over banking did. There is no discussion of economic reforms in this parable. For Whitman, the bankers are types, stock characters who represent the injustice of society in its unequal treatment of the rich and the poor and working class. The class division is clear from the basic structure of the story itself and it is reinforced by a list that Whitman gives of the regular working people who suffered because of the financial manipulations of the bankers. (This list sounds a little like an early instance of one of Whitman's catalogs.)[13] Aside from being caricatures, the bankers in this article are also straight-forward villains; they are described as sitting around in an office discussing their plot. Depicting them as corrupt individuals means that Whitman is not taking the hard-line view of earlier Democrats who saw all banking and related activities as fundamentally wrong. For adherents to the anti-speculation sentiment, which dated to the Democrats opposition to Alexander Hamilton, the idea of a bad or villainous banker would be redundant.

Whitman may not have picked up the scathing anti-banking sentiment of his political forbears, but he fully adopted their radical egalitarian views. In his early journalism, Whitman routinely says that the people are just as intelligent and capable of deciding on the issues that are important to their lives as the politicians who make their laws. In one case Whitman expands this point into a broader social critique by arguing that in general the public is too quick to assume that their political leaders are wise and capable and can be trusted to solve society's problems. This mistake on the part of the people leads to legislatures having too much power and passing too many

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[13] Whitman, "Can This Be Justice?" in *Journalism,* 40.

laws. People should trust their own ability to solve their problems.[14] In a similar vein, he argues that more regular people, merchants and mechanics, should run for office instead of the usual line-up of politicos and lawyers.[15]

There is one well-known blind spot in Whitman's early journalism in which he seems to fall far short of his proclaimed democratic ideals: his anti-Irish and anti-Catholic articles during the political controversy in the early 1840s over public schooling. Religious and political leaders of the Irish Catholic community had begun to campaign to have the state fund parochial schools for their children. They argued that the existing school system, which was funded by New York State but run by a private group of reformers and activists, violated their rights to freedom of religion by imposing Protestant doctrines and prayers on their children. One central objection was that the schools used the King James Version of the Bible, which was offensive for political as well as religious reasons because of it's long association with English Protestantism. Much of the non-Irish in New York were appalled at the idea that this community of foreigners would act so aggressively to assert their influence and that they could threaten the well-established principle of separation of church and state by virtue of their presence as an important voting block.[16] Of course the objection to the Irish Catholic plan was not based entirely on a strong belief in the separation of Church and State. Nor was it a driven by anti-democratic conservatives who resented

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[14] Whitman, "Reform it Altogether" in *Journalism,* 64.
[15] Whitman, "Reform in Congress" in *Journalism,* 135-36.
[16] My discussion of this controversy focuses on local politics, but it had larger national and international significance. For a recent discussion of the issue (and a re-evaluation of Archbishop John Hughes, the most prominent leader of the Irish-American community) see Martin L. Meenagh, "Archbishop John Hughes and the New York Schools Controversy of 1840-43" *American Nineteenth Century History* 5 No. 1 (Spring 2005). 34-65.

the power of the newly-enfranchised Irish masses. The response was entangled with prevailing anti-Catholic sentiments that were held by many on the political spectrum. As we saw in Margaret Fuller's work, it was possible to support democracy and welcome immigrants from Europe, but to also feel that Catholicism was a grave threat to the republic.

Whitman draws on some of this high-minded anti-Catholicism in his response, but he was closer to the issue than Fuller, and he is more visceral and almost violent in his attacks on the Irish. This issue was not a matter of intellectual discussion for Whitman. He was the editor of a daily paper in the city, the *Aurora*, at the time of the controversy and he was immersed in the scathing attacks between opposing editors and raucousness of the local political scene. (Fuller did not come to New York to work at the *Tribune* until 1844 when much of this controversy had died down.) Whitman's first articles on the schools issue are defenses of the quality of the current system. He shows himself to be deeply invested in the issue of education; in one of these articles he says that he has over the past six months visited all the schools in the city to evaluate them.[17] As the movement by the Irish leaders and their political supporters gains momentum, Whitman becomes harsher and more confrontational. He attacks Archbishop John Hughes, the most prominent leader of the campaign, portraying him as a wicked manipulator of the people and the mastermind of the whole campaign.[18] For Whitman the whole effort to get funding for Catholics schools is an attempt to institute doctrinal and religious control over the Catholic population in the U.S., an effort that of course he objects to as incompatible with American

[17] Whitman, "The System Must Stand" in *Journalism,* 41.
[18] Whitman, "Sectarianism and Our Public Schools" in *Journalism,* 42-43.

principles. This dread at the idea that the democratic institutions would be taken over leads him to his horrified comment on the prospect of a democracy "ruled by the tattered, coarse, unshaven, filthy, Irish rabble!"[19] Like Fuller and others he felt that the Irish immigrants were welcome to the country but that they should leave behind the blind devotion to the authority of the church that they were presumed to have and get in line with republican independence and individualism.[20]

Whitman's anti-catholic and anti-Irish sentiments, though they were intense, died down quickly after the controversy over the schools died down. The conclusion to the schools campaign was the passage of the Maclay bill in Albany, which represented a compromise to meet some of the demands of the Irish community. The bill created a state-run Board of Education and took away the operation of schools from the privately-run New York Public School Society. Public schools from then on were to be strictly non-sectarian, which meant they would phase out the use of the King James Version of the Bible in order to avoid offending Catholics. The state would not however contribute to Catholic schools. The church did establish its own system of parochial schools that were funded privately by tuition and church funds on the model that still exists today. Whitman reacted with frustration to the passage of the bill. Earlier he had spoken of the proposals to change the city's school system as though it meant destroying that system, but in the event of the passage of the Maclay Bill, Whitman is outraged that the Irish political faction succeeded in pressuring Tammany leaders to get the bill passed. He attacks the legislators in Albany who didn't support the law but who failed to work to oppose it because they were worried

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[19] Whitman, "The Mask Thrown Off" in *Journalism,*102.
[20] Whitman, "Defining 'Our Position'" in *Journalism*, 84-86.

about the political consequences. The news of the bill's passage is reported on a Monday the day before the city elections, so there is not much time for any political backlash to build up (and presumably this last-minute passage was deliberate). Nonetheless Whitman proposes that votes, especially democrats who are outraged by the influence of the Irish refrain from voting in the upcoming local elections to send a message to the party.[21] In the election Tammany's mayoral candidate wins, but the Whigs gain control of the Common Council, which allows Whitman claim that Tammany suffered the repercussions for their dealings with the Irish faction.[22] In spite of the vitriol of his writing leading up to the election, is content with concluding the affair with this positive spin on the election results. There are two follow-up reports on election night violence between Irish and "American" gangs. In one Whitman describes the whole thing, including an attack on Cardinal Hughes's residence, as a Jesuit plot to gain sympathy for the Irish, but the next day he files an updated and remarkably balanced account of the violence.[23]

Notably, there are no follow-up articles on the terrible consequences of the Maclay Bill for the city's public schools. Only six months later, writing now for *The Sun,* Whitman describes New York State's schools as among the best in the country.[24]

Whitman's backing off of his anti-Irish sentiments includes an article that specifically disavows the Nativist sentiments that emerged in the city around this time. He does not think that immigrants should be denied the right to vote. That proposal goes against his democratic values; "We go for the largest liberty," he

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[21] Whitman, "[The Passage of Maclay's School Bill]" in *Journalism*, 106-07.
[22] Whitman, "[A Tammany Defeat]" in *Journalism,* 116-17.
[23] Whitman, "Plots of the Jesuits!" and "The Late Riots" in *Journalism,* 117-20.
[24] Whitman, "Schools, and Training of the Young" in *Journalism,* 159.

writes, but immigrant groups should not be catered to by the parties.[25] His anti-Catholic ideas focuses on the hierarchy and figures like Hughes. Whitman left himself an opening to accept the Irish immigrants themselves by placing the blame on the corrupting influence of their leaders. Less than a year after the passage of the Maclay bill Whitman wrote an article titled "The Intelligence of the Working People." He reasserts his faith in the people, saying that if there is any danger in politics it comes from the political leaders. "Parties must remember," Whitman writes, "that the masses of the people are as intelligent as the wire pullers of any faction or clique…"[26] He doesn't refer explicitly to the schools controversy, but the Irish Catholic political leaders were the "faction or clique" that he and many of his readers were most concerned with during the previous year.

Whitman's egalitarian view of the intelligence of the people underlies his view that the government which governs least governs best, a classic sentiment of American republicanism. As with the anti-banking sentiment, Whitman's anti-government views are a bit softer than those of radical Jacksonians of an earlier era, and Leggett again provides a good comparison. He describes the legislators as "no more and no better than other men," so the country should not expect them to solve all its problems.[27] When Whitman refers to the banking legislation as an example of too much government involvement he says the country would be better off if the legislatures just "ceased meddling" with banking.[28] Contrast this view with that of Leggett who saw he issue of banking legislation as a fundamental abuse of power that

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[25] Whitman, "[Americanism II]," *Journalism*, 124.
[26] Whitman, *Journalism,* 172.
[27] Whitman, "Reform It Altogether" in *Journalism,* 64.
[28] Whitman, "[The True Democratic Principle]" in *Journalism,* 55.

resulted in a de facto aristocracy. The problem with government from that point of view is not that it is bumbling and meddlesome but that it always acts to reduce the freedom of the people. Whitman's less strident critique of government is based on faith in the people instead of mistrust of government.

The ideal example of the independent citizen that Whitman admired so much was the free laborer. Just as he would do so famously in his poetry, Whitman develops this theme in his early journalism. Aside from political commentaries, Whitman wrote articles that described New York City scenes and the people of the city. These pieces are often referred to as prefiguring some of the descriptive material in *Leaves of Grass.* They often focus on the street life of the city and emphasize the lives of working people. One such piece, which is cited often by Whitman biographers for its similarity to the later poetry, describes a busy market, focusing on the various characters that come and go and work or do their shopping there. Among these characters, there is a mason who has just been paid, whom Whitman describes as being especially proud and confident because of the money in his pocket.[29] This figure is an archetype of the independent artisan-citizen idealized by the Jacksonians. His independence is related to his status as a free laborer.

As his reference to the economically independent laborer suggests, Whitman had the typical free labor and free trade economic views of his party and as a result saw political and economic independence as inter-related. These views showed up in his enthusiasm for the city's mechanics and other working class men. Whitman does on occasion mention more specific issues of economic policy, but as in other cases of

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[29] Whitman, "Life in a New York Market" in *Journalism,* 55-56.

party ideology, he is fairly perfunctory in his free trade views. He criticizes a group of business leaders who advocate protectionism and tariffs in one case, but he is not so much concerned with the principles of free trade in this case as he is in pointing out that the business men involved are advocating this policy that would hurt working people out of obvious self-interest; he refers to the suffering of the poor in England as a consequence of protectionist policies.[30] A few years later in an article on a local union movement, he notes that unions run counter to free market principles, but he supports them anyway. He writes that "the freer and the more without restrictions of any kind you leave trade and prices to regulate themselves, the better for all parties," but in the end he comes around to admiring these laborers for their efforts, as he did in a few articles on unionization in the mid to late 1840s.[31] In this case Whitman's economic principles where not as important as his admiration for the independent workers and for the assertive spirit and sense of identity that he saw in the union movement. If there is any theoretical inconsistency here, it would not likely have concerned Whitman much. His enthusiasm for democracy and the people was more affective and spiritual than intellectual. His support for laborers for instance is not derived from the principles of Adam Smith's economic theories but from his personal interaction and sense of identity with them. That connection with the people, in spite of many other changes in his outlook, remains central in the poetry he wrote a decade after this journalism.

Early Literary Criticism

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[30] Whitman, "The Latest and Grandest Humbug" in *Journalism,* 104-05.
[31] Whitman, "Illy Paid Labor in Brooklyn" in *Journalism,* 312

Whitman brought his views on democracy, economics, and the people to bear on the literary and other arts criticism he wrote as a journalist. For him, as for the other writers considered in this study, there was never any question of whether or not political questions related to literature and culture. The moral dimension of culture was assumed from the outset, and for Americans across a wide spectrum of beliefs, morality was inextricably linked to politics and the fate of democracy. Whitman exhibits the typical American trait of seeing his country's experiment in democracy as the cause of humanity. In this regard he had much in common with Whigs and many others on the political scene. His view of democracy was more egalitarian than someone like Greeley and perhaps even Fuller, but all three of them saw themselves as supporters of New World democracy against Old World aristocracy. (And all three supported the republican movements and revolutions in Europe in 1848.) On moral questions however, Whitman developed distinct views. While there are some examples of conventional morality in his early journalism, Whitman becomes less and less concerned with such questions and either avoids discussing moral issues or flouts the usual conventions. By the time he writes *Leaves of Grass* he reveals a moral outlook deliberately opposed to the conventional bourgeois/Whig moral outlook of someone like Horace Greeley.

In Whitman's early criticism, morality, democracy and literature come together explicitly in the articles that he wrote on Charles Dickens. In the earliest article, written in 1842, Whitman responds to a critic who has accused Dickens of being anti-democratic. The critic's argument is that Dickens depicts the gross details of sickness and immorality in some of his characters, and as a result must have a

negative and cynical view of the common people, which is counter to democratic principles. Whitman defends Dickens from this argument on a few grounds. A democratic writer, he writes, must show us our common humanity and need not avoid the unseemly side of life in doing so, and by this standard Dickens is a democratic writer. Next, Whitman defends the morality of Dickens' work by noting that Dickens is careful to always show that immorality is punished and virtue rewarded. This is a fairly traditional moralistic defense of literature, the kind of thing that we see less of later in Whitman's literary career. Even in this review there is a glimpse of the later Whitman's defiant attitude toward narrow ideas of decency in literature when he faults the critic he is responding to for his excessive "delicacy" and accuses him of being a "literary fop" and not "a man."[32] Once he has dismissed the moral critique, Whitman defends Dickens' depiction of real life on the grounds that it informs readers of social problems and prompts them to think of reform—he refers to *Oliver Twist* as an example of this.[33]

Whitman defends Dickens from essentially the same charges of immorality a few years later in a piece that dispenses with earnest moralizing. Instead, Whitman defends Dickens on the grounds that there really are such bad and repulsive characters in the world as there are in Dickens' novels. Implicitly, this argument is in the same spirit as his defense of *Oliver Twist.* Dickens' work prompts us to concern about society by confronting us with the reality of its problems. But Whitman doesn't make that case here, and by the end of the piece we see that this defense of Dickens is just a set-up for an attack on an editor of another New York city daily newspaper. He

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[32] Whitman, "Boz and Democracy" in *Journalism,* 37.
[33] Whitman, "Boz and Democracy" in *Journalism,* 35-38.

cites James Gordon Bennett, the editor of the *Herald,* as an example of Dickensian villainy existing in the real world and then launches into a scathing attack on Bennett.[34]

Whitman generally takes a slightly irreverent approach to conventional morality in his *Aurora* writing in the mid-1840s. In a piece describing the day-to-day life in his boarding house he makes what seems to be a joking reference to the prostitutes who also live in the house. He quickly describes the people sitting around the breakfast table, concluding with a reference to "several other, ladies, &c., whom we feel delicate about mentioning."[35] It is hard to imagine a reformer like Horace Greeley making light of what was seen as an almost unmentionably immoral social ill. Greeley is in fact a target of Whitman's barbs for his self-righteous crusading. Whitman makes fun of Greeley's self-importance after seeing him at a lecture by Emerson.[36] In another case he mocks Greeley's attachment to a long list of kooky and mutually contradictory reform ideas.[37] Whitman did approve of one of the reform causes that Greeley was dedicated to: temperance. However, his support for the temperance movements among the working class did not have the same intense moral character of temperance advocates like Greeley.[38] In an article on the dangers that country boys face in coming to the city Whitman wrote about drinking as one of a range of ills that can lead to intemperance and threaten the morals of such men. He

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[34] Whitman, "Dickens and Democracy" in *Journalism,* 92-93.
[35] Whitman, "New York Boarding Houses" in *Journalism,* 61.
[36] Whitman, "Mr. Emerson's Lecture" in *Journalism,* 44.
[37] Of Greeley's many political causes Whitman writes "Hardly any two of them can go together with any more safety than the fox, goose, and corn, in the old nursery tale." Whitman, "Horace Greeley" in *Journalism,* 129.
[38] Whitman, "Temperance among the Firemen!" in *Journalism,* 87.

does not imply, as Greeley did, that there is a great moral failing in the your men who are drawn to the city.[39]

Whitman's defense of Dickens shows how his criticism is shaped by this ideas of democracy and class. In this case class takes the form of the everyman persona that Whitman adopts in his writing, which includes strong egalitarian beliefs and irreverence toward middle class moralism. Whitman writes from the position of some imagined artisan or mechanic who is disdainful of the moral judgments of the traditional cultured classes. As was the case in earlier Jacksonian views on literature there is a strong anti-intellectual element to this position. It was also a gendered position: the working class democratic position is physical, rough and masculine; the literary upper class position is sensitive, moralistic, and feminine. In the first piece on Dickens, Whitman takes on this position inconsistently: on the one hand he accepts the moral judgments against Dickens enough to respond to them on their own terms by defending Dickens from the charge of immorality; on the other hand he dismisses those concerns by casting them as merely the worries of a "literary fop." The later pieces, including the one that refers to Bennett and the others on the boarding house, show Whitman more consistently and confidently representing a Jacksonian class critique with irreverence toward more refined ideas of morality and engagement in the world of the working class.

Whitman's critique here is in some ways little changed from that of Leggett a generation earlier. The political stakes that he associates with culture are similar. Whitman repeats the commonplace about European literature not being appropriate

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[39] Whitman, "Dangers to Country Youth in the City" in *Journalism,*164-65.

for the values of the new democracy of the United States.[40] One political difference is that Whitman and his contemporaries saw large-scale immigration from Europe as a challenge to democracy. His concern was not with the introduction of anti-democratic ideas through European art, which was the concern of Leggett, but the spread of these ideas through immigrants, specifically Irish Catholics. Whitman made his comments on the dangers of European literature in the article in the *Aurora* in which he defines his position on immigration and nativism and backs off the more hard-line anti-Irish stance that he had taken during the schools crisis. He welcomes immigrants he says but he feels they should not bring European ideas with them.

Whitman's criticism is distinct from strict partisans like Greeley. Whitman is more interested in literature for its own sake and is willing to accept that literature and writing in general might play a role in the advancement of democracy. He responds to literature personally and emotionally. He ends his first piece on Dickens by saying how grateful he is to Dickens for his work and how he feels almost like he as met the writer through his books.[41] Not long after this he writes a few pieces in response to the death of a local poet named McDonald Clarke. Clarke was associated with the working class, and he lived and wrote outside of the traditional literary circles, but Whitman's writing about him does not dwell on the political significance of Clarke's status as a poet of the people. He takes Clarke seriously as an artist and tries to rescue him from being remembered as just a local eccentric. He describes

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[40] Whitman, "Defining 'Our Position'" in *Journalism,* 84-86.
[41] Whitman, "Boz and Democracy" in *Journalism,* 38.

Clarke as "having all the requisites of a great poet," because he could create "bold, startling images, and strange pictures" in his writing.[42]

The Function of the Press

Whitman had, as he put it, "a lofty sense of what the press should be."[43] He thought that it should shape public opinion by informing the public about issues. In order achieve this goal the editors and writers of the press need to be independent from the views of political factions and even from the views of the public itself. There is a tension in this view of the press between Whitman's democratic faith in the people and their capacity for self-government and critical thinking and the importance of the elite class of intellectuals in guiding the opinions of the public. As Whitman discusses his views on the press he is careful to try to strike a balance between these two articles of faith. He writes often about the intellectual and critical capacity of the people, but he must also account for those instances when the public has rejected opinions that he believes are correct. In those cases, Whitman, rather than fault the public, which might imply that the people were too ignorant or immoral to make decisions about government, points the finger at the connivances of political leaders or other public figures. This tendency to protect the people—or rather to protect his idea of the people—is consistent in Whitman's writing. Ultimately his poetic persona in *Leaves of Grass* resolves the problem by not making moral judgments at all and accepting everyone.

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[42] Whitman, "[Death of McDonald Clarke]" in *Journalism,* 46.
[43] Whitman, "[Credo]" in *Journalism,* 89.

The schools controversy was one occasion when there was a popular belief that Whitman strongly disagreed with, and the aftermath of that issue prompted him to discuss his views on the function of the press. During the controversy itself, he accounted for the erroneous views he saw in the Catholics by blaming and demonizing their leader Archbishop Hughes. In his follow-up piece in which he distances himself from Nativism and discusses the threat he sees from immigrants' European ideas, Whitman also explains the role he sees for the press. He could not follow "public opinion" on this issue. The goal of the press is to "lead" public opinion, "to purify it…"[44] He follows this with his comment on his "lofty sense of what the press should be." "We desire," he writes, "to stir up men's minds…"[45] Whitman envisions a special role for the press, but one that is consistent with his democratic ideals. He doesn't imagine a press that hands down moral judgments to the people, and he avoids taking a condescending tone of instructing or educating the people. Instead Whitman imagines stirring up their minds, an approach that seems to incorporate his assumption that the people had the intellectual ability to make decisions about the government and society.

Whitman's faith in the public's reason at times showed a simplistic view of how public discourse worked. As he sees it, all that is necessary to win the public over is to reach the people with the appropriate facts. A few years later after his Aurora writing, Whitman commented on the elitism of the up-market 6-penny daily papers. They claimed, according to Whitman, to have a greater role in society because their readers come from the educated elite. Whitman rejects this claim and argues that

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[44] Whitman, "[Credo]" in *Journalism,* 89.
[45] Whitman, "[Credo]" in *Journalism,* 89.

in a democracy elite influence is not as important as the influence over the masses that the penny press has.46 Some Whigs and conservatives would have agreed with Whitman's assessment of the influence of the popular press, though of course they would have seen this as a negative development. For Whitman the influence of the general population is the ideal of how public debate should happen in a democracy. Interestingly Whitman writes as if this ideal were essentially achieved. He assumes that the influence of the penny press and the general readership they serve were already an accomplished fact. He doesn't reveal any uncertainty or worry about the influence of the elites under-cutting this democratic ideal. Those worries, to the point at times of paranoia, were a part of the Jacksonian rhetoric about the power of the upper classes. Leggett again serves as a prime example; he could write about the influence of the masses as an ideal, but his critique of society dwelled on the anti-democratic tendencies of the upper classes who frustrated that ideal.

The same unexamined assurance in the rational public sphere occurs in an article Whitman wrote on tariffs. His views are the boilerplate Jacksonian arguments against tariffs and the self-interested businessmen who favor them. His recommendation for defeating this political movement is simply to educate the people about the practical flaws in the tariffs. Once the people are "enlightened" they will oppose the tariff, Whitman writes, as though he were writing about a law of nature.47

Whitman's confidence in popular democracy in these cases has a few different causes. It may have been the result of naïve idealism. Whitman could be a keen observer of the city and society around him, but he was not a trenchant critic of social

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[46] Whitman, "Newspaperial Etiquette" in *Journalism,* 123-24.
[47] Whitman, "The Merchants of Our City" in *Journalism,* 195.

reality. The criticism he wrote as we've seen tended to be formulaic. His powers of observation in his journalism and later in his poetry were employed to depict an ideal diverse egalitarian society at street level not to analyze its social structures. His confidence may also reflect the greater confidence that populist Democrats had in Whitman's generation. Leggett lived and wrote during Jackson's administration and fought for the change that it represented in American politics. Whitman and other of his generation could look back on Jackson as an enshrined hero and on a string of other political successes. Democrats in New York State in particular could be confident: they had achieved many of the financial reforms that Leggett and others had worked for; the political faction associated with Martin Van Buren had achieved national prominence with his election as President; and a state constitutional reform in 1846 had expanded suffrage and the power of the legislature. Lastly, Whitman's confidence must be read in part as a rhetorical position. In the intensely competitive partisan battles between newspapers, the editor's job was to present his paper's positions as the only decent position possible and to assail his political and professional opponents.[48]

Notwithstanding the professional battles between papers, Whitman did believe strongly in the role of the press in shaping public opinion in a democracy. Also in

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[48] That his position was often theatrical is clear. In his career as a journeyman editor, Whitman could go from extolling the *Aurora* as the city's best and most balanced paper to attacking the character of its publishers once he was let go. Aside from external evidence, the attacks themselves are so outrageous that they reveal their archness. Whitman's attacks on Bennett, the editor of the *Herald,* are so over-the-top that their purpose is more to display one's wit and verve than to earnestly defend a political position. See for example the discussion of Dickens' villains that is used merely to set up an attack on Bennett's villainy. Or the piece that begins as a typical city street scene in which the narrator tells us he encountered Bennett on the street and ends with a visual punch line of a picture of a man with a donkey's head.

spite of his blithe confidence in his comments on the 6-penny papers, Whitman could be critical of the shortcomings of the press in meeting those goals. This awareness became more acute as the national divisions over slavery became more intractable.

Whitman engaged in a serious discussion of the role of the press in America and its relationship with the public in an article titled "American Editing and Editors," which he wrote in 1846 while editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Here Whitman struggles again with the issue of the wisdom the people and the shortcomings of society. He opens with praise for the people, writing that "The American people are intellectual in a high degree—their brains are clear, and their penetration eagle-eyed."[49] The problem he sees is that the newspapers of the country are not living up to the potential of the people. If they did they could play a much more significant role in society. The blame for this shortcoming of the press is attributed to both the public and the press itself. The public are at fault because they have not expected much from the press, which "has been regarded as a mere agent for pleasing society…"[50] Whitman's criticism of the people here contains some elements of the anti-populist sentiments of a Whig like Horace Greeley. Whitman's critique is a very mild form of anti-populism, but it is based on the idea that the people are moved by appeals to base instincts like pleasure more than they are moved by higher sentiments and ideals. He blames the press too for accepting this limited vision of their function. The press, he writes, "has failed to perceive its real nature; it has failed in asserting its claims…it

[49] Whitman, Walt. "American Editing and Editors" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. September 29, 1846.
[50] Whitman, "American Editing…"

has failed in becoming the moral power of tremendous force of which it is capable."[51] In spite of this criticism, Whitman lays greater stress on the role of the public and this article represents the furthest he goes in criticizing the public.

The last third of Whitman's discussion in "American Editing and Editors" laments the way the public treats those editors who do try to make the press answer to a higher moral and intellectual purpose. Those heroic editors and writers suffer for their independent-mindedness. "When a man of lofty faith and stern virtue has arisen among them…how has he been received by the community?" Whitman asks. He has been attacked by his enemies, "a strong public opinion is aroused against him," and he is driven from the field of journalism. Some of this complaint no doubt reflects Whitman's own experiences as an editor.

The prime example that Whitman gives of this treatment of the press, is William Leggett. Whitman, assuming that his audience would be familiar with Leggett's career asks "Can we forget the career of the lamented Leggett?"[52] Leggett was true to an admirable cause in spite of public opinion and he was removed from his position at the *Evening Post* and endured hardships as a result. Whitman doesn't get specific about which cause of Leggett's he admires. Presumably most of his readers would remember Leggett for his positions on economic issues like banking and tariffs. However, the cause that led to the most problems for Leggett was abolitionism. That cause and the consequences that Leggett endured for it are what Whitman probably identified with in his predecessor's career. He had been fired from papers already for falling with out with publishers, and in less than a year and a half

[51] Whitman, "American Editing…"
[52] Whitman "American Editing…"

he would be fired from the *Eagle* because of his opposition to the extension of slavery.

The Great Poet and Society

Through the late 1840s and early 1850s, the controversy over slavery would lead to intensified sectional and political tensions. Whitman worked as an editor in New Orleans for part of that time, which offered him an opportunity to see both national and local perspectives on the issue. The experience of slavery first hand in the South also seems to have strengthened his opposition to it. This was also the period in which Whitman began his development of the literary voice that would become the signature feature of his poetry. Though initially that voice was invested in the political battles of the day and shared some of the attributes of the crusading editorialist, the poetic voice and persona that appears in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 resists any kind of sectional or partisan spirit. That persona, which Whitman refers to in the preface as the great poet, transcends the messy squabbling of the newspapers and politicians and can understand the people and convince them without argument. Whitman shifts the lofty moral role of the press to the poet. This change means that his former faith in the function of the press and in the enlightenment of the people becomes a hope in poetic vision.

Some of this change in outlook is evident in the prose criticism and commentary he wrote before 1855. An article called “Hero Presidents” which he wrote for the New Orleans *Crescent* in 1848 shows Whitman’s move away from a belief in a rational enlightenment idea of the public. He defends the recent trend in the

United States of electing heroic generals to be President on the grounds that people in all human societies throughout history have admired warriors. They appeal to something in human nature that admires great deeds and heroic actions. People do not make decisions, Whitman says, based strictly on reason; they are influenced just as much by emotion. He refers to the idea that the bards and poets of a country probably have a greater influence than its legislators. This idea "was suggested by the fact that the reasons of men are inferior to and under the control of their imaginations."[53] Whitman does not make this point as a criticism of the people. He has nothing bad to say about human imagination as such or about the habit of admiring military leaders. He concludes that these are part of human nature, and the election of hero Presidents is not a threat to the republic because the Constitution is designed to accommodate all of human nature.[54]

A few years later back in Brooklyn, Whitman develops this idea of the relationship between the poet/artist and heroic action in "Art and Artists" a lecture he gave to the Brooklyn Art Union. Whitman expresses strong cynicism about the American people's materialism, which poses a great challenge to the artist. The best hope for the artist is to be inspired by heroism and to channel that inspiration into art. He advises artists to be inspired by heroic struggles for freedom, referring to the struggle of slaves and of the European revolutionaries of 1848 as examples.[55]

Whitman's discussion of heroic action in "Art and Artists" draws on the ideal of the classical Greek man. His discussion of the equanimity of the Greeks shows

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[53] Walt Whitman, "Hero Presidents" in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman,* ed. Emory Holloway (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972), 2:195-96.
[54] Whitman, "Hero Presidents" in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose,* 197.
[55] Whitman "Art and Artists" in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose,* 241, 246-47.

how this idea influenced his idea of the great poet. The Greek character is associated with a list of virtues that Whitman would also attribute to the great poet. The ideal Greek was above pettiness and self-interest in political affairs; he has an egalitarian outlook that allows him to see the goodness of people regardless of their class; he is moved by reason as well as by "the flow of the soul;" he appreciates the full range of culture; and he can be a diplomat or a warrior according to the needs of his country.[56] In spite of these admirably even-handed traits the artist that Whitman describes in "Art and Artists" is not a non-partisan figure. He instructs the artists to be inspired by progressive and revolutionary political causes. He exemplifies this advice with his own practice by closing with some of his own recent poetry on the dead heroes of 1848.

The poem Whitman read from in "Art and Artists" was published in a city paper a year earlier under the title "Resurgemus." It is one of the first poems he published written in his mature free verse style and the first of the poems that would appear in *Leaves of Grass* to be published. The poem is inspired by the events in Europe and Whitman's admiration for the revolutionaries, so it is in a sense a poem that attempts to make a political point and defend an political position. However there are indications that Whitman was trying to reach for a more lofty and less partisan approach. Whitman follows his insights in "Hero Presidents" and his advice in "Art and Artists" and stresses the heroic and good actions of the revolutionaries. He also employs a poetic narrative voice with a grander vision than that of a newspaper editor. He is able to rise above the defeat of the revolutions and maintain his hope in

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[56] Whitman "Art and Artists" in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose,* 244-45.

the cause they represented: "Liberty, let others despair of thee, / But I will never despair of thee."[57] He sees the spirit of the dead revolutionaries carrying on the struggle by inspiring others to follow them and fight for the cause. This poem itself of course performed that same function in proclaiming their heroism.

If "Resurgemus" shows Whitman moving toward the poetic voice of *Leaves of Grass,* his other early free verse poems show him engaged poetically in the intensely bitter partisan struggles of the day. Those poems all deal with the struggle over the existence and extension of slavery. Unlike "Resurgemus" they had to do with an issue that was so immediate and contested that Whitman count not adopt a transcendent poetic voice. The first published of these poems, "Blood Money," offers a stinging criticism of slavery by comparing it to Judas's betrayal of Jesus for money. Aside from the long lines, the poem contains some other signature features of the poetry that would appear in *Leaves of Grass* five years later. In making its critique of slavery the poem identifies the suffering of slaves with that of Jesus using concrete language. Whitman writes that "The meanest spit in thy face--they smite thee with their palms; / Bruised, bloody and pinioned is thy body." These lines are addressed to Jesus who is referred to as "Witness of Anguish—Brother of Slaves."[58] These lines on the suffering of slaves recall lines in *Leaves of Grass* in which the poet narrator identifies with the suffering of an escaped slave. The signature difference in the later work is that Whitman has substitued his poetic persona for Jesus. The sympathy he expresses here is mediated through religion, but the work in *Leaves of Grass* tries to achieve a greater more personal sympathy.

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[57] Whitman "Resurgemus" in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose,* 30.
[58] Walter Whitman, "Blood Money" *New York Evening Post.* April 30, 1850.

Two more scathingly critical poems followed "Blood Money." One, "The House of Friends," is an angry and wholly partisan attack on the Old Hunkers, the faction of the Democratic party that, as Whitman saw it, was too willing to accommodate Southern slave holders and allow slavery to be extended through out the country. Whitman attacks these figures more strongly in this poem than he attacks slave holders. They are referred to as "Doughfaces, Crawlers, Lice of Humanity—"[59] (Whitman reuses a version of this line in the 1855 Preface in a different context.) The second poem, "A Boston Ballad" does not attack specific figures as fiercely but takes a similarly angry tone.

"A Boston Ballad" was written in response to the highly controversial Anthony Burns case in Boston in which federal troops were used to return a runaway slave to slavery. That case was one of the first instances of enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. It insensed anti-slavery activists in the North because it confronted them with the legal obligation that the Act created for all the states to enforce the legality of slavery. Whitman was one of many Northerners who saw this law as an affront to the ideals of American democracy. The poem describes the scene at the Boston courthouse when the Federal agents escort Burns out through a crowd that had gathered to protest. The scene is described by a scathingly sarcastic and angry poetic narrator. He brings the national past into contact with the contemporary events by describing the presence of ghosts from the Revolutionary War who witness the scene and complain about the loss of the ideals they died for. He adds that all that

[59] Whitman, "The House of Friends" in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose,* 26.

is missing from this picture is to get the body of King George III and set it up in Boston.[60]

The angry polemical tone of these poems is practically a poeticized version of that of the battling newspaper editors. Whitman carries over the rhetorical stance and the ideological stakes from his earlier career. The charges against the political enemies are not simply matters of difference of opinion but they are a matter of betrayal and treason. The compromises with the slave holding South and the ensuing events in Boston and elsewhere that seemed to promise the extension of slavery throughout the country represent betrayals of the principles of the coutry's ideal, particularly of democracy, the insult to which is stressed in the sarcastic reference to restoring England's King George III, the villain of 1776, to a place of honor. The poetic form anticipates much of the style of Whitman's later poetry, but those forms are put to different use in these poems than in later work. It has been noted that Whitman's free verse style is oratorical, and in this case the oratorical flourishes seem to serve a speaker who wants to exhort the country to examine its national sins.

Whitman's political views may not have changed, but his poetic vision changes between the writing of "A Boston Ballad" and "In the House of Friends" and the writing of the rest of the poems of *Leaves of Grass* and the book's preface. He employs many of the poetic tools he employed in the earlier poems, but he had a dramatically different vision of the role that poetry should play and the relationship between the poet and the people. The poems in *Leaves of Grass* retain the oratorical style, but the aim of the poet-speaker in the later work is to inspire rather than

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[60] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* (New York, 1855. Facsim. ed. New York: Eakins Press, 1966), 91.

condemn. He makes use of the technique of vividly describing scenes of American life and of incorporating scenes and figures from American history, particularly from the Revolutionary War period. In *Leaves of Grass* however when a scene is described the narrator sympathizes or fully identifies with the figures being described instead of attacking them. The historical references are used to inspire readers and teach them the value of the patriotic figures of their history. Whitman's change of emphasis is shaped by the worsening tensions in the country over slavery. The poet here serves a higher moral and political function than just attacking his opponents.

Whitman's new public vision of literature is set forth in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Much of that preface is devoted to describing the character of the great poet and his relationship to the nation and its people. The great poet is supposed to incorporate all of the people of the country. Taking on this role himself, Whitman tries to transcend the country's political divisions. He is not always successful in his attempt to do this in *Leaves of Grass* or even in the preface, but his attempt to do so produced his poetry's most distinctive features.

The preface begins with a statement of Whitman's continuing nationalism and egalitarianism. He asserts the greatness of America from his first sentence in which he says that the greatest poets have in a sense always been Americans. This idea, though on the surface it is an attempt to make his theory less narrowly nationalistic, is asserting the traditional nationalistic position that American values are universal values. The country's most essential value and the key to its greatness for Whitman is its egalitarianism. The country's greatness is in its "common people," he writes, so

the function of the poet is tied to his relation to the people.[61] The poet is not needed to teach the people about the beauty of nature. "Men and women perceive the beauty well enough…probably as well as he."[62] The poet is distinguished not for his observations of nature or for his technical literary abilities but for his ability to understand the country and speak to the people through his work.

Whitman begins to describe the character of the great American poet in relation to his descriptions of the nature of the country itself. The poet's nature must correspond to the nature of the country in space and time. Spatially, the poet in some literal sense *is* the country. He "incarnates its geography" Whitman writes. When Whitman discusses the largeness of soul that the poet must exhibit there is a suggestion that the large physical dimensions of America itself must be matched in the poet by a broad-mindedness and all-encompassing vision. Those traits also suit the temporal nature of the country. America is a future-directed country, and its poet must be so too. To this end the American poet must be "indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic."[63] The resulting character that is sketched here for the poet is virtually the opposite of that of a local partisan newspaperman or politician whose focus is on the present and the past of political conflicts and whose material is the ins and outs of local political and editorial battles.

The poet's transcendent engagement with the country means that he has no need to engage in debates or political battles. His role is to provide a sort of spiritual guidance for the country. "He is the equalizer of his age and land….he supplies what

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[61] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, i-iii.
[62] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* v.
[63] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* iv.

wants supplying and checks what wants checking."[64] Whitman is careful in his discussion of the poet and the people to maintain his faith in the people. The poet is not instructing the people or providing moral guidance for them. The spirit of "his age and land" is assumed to spring mostly from the people, and the poet's function is only to guide or "check" that spirit. The language of checking the people is presumably drawn from the idea of checks and balances on power in the Constitution and has a similar function. Checks on the power of elected branches of government were not assumed to threaten democracy or undermine the democratic system. The checks served to prevent corruption and the domination of one faction or party over all others. The poet is imagined to play a similar role. In this instance Whitman draws on the vision of a balanced and ordered system that underlay the founding and the Constitution. He had expressed complete faith in the wisdom of the Constitution in his earlier piece from the *Crescent* on "Hero Presidents." In both cases he is imagining a balancing of different impulses: the rational and the emotional, the peaceful and the war-like. Whitman sees the poet playing a role like that of the Constitution in mitigating the dangers posed to the country by political factions. And of course the poet is like the Constitution in that both embody the country in a textual form. The text of the Constitution *is* the United States in one form, and the ambition for *Leaves of Grass* was to create a text that could somehow *be* the American poet and the American people.

In describing a great poet whose function is to serve the people, Whitman is offering a figure who disclaimed the intellectual or critical functions assumed by

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[64] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* iv.

journalists and critics of the day. Whitman's earlier claims as an editor to the role of educating the enlightening the people are absent. His vision also rejects the stronger claims made by Margaret Fuller for the great role of heroic intellectuals and by Horace Greeley for the essential moral guidance of the upper classes. In contrast to the ideas of these more elitist thinkers, the great poet that Whitman describes is a kind of sublime demagogue who, aside from checking some tendencies, reflects the sentiments of the masses. In a passage that highlights the political consequences of this vision of the poet, Whitman describes him as peaceful in peace and warlike in war.[65] Even on the most searing and divisive political subject the poet does not criticize or make judgments. This sentiment is remarkable considering the intensity of the recent political divisions over the U.S.-Mexico War and its central role in bringing about the crises over the extension of slavery.

The great poet, even though he is defined by his moral nature, refrains from moral judgments as well as political ones. Whitman says flatly that "The greatest poet does not moralize…"[66] The moral influence that the poet has over the people will come from the example of his moral nature. The great poet, Whitman stresses, must be have a great soul. He must be above "pettiness or triviality," free from "jealousy" or "envy."[67] His capacity to love and understand others and accept them "on equal terms" will convince the people of the truth of his vision.

The moral weight of the great poet as Whitman imagines him is such that he is beyond the need for argument or debate. In other words he transcends public debates

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[65] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* vi-v.
[66] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* vi.
[67] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* v,vi.

over politics, morals, or theology. And he is not a part of the rationalist public sphere. "[H]e is no arguer," Whitman writes. He will "prove himself by every step he takes…"[68] Whitman's descriptions of the great poet here are mystical and paradoxical. He has already established that the poet will not have much need or desire to prove himself or to argue. On political questions over matters like war and peace the role of the poet is to reflect the will of the people. In those instances he essentially follows the opinions of the public and, at most, checks some elements of their opinions. But in spite of this supposed oneness with the people, Whitman offers the idea that the poet will win the people over without arguing, simply by being himself. We are left with an image of the great poet as both a leader and a follower of the people. Whitman would not have been too concerned about any potential paradox in this image. The mystical relationship between the poet and the people is dependent on the poet having a connection to common universal principles. That connection ensures that he and the common people share the same general outlook and that his views and beliefs will win the assent of the people.

Perhaps it goes without saying that any poet who writes a manifesto describing the ideal poet intends to fill that role. In Whitman's case the poems of *Leaves of Grass*, especially the book's first poem, expressly follow the artistic program laid out in the preface. The first poem, which begins with the lines "I celebrate myself…," functions as a companion piece to the preface. The long poem, usually referred to as "Song of Myself," the title Whitman gave it in later editions of the book, is well described by reference to just its first lines: "I celebrate myself / And

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[68] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* v.

what I assume you shall assume. / For every atom belongs to me as good belongs to you" The poem is dedicated to explaining who the speaker of these lines is and why his assumptions should also be his readers'. The third line summarizes the explanation that the poem offers for the connection between the poet and the reader. They are both part of the same universe and share in a common transcendent bond. The bond is described in various ways in the course of the poem. It begins with a statement of empathy for the plights of others. The poet describes how he understands the pleasures and pains of other people: a runaway slave, a woman watching men bathing in a river, and many others.

Whitman makes use of his characteristic catalogs throughout "I celebrate myself…" to show how broad-ranging his identification and sympathy are. Later in the poem he expands beyond sympathy and understanding to full identification with others. The first reference to a runaway slave describes him in the third person and places the narrator/poet in the position of guarding and aiding the desperate man in his escape. The next time a runaway slave is referred to the narrator writes as though he were the runaway and were experiencing the pain and fear of being hunted. That identification is employed for other figures. Whitman writes in these sections, "I am the man, I suffered I was there."[69] The identification expands further from other people to the natural world and the universe. The poet tells us that he sympathizes with the driver of an ox cart that he sees in the street. He adds "…and I do not stop there / I go with the team also."[70] He claims to be one with the geography of the continent itself—as Whitman wrote in the preface, the great poet should "incarnate

[69] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 39.
[70] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 37.

the geography" of his country. When he describes the feeling of his poetic vision he uses similar ideas of oneness: "…my elbows rest in the sea gaps, / I skirt the sierras…my palms cover continents."[71] Whitman takes on the traits of the great poet in the opening poem of the book. He also takes on and expands on the role the poet should play among the people.

The narrator of "I celebrate myself…" presents himself as a mystical inspiring figure who will teach the people important lessons they need to learn as citizens in a democracy. He explicitly offers guidance to the reader in the search for truth. Like the great poet described in the preface he wants to check some of the tendencies of the people to trust too much in authority. "Stop this day and night with me," he promises, and "You shall no longer take things at second hand or third hand…nor look through the eyes of the dead nor feed on the spectres in books."[72] In these and many other comments, the poet establishes his radical egalitarian position about the moral and artistic capacity of the people. He also tries to maintain the magnanimous approach to political and spiritual views attributed to the great poet. In the religious realm he asserts that there are multiple "supremes" that we can follow and learn from just as he has taken from all of them what he needs. He claims at the same time that he is above any of those supreme figures because he can contain them all. The image he uses of taking these divine figures as though they were sheets of paper and placing them in his "portfolio" reduces their significance, but highlights also the equal status of the text of *Leaves of Grass* and the presence of the narrator and the status and presence of these ancient gods. They are all mediated by text in the same way, so the connection

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[71] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 59.
[72] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 28.

between this American poet is just as real as the connection to any of those other figures. He ends this passage with the lines "The supernatural of no account…myself waiting my time to be one of the supremes."[73]

Despite the grandeur of these spiritual claims, Whitman cannot convincingly maintain the transcendent political position of the great poet throughout *Leaves of Grass*. The strong feelings aroused by slavery and the partisan and sectarian divisions over it are too much for him to be neutral about.

Despite his attempts to do otherwise, Whitman reveals the partisan roots of his writing throughout the book. His repeated depiction of runaway slaves in "I celebrate myself…" is not neutral. The narrator sympathizes with the cause of the runaways and puts himself in their place and claims identity with them. The question of slavery is too intense for him to adopt the opposing camp's point of view. There is evidence that his vision for his poetry at one point extended to that the point that he could transcend the divisions over slavery, but this sentiment proved to be beyond what Whitman could express. Neither the 1855 preface or his depiction of the great poet in "I celebrate myself" includes a statement of identity with slave-holders. Likewise his identification with the working class and his enthusiastic depiction of them and of popular democracy was not in his time a politically-neutral position to take (as the chapter on Greeley shows), and Whitman did not try to be on both sides of that question. Whitman makes no attempt to capture the life of conservative New England clergymen, for instance, with the same energy as he does the lives of urban laborers or settlers on the frontier. Looking beyond the first poem, there are more obvious

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[73] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 75.

examples. *Leaves of Grass* contains the poem, already discussed, about the capture and trial of Anthony Burns. The angry partisan tone of that poem is completely at odds with the purported magnanimity of the great poet, which may explain why Whitman buries the poem on practically the last page of the book.

The preface itself contains harsh political language in a passage on the threats to democracy that currently existed in the country. Those political enemies are called "cringers, sucker, doughfaces, lice of humanity"[74] This language is not what we expect from the great poet who will win over the people with his every step. He used a similar line in "In the House of Friends" to attack Old Hunkers for accommodating slavery. In the Preface he does not specify who he is attacking. His gesture toward magnanimity in this case consists only in defining his enemies in murky terms (and even that may not have amounted to much since the term "doughfaces" was commonly used by Whitman and others to refer to Northerners who compromised with slavery.

When Whitman created the role of the great poet who transcended politics he was probably genuine in his attempt to fill that role himself. But in adopting this poetic persona he did not of course lose his own political views or his zeal for defending them. Whitman wants to create a poetry that can replace the existing model of argument and political debate which is implicitly faulted in his preface and in the poetry of *Leaves of Grass.* Judging from his writing shortly before the publication of *Leaves of Grass,* Whitman apparently came to see the existing model as flawed because it did not take into account all of human nature. The idea that a journalist can

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[74] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 18.

win over the public merely by presenting them with the facts surrounding an issue assumes that people are simply rational. He looked to the Constitution, the ideals of Greek characters, and elsewhere no doubt to develop his idea that all aspects of human nature must be accommodated.

One remarkable feature of the approach to social change that Whitman adopts is that it resists appeals to the heroic intellectual figure. There were models of such heroic figures from the American founding. In Whitman's own time there were many powerful examples of Romantic artist heroes. In *Leaves of Grass* journalists and politicians are described as humble workers comparable to the workers in any other occupation. They are not world-shaking heroes or daring intellectual rebels. The journalist's pencil on the page is described in the same passage as the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil and other tools used by manual laborers.[75] The President and other politicians in Washington are described only to stress their humility and the equality between them and the common people of America. The President is described taking off his hat to the people to show them respect. The cabinet is described going doing its work in a passage that includes descriptions of prostitutes and other workers.[76] These public figures perform their work, which is necessary for the country but no more necessary for the country or more worthy according to Whitman's poetry than the work of manual laborers. There is no Napoleon or Mazzini among the public figures of *Leaves of Grass.*[77]

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[75] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 40.
[76] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 6, 41.
[77] Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter, this point about public figures remains true even in the later editions of *Leaves of Grass* that feature poems in response to Lincoln's death. Lincoln's life and death are offered for their symbolic

The non-heroic status of these public figures is matched by the non-heroic great poet. It might sound odd to describe the poetic narrator of *Leaves of Grass* as non-heroic considering how supremely confident he is in his spiritual and physical prowess. He brags in explicit terms about his sexual and reproductive capabilities. He tells us he has taken any number of gods throughout history and transcended them. He even claims in one passage to be the messiah. This bravado however never extends into personal heroics. There are no tales of his adventures or of his struggles. In fact there is little or nothing in the poems that asks us to see the narrator as a person in the world. The poet of *Leaves of Grass* is no Byron or Beethoven (he is not even a Fuller).

In spite of the assertive manliness that is part of the self-presentation of the Whitman narrator, the poet-narrator of *Leaves of Grass* is most often invisible. In many passages the central figure is a third party that the poet either sympathizes with or shares identity with. The great claims the narrator makes are not personal. They are claims that apply to all the people as he stresses in his repeated claims of identity with the people and his panoramic survey of the nation. This is clear of course from the second line of the poetry in the book; "what I assume you shall assume." The yielding of any heroic individual role for the poet is taken to its furthest expression in the closing image of "I celebrate myself" in which the narrator describes himself disappearing into the universe:

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value for the nation, but Lincoln does not appear as a character or a self. In his lecture "Death of Abraham Lincoln" Whitman explains that Lincoln is important because of the great "inheritance-value" of his symbolic death in shaping the national identity. This approach seems consistent with his use of Lincoln in *Leaves of Grass* and his general approach to the self in poetry.

I depart as air . . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.[78]

[78] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 88.

Epilogue: Whitman's Modern Vistas

When Walt Whitman began his career as a writer and developed his political views he did so under the influence of people for whom the American Revolution and the great Republican icons of Jefferson and Washington existed in living memory. The writers and activists he admired in his own time saw themselves as part of the same Republican revolutionary cause as Jefferson and the French Revolution. Whitman understood class and labor in terms of a pre-industrial artisan class, whose members worked in small shops and took pride in their craft associations, the value of their labor, and their independence. And Whitman's own early work of putting out a newspaper in Long Island was a craft, not much changed from the days of Benjamin Franklin. In spite of this historical distance, even the earliest of Whitman's poetry can seem modern; in it we see the energy and diversity of the crowded city street. The tensions in Whitman result from his trying to capture this emerging modern world while retaining his older values.

Whitman's later work, written in the 1870s and 1880s, reflected a more familiar modern world. The Revolution had become history, replaced as the nation's defining moment by the brutal fight for survival of the Civil War. Socially, the division between corporate power and exploited industrial labor emerged. Technology shaped the culture and the world into familiar forms. Newspapers were now industrialized and reached tens of thousands of readers. The Brooklyn Bridge had replaced the Brooklyn ferry.

Although Whitman was prepared for some of these changes, his political views had become out of step. For many of the writers of the time, egalitarianism of the sort promoted in Whitman's early writings cheapened the value of the creative power of the artist and threatened to replace a great cultural tradition with a worthless popular culture.

Whitman himself expressed deep concern over the flaws of democracy. Still, in *Democratic Vistas* and elsewhere he ultimately was guided by his earliest sympathies and maintained his egalitarian views of literature and politics in the face of an emerging modernist movement that would question them.

Whitman made an uneasy and at times equivocal defense of democracy in *Democratic Vistas.* He was responding to the criticism of Thomas Carlyle specifically but also more generally to a widespread critique by intellectuals that democracy could be taken too far, that a country guided entirely by the will of the masses would have a culture and political leadership that appealed to the lowest common denominator. Whitman also expressed some of these doubts, admitting that he would "not gloss over the appalling danger of universal suffrage in the United States." His goal was to address the flaws in democracy, to speak to those who, like himself, struggled to reconcile "democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the people's crudeness, vice, caprices."[1] He acknowledged that the political side of democracy, the selection of leaders by the voters, could be flawed and could produce unscrupulous leaders. But the redeeming value of democracy was not in this political process itself. As Whitman noted, in a dig at Carlyle's elitism, democracies might not produce government by the

[1] Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (New York: Mitchell-Kennerley, 1891), 198.

"best men," but neither had aristocracy or monarchy.[2] The specialness of democratic society lay in the fact that it afforded all individuals the opportunity to develop themselves. As Whitman puts it, "To be a voter with the rest is not so much…. But to become an enfranchised man, and now…to commence…the grand experiment of development…that is something."[3]

Whitman did not waver in his belief in the people's capacity to live up to this opportunity. American history, Whitman says, is built on "the simple idea that the last, best dependence is to be upon humanity itself, and its own inherent, normal, full-grown qualities, without any superstitious support whatever."[4] The country's social problems might be dire and its politicians corrupt, but from this perspective there was no alternative to relying on "humanity itself." For Whitman, the American people had shown the truth of this belief many times throughout history; he singles out the great sacrifice of the people in fighting to preserve the country in the Civil War as "the plentifully-supplied, last-needed proof of democracy."[5]

Whitman referred to this belief in the central importance of individual development as personalism. He provided a concrete, almost sociological, idea of what the individual would be in democracy. In substance this is a far cry from the mysticism of "Song of Myself," but in its spirit it reflects the same egalitarianism, the same conviction that the people in general contain all the heroism, beauty, and wisdom that the country needs.

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[2] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 212.
[3] Whitman *Complete Prose*, 212-13.
[4] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 208.
[5] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 211.

One consequence of Whitman's adherence to the value of the people as individuals is that he is not drawn to class identification or to collective efforts such as the labor movement. Whitman's reliance on the idea of the independent working man (and woman, whose cause he repeatedly raises in *Vistas*) leads him to adopt in some moments laissez-faire capitalist views. The most assailed (and assailable) passage in *Vistas* related to these views is the following, which suggests that there is a political and moral hierarchy that corresponds to wealth:

> [D]emocracy looks with suspicious, ill-satisfied eye upon the very poor, the ignorant, and on those out of business. She asks for men and women with occupations, well-off, owners of houses and acres, and with cash in the bank—and with some cravings for literature, too.[6]

This comment implies the kind of moral distinction between those who work and those who don't that was central to bourgeois ideology (as seen in an extreme form in the discussion of Horace Greeley's beliefs in Chapter 3). That view represents an obvious move to a more conservative position from his views of the 1850s. Where, for example, would the loafers and Bowery Bhoys of *Leaves of Grass* fit in this scheme? Alan Trachtenberg quotes this passage to illustrate Whitman's late conservatism and his commitment to laissez-faire capitalist ideology through the depiction of the idealized striving middle class. Whitman evidently knew this line had some shock value coming from him. He begins the sentence by saying this point will sound "ungracious" and seem like a "paradox," and then he adds a footnote at the end of the paragraph admitting that this is all very materialistic but that he sees the

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[6] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 215.

"extreme business energy and this almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States" laying the groundwork for a stable democratic society by spreading wealth.[7] The idea that an ideal democracy should have widespread ownership of property and distribution of wealth is one that a modern progressive or leftist could hardly disagree with. The mechanism that Whitman associated with this distribution, however, free market capitalism, was conservative and, more importantly, brought with it a great many social problems that Whitman does not address, problems that were already evident in 1855 and only worsened in the rest of the century. As Trachtenberg puts it, Whitman "celebrated the liberatory effects of capitalism and closed his eyes to the rest."[8]

Trachtenberg's central concern here is Whitman's depiction of labor and laborers. He acknowledges that Whitman describes workers out of a genuine sense that their work and their lives were worthy of representation in art and out of a profound sense of the importance of human labor in producing the things of the modern world.[9] Nonetheless, he finds Whitman's vision for creating the ideal democratic America just as problematic as acceptance of capitalism. He says that Whitman's "political hope for actualizing America remained invested in poets, bards, literati. He remained suspicious of organized labor."[10] Here Trachtenberg takes his point too far: poets and bards, yes, but Whitman is clear about what kind of poetic culture he envisions, and it is not made up of literati.

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[7] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 215.
[8] Alan Trachtenberg, "The Politics of Labor and the Poet's Work: A Reading of 'A Song of Occupations'" in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays,* ed. by Edward Folsom (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1994), 131.
[9] Trachtenberg 123, 126-27.
[10] Trachtenberg 122.

The goal of government and of culture in America should be to foster peoples' ability to develop and to govern themselves. When Whitman discusses culture in this vein he taps into a cultural critique that could be right out of Jacksonian-era polemics. He suggests that the country lacks an artistic tradition that recognizes the greatness of the people, in part because the country has inherited a literature from Europe with its roots in aristocracy and monarchy. The people deserve to be recognized simply for their inherent worth and great accomplishments, for what he describes as "their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast, artistic contrasts of lights and shades."[11] No such literature has been written yet, Whitman says, though of course that was his ambition from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* onward; his comment here represents a combination of modesty and perhaps a sense that he had not succeeded. The established literary tradition and the current high culture worked actively against the democratic goals Whitman seeks. "The great poems," he writes, "Shakespeare included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life-blood of democracy. The models of our literature...have had their birth in courts...; all smells of princes' favors."[12] The "genteel" poetry and art that dominate American high culture are no better. Whitman provides more of a traditional artistic and poetic manifesto in this passage than in the original preface to *Leaves of Grass.* Here, writing as a cultural critic and not a transcendent bard, Whitman can take swipes at his contemporaries, though he does not name names (and in assuming this polemical position and voice, he echoes the views of William Leggett from forty years earlier). The implication of this critique is that his own

[11] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 209-10.
[12] Whitman *Complete Prose,* 219.

poetry is unique in its radical celebration of the people. Subsequent generations have generally regarded Whitman's work as a radical departure from the literary tradition, but, bearing out Whitman's sense of the hostility of high culture to the aims of his work, many have seen his radicalism as his central flaw.

Whitman uses the term "genteel" to disparage the American literary tradition. George Santayana famously used the same term in "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," his critique of the country's incoherent cultural position at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Santayana, the genteel tradition was rooted in Calvinist ideas of spiritual self-examination and Transcendentalist ideas of the semi-divine self, ideas which were at odds with each other, and also at odds with the energetic and outward character of the nation. Whitman plays an important role in Santayana's analysis of this cultural moment. He refers to Whitman as possibly "The one American writer who has left the genteel tradition entirely behind," but he does not find in Whitman an alternative vision for American culture.[13] For Santayana, Whitman has no vision of any kind; he represents a pure rebellion against the genteel tradition. Since Whitman extended the idea of "democracy" to everything in the universe, "The various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal." Santayana uses a political metaphor to describe what he sees as a patently absurd artistic and moral vision. (In another political metaphor, Santayana says that in Whitman "Bohemia rebelled against the genteel tradition" without providing the "reconstruction that alone can justify revolution.") The absurdity and flaw in Whitman's approach is that his universal democratic

[13] George Santayana. "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967), 52.

perspective "was utterly disintegrating" to the poet and his imagination. Through it "He reduced his imagination to a passive sensorium for the registering of impressions."[14] Santayana concludes by allowing that Whitman's work might prove to be an important beginning in establishing a new "moral imagination" for America, but the crucial missing element is the presence of a creative will.

That Santayana sees the poet of *Leaves of Grass* as a "passive sensorium" is in a way an unintended tribute to Whitman, who sought to create a poetic persona that could reflect and identify with the people and nature so thoroughly that he would be incorporated into both. Of course, Santayana means to convey his sense of uncanny dread that the individual creative human will could be reduced to something that sounds like a machine or scientific instrument. His dread here goes beyond a literary judgment; the root of his fear is that democratic ideas and Bohemian rebellion will come to dominate thought and art as they have the political realm and the result will be the loss of understanding of the value of the creating human mind.

The most promising alternative to the genteel tradition for Santayana is William James's pragmatism; it undermines the claims of the genteel tradition and also offers a vision of the human capacity to create ideas and systems of belief to our needs. With this idea in mind, Santayana closes his talk by describing the opportunity that his audience, students and faculty at the University of California in Berkeley, will have to escape the genteel tradition through their contact with the great natural scenes that surround them. Freed of Calvinism and Transcendentalism, they can see their "forests and…Sierras" without the "egotism" of these and all other European-based

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[14] Santayana 53.

philosophies, which insisted that nature revolved around "human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil."[15] Contact with nature in the context of this growing American civilization will teach these young philosophers that "what you can do avails little materially, and in the end nothing" and will inspire them to develop their true imaginative capacity, their "natural dignity and joy, namely, in representing many things, without being them, and in letting [the] imagination, through sympathy, celebrate and echo their life."[16]

It is not hard to see what Santayana means when he says that Whitman provided a starting point for post-genteel American thinking. His closing passage recalls Whitman in its scene, the grand national landscape, particularly the Sierras which Whitman refers to, and in its language of moving past ideas of good and evil, of establishing sympathy with "many things" and celebrating them. For Santayana, Whitman fails in the category of using imagination because his excessively democratic vision fails to make any distinction between the many things he represents. The most telling difference, however, between Santayana's vision and Whitman's is the location of Santayana's imaginary modern poet: he is in the woods, in "Nature." In spite of Santayana's critique of the Transcendentalist and Romantic approach to nature, he returns to it as a source of inspiration. Whitman might "skirt the Sierras" in his vision, but the poet of *Leaves of Grass* is most often among people and not mountains and forests; he is in the cities most famously, but also in the farms and the frontier. Santayana's poet retreats from modern society to understand himself; he employs his "sympathy" to understand and represent "many things" not people.

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[15] Santayana 63.
[16] Santayana 64.

The not-very-thinly-veiled objection that Santayana has to Whitman is to the people he represents, representations which Santayana does not even acknowledge are there in the poetry. In his discussion of Whitman, Santayana refers to the "sights, moods, and emotions" in Whitman and to "the animals" and "the cosmos," but he does not refer at all to the people.

Santayana casts his discomfort with Whitman's democratic spirit in philosophical terms, with the political points tucked into metaphors. He doesn't spare Whitman a direct attack, but (whether out of tact or principle) he does spare democracy. His contemporary Ezra Pound was far more blunt in his response to Whitman's vision. Only a few years after Santayana's speech in California, Pound took on Whitman in a commentary in *Poetry*, and established a vision for the modern artist that was radically opposed to that of Whitman. Pound was writing an exchange with *Poetry's* editor Harriet Monroe under the title "The Audience." The occasion for Pound's piece was his objection to the magazine's motto, Whitman's line that "To have great poets there must be great audiences too," which he finds to be fundamentally wrong. "This sentence is Whitman tired," Pound writes, implying that Whitman knew better than to give the public so much credit. This disingenuous and dismissive comment is all the time Pound gives to Whitman's views before elaborating on his vision of the godlike artist and the pathetic clods that make up the rest of humanity. He writes, "Humanity is the rich effluvium, it is the waste and the manure and the soil, and from it grows the tree of the arts."[17] He gives examples of unappreciated modern writers and points out that great scientists don't need to have

[17] Ezra Pound, "The Audience I," *Poetry* V.1 (1914): 29.

an audience in order to make discoveries. Some audience always exists for "great artists," but that audience should not be confused with a popular audience. Great artists only have an audience because "the Lord of the universe sends into this world in each generation a few intelligent spirits, and these ultimately manage the rest. But this rest—this rabble, this multitude—does *not* create the great artist. They are aimless and drifting without him. They dare not inspect their own souls."[18] Pound is infamous for outrageous fascistic statements like this, but the malice of his position is still striking. The contrast with Whitman's views is obvious, both in literary and political terms, but Pound never refers to politics or democracy in this piece and he presents his views as self-evident truths and not as part of some philosophical or critical disagreement with Whitman.

There is hardly any need for Pound to refer to democracy as such; his view of the audience and humanity generally is at odds with any kind of democratic idea, and Harriet Monroe begins her response to Pound with a discussion of democracy and modern society. Monroe's view of poetry and democracy is almost a paraphrase of Whitman, which is not surprising considering she chose the "motto" for the magazine (the fact that she founded a poetry magazine in Chicago in the first place suggests a Whitmanesque vision even without the motto). The coterie audience of artists like Dante, which Pound refers to, were a product of the "stay-at-home aristocratic ages," but the modern democratic age requires broader audiences. To reach those audiences the poet must capture the "common thought and feeling of all the people." There is a great need and demand for a poet who can make this connection so that the modern

[18] Pound 30.

democratic masses can become aware of "truth and beauty," and Monroe sees signs that "the crowd" or "Democracy" is "discovering a deeper need than the need of food and raiment."[19] This is *almost* but not quite Whitman because of Monroe's limited view of the democratic public, which she sees as currently having no spiritual sense at all. The "poet-prophet" she imagines would guide and inspire the people, but she doesn't refer to the people inspiring the poet with their nobility and heroism—the key point in Whitman's critique of traditional literature. Nonetheless, Monroe describes art as "the expression of a reciprocal relation between the artist and his public," and she dedicated her magazine to that idea.

Pound is an extreme case of the rejection of Whitman's democratic vision of literature and society, but he and Santayana represent a significant thread of the modern discourse around cultural authority and the masses. Even when Whitman is not referred to directly the contrast between his perspective and other writers in this vein is evident in their use of the image of the modern urban world. William Butler Yeats, whose work generally avoided such images entirely, vents his disgust at that world and what it represents in a late essay, "General Introduction for My Work." Yeats writes "When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge [in Dublin] in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred rises"; he looks forward to the time when this hatred will lead

[19] Harriet Monroe, "The Audience II," *Poetry* V.1 (1914): 30-31.

to "violence" and a "rule of kindred."[20] This vision of a violent end to the disordered modern world underlies Yeats' famous "A Second Coming" also and other work, but in his prose he provides a location for his unhappiness. The buildings and signs of the city are enough to disturb him (there is no mention of the people in the city).

Another iconic modern poet, T. S. Eliot, provides a less violent but still grim vision of the modern city. From the "half-deserted streets" of "Prufrock" to the "Unreal City" of "The Wasteland" Eliot offers urban images of lonely and depressed souls. He does, however, directly engage with and enter the city in these major poems. We hear last call in the London pubs and snatches of popular songs and even some of the conversations of the patrons. Eliot extends his imagination to include the city and its people, though the cumulative effect is grim. The city is deathly and awaiting some rebirth. In "The Waste Land" the narrator describes a crowd of people as an image of hell: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (alluding in the second line to Dante).[21] A poet cannot be asked to see life and energy where he naturally sees death and defeat. In some ways certainly Eliot's brutal vision of modern urban life was true. Eliot could be seen as doing what Alan Trachtenberg and others have faulted Whitman for *not* doing: seeing the harsh realities of modern urban life. Undoubtedly, there was a waste land in nineteenth-century New York City that another poet might have captured, but who would ask for Whitman to have seen in the city anything but what he did see? Whitman saw the crowds and saw in each man and woman the great potential for

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[20] William Butler Yeats, "General Introduction for My Work" in *Essays and Introductions* (London: MacMillan, 1961), 526.
[21] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*. (San Diego, Harvest-Harcourt Brace, 1964), 53.

development, for heroism and beauty. He saw a vision of radical democratic revolution that would seem antique and preposterous to many of the great poets of the modern period. His work captured that political vision as well as the artistic vision of a poet who could include everyone and yet make revolutionary claims, who could unite without commanding.

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