2000

Authorship and individualism in American literature

Valerie Ann DeBrava
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-7qnj-tx17

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6” x 9” black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI®

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
AUTHORSHIP AND INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Valerie DeBrava
2000
This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Valerie DeBrava

Approved, May 2000

Robert A. Gross
Kenneth M. Price

Lawrence Buell
Harvard University
To the Memory of Richard Charles Gill
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

ABSTRACT vi

INTRODUCTION. THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK 2

CHAPTER I. ELIZABETH STODDARD: THE ART OF "HIGH TEMPER" 13

CHAPTER II. THE BURDEN OF SONG: RICHARD STODDARD AND THE GENTEEL TRADITION 76

CHAPTER III. INTER-CHAPTER: THE INCORPORATED READER 143

CHAPTER IV. THE SELF-PUBLISHING CAREER OF WALT WHITMAN 161

CHAPTER V. THE POSTHUMOUS CAREER OF EMILY DICKINSON: AN UNPREDICTED ECLIPSE 213

POSTSCRIPT. THE INCORPORATED READER AS ACADEMIC READER 278
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the earliest stages of this dissertation, I have benefited from the tireless wisdom and enthusiasm of Professor Robert A. Gross. Without his interdisciplinary intellect, this project would not have evolved beyond a strictly literary or biographical study. Countless thanks are owed to Professor Kenneth M. Price, who read this dissertation in every stage of its composition with amiable rigor. Robert J. Scholnick's expertise on the genteel tradition has been invaluable. For Elizabeth Barnes's keen attention to my text I am grateful. Lawrence Buell, as my external reader, offered a serious and thorough assessment of this dissertation that I will always appreciate.
ABSTRACT

A look at the genre of American literary history, as well as at the careers of four nineteenth-century writers, this neo-Marxist study treats the lives and works of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Elizabeth and Richard Stoddard through the productive circumstances of their writing, and through our expectations as consumers of their personalities and texts. Typically, Whitman and Dickinson are recognized as creative individualists who defied the literary and social conventions of their time, while the Stoddards — when they are recognized at all — are remembered in less daring terms. Many critics today regard Elizabeth Stoddard's first novel, The Morgesons, as an unsentimental exploration of sexuality and an innovative foray into realism. Even so, these critics tend to see the radical potential of the novel as compromised by its flawed form, often considered an unsophisticated melding of domestic and realist fiction, and by the failure of Stoddard's subsequent works to build on The Morgesons' critique of middle-class womanhood. Richard Henry Stoddard, meanwhile, is seen as an unremarkable adherent to the genteel tradition, a chapter in American literary history now regarded as stagnantly establishmentarian and conformist. By contrast, Whitman and Dickinson stand forth as the artistic embodiments of personal freedom and innovation.

Close examination of the careers of Whitman and Dickinson (posthumous, in the case of Dickinson) reveals, however, that these celebrated individualists were not as removed from social determinations of identity as their personas suggest, and that their differences from the Stoddards were less a matter of temperament than of personality's articulation through commercialism and publicity. The Stoddards inhabited a literary world where the pre-commercial ideal of refined, amateur anonymity tempered the promotional impulse to peddle authors along with texts. The result for the Stoddards — and their genteel peers — was an authorial identity more conforming than conspicuous, and more explicitly social than subversive. Whitman and the posthumous Dickinson of the 1890s, on the other hand, were commodified in conjunction with the promotion of their texts — by Whitman himself and, in the case of Dickinson, by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. As part of the larger capitalist transformation of subjectivity (what Marxist critics term reification), this promotion of Whitman and Dickinson exemplified the influence of late nineteenth-century literary commercialism on the writing self. The careers of Whitman and Dickinson, in other words, were inextricable from the economic and historical circumstances from which authorship emerged as a profession distinct from the avocation of letters, and from which the author, as a static, marketable persona, emerged as a figure distinct from the writer. The autonomy and originality for which Whitman and Dickinson are acclaimed become, in this light, testaments to ideology. For such independence is a feature of their marketed identities that derives from the objectifying, isolating power of commercialism, rather than from genuine individuality and freedom. Such canonical independence derives, in fact, from what Marx calls the commodity fetish, a perceptual paradigm that isolates and objectifies people, as well as things, in a capitalist system.

VALERIE DEBRAVA
AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY IN VIRGINIA
ROBERT A. GROSS
FORREST MURDEN JR. PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND AMERICAN STUDIES

vi
AUTHORSHIP AND INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Groundwork

The following dissertation began with my interest in the genre of nineteenth-century domestic fiction. Through that interest I came to the novels of Elizabeth Stoddard, whose work has been reintroduced in recent years by a number of scholars drawn to the complex realism of her writing, and interested in contributing to the revitalization of nineteenth-century women's fiction.1 After reading Stoddard’s first novel in conjunction with her other writings, I began to see The Morgesons as a text that utilizes the conventional elements of domestic fiction to critique the potentially universalizing definitions of womanhood proper to that genre. If this is the case, I asked, from what vantage-point does Stoddard judge the domestic, sentimental understanding of womanhood? What sort of identity does her imaginative critique imply?

From this question it was an easy leap to my interest in the biographical circumstances of Elizabeth Stoddard’s life, many of which had to do with her marriage to the moderately recognized (if not eminent) poet, editor, and reviewer, Richard Henry Stoddard. While my feminist sensibilities steer me from the presupposition that a woman novelist can only be fully appreciated when we take into consideration her marriage, I quickly realized that Elizabeth Stoddard’s tie to Richard Stoddard was not strictly personal and matrimonial, but an example of the trying interdependence that characterized both of their literary careers. From what we can gather of their marriage, the Stoddards shared an edgy fondness that was determined as much by their literary ambitions and consequent poverty, as by their temperamental chemistry. Spouses who, on New York’s literary scene, were cultural partners as much as they were conjugal partners, the Stoddards displayed an aggravated tolerance for one another that epitomized their clinging disillusionment with the artistic and intellectual circle in which they moved.

1 Among the scholars who have helped restore Stoddard to visibility, through published studies and unpublished dissertations, are James Matlack, Lawrence Buell, Sandra Zagarell, Sybil Weir, Susan Harris, Leila Assumpcao Harris, Dawn Henwood, Ann Jerome Croce, and Lisa Radinovsky.
Reflecting on Elizabeth Stoddard's first novel, I surmised that the establishmentarian culture she and her husband occupied—a culture commonly referred to as the genteel tradition—offers an alternative source of identity distinct from the imaginative reservoir presented by domestic fiction and its interpretation by modern scholars. I surmised that the tested yet abiding ties between the Stoddards themselves, and between the Stoddards and their genteel peers, point to a kind of relational identity, authorial and more broadly cultural, that not only inflected Elizabeth Stoddard's writing, but also the scope of her husband's ambitions and the nature of his reception—both contemporary and posthumous. For all of its obscurity in current articulations of American literary history—indeed, because of such obscurity—the genteel tradition, I supposed, provides a glimpse into an alternative mode of self distinct from the reigning model of autonomy and subversion (feminist and otherwise) that determines the shape of American literature today.

As a counterpoint to the Stoddards, I decided to examine the careers of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson ("career" being used loosely in connection with Dickinson). The biographical parallels between the Stoddards, and Whitman and Dickinson promised apt comparisons. (Elizabeth Stoddard and Emily Dickinson, both born and raised in Massachusetts, were poignantly aware of the ways in which their writings were not appreciated; Richard Stoddard and Walt Whitman, never fully resisting the pull of New York City's literary culture, labored tirelessly to achieve an elusive recognition.) If the parallels between the Stoddards, Whitman, and Dickinson make comparison apt, the differences between the Stoddards and their better remembered contemporaries could only make for compelling contrasts. The Stoddards might best be understood in terms of a vestigial cultural identity, but the exceptionality of Whitman and Dickinson—for which they are today celebrated—could only underscore the differences that have saved the democratic bard and the Amherst poet from oblivion. In fact, the uniqueness of these latter poets, arranged in narrative contrast with the Stoddards, promised not only to emphasize the artistic originality and independence that separated them from their genteel contemporaries and contributed to their immortality, but also to reinforce the antiquated character of the polite
tradition against which they wrote. The genteel tradition might offer a glimpse into a forgotten mode of being, but the uniqueness of Whitman and Dickinson could only reinforce how that alternative, interdependent self is a conceptual dinosaur.

What I discovered when I scrutinized the circumstances under which Whitman and Dickinson wrote and published (posthumously, in the case of Dickinson) is that a surprising continuity exists between these unconventional poets and their more conforming contemporaries. Representatives of irreverent originality. Whitman and Dickinson are the embodiments of individualism, a set of cultural values that appears to have displaced the collective values of the genteel tradition. Yet my examination of Whitman's and Dickinson's careers indicated that their literary identities were as contingent on the circumstances of writing and publishing as any genteel author's was on the institutional or collective circumstances of composition, and that their individualistic presence in American literary history attests not to their ability to rise above their environment, but to exist through its constraints and redefinitions. What I initially believed would be a stable set of contrasts became, as I progressed, a continuum of slippages that show the long ideological arm of our material world.

Consistent with my original, dichotomous thinking on these writers, Authorship and Individualism in American Literature is divided into two parts. The point of interest that unites these two parts, and that reflects my shift from dichotomy to continuity (as well as my embrace of Marxist philosophy), is the nature of individualism as the culturally constructed priority of personal independence and originality over relational identity. As the culturally imposed lens through which we read not only American literature, but our surroundings, each other, and ourselves, individualism is different from individuality, which comprises part of our relational identity. While individuality indicates an authentically discrete register of awareness that is compatible with social (whether interpersonal or institutional) consciousness, individualism is an
ideology of identity that celebrates the lone dimensions of human being to excess. To adopt the vocabulary of Marx, individualism is the "fetishized" experience of individuality.

As one of its premises, this dissertation assumes the Marxist tenet that the individualist human, as opposed to the individual human, emerges with the historical development of consumer capitalism. The abstract originality of the individualist, in other words, is a consequence of history, rather than the given nature of humanity. As Marx states in *Contributions to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, "man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, the state, the society." Only with the appearance of capitalist, consumer-oriented economies do people begin to "squat" in a conspicuous detachment from their surroundings. "The further back we go into history," Marx maintains, "the more the individual, and, therefore, the producing individual seems to depend on and constitute a part of a larger whole." Conversely, "the isolated individual [the individualistic human] becomes prevalent," Marx claims, after the appearance of "bourgeois society" in the eighteenth century, when the economic – specifically, the commercial – "interrelations of society... have reached the highest state of development" (Lukes 76). As Richard Schmitt explains in his analysis of "separateness," Marxist individualism (the only individualism to which I refer) must be understood in its historical and economic context.

Marx points out that the concept of the separate individual is itself a historical phenomenon. It was not known to the Greeks or the medievals but arose with the ascent of the new capitalist class in England in the eighteenth century. Thus the identification of oneself as an individual presupposes a social stock of ideas and thus a functioning society and culture.  

---

When we recognize that individualism is a culturally and historically specific range of sensibilities, we can begin to understand the phenomena it encompasses in a contingent and, therefore, expansive light. By way of example, we can begin to see American letters, as an established literary history and a professional field of study, as an outgrowth of capitalist culture. From this perspective, the "aesthetic" judgments that have enshrined Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and that have all but obliterated the Stoddards and the genteel tradition from the canon, lose some of their absolute quality, and acquire instead a relative and instrumental significance that enables us to see the logic behind our tastes. The current reign of Whitman and Dickinson — as well as the less glorious fate of their genteel contemporaries — becomes evidence of the roles they played (from beyond the grave, in the case of Dickinson) in the newly competitive, increasingly market-driven world of nineteenth-century authorship and publishing. The fame and obscurity of these writers become evidence, furthermore, of our own ideological predispositions as readers drawn to the experimentalist over the traditionalist, or the principled isolationist over the communitarian conformist.

A second premise of this dissertation is that authorship, as a public vocation that evolved out of a once private avocation, is a cultural extension of the displacement of individuality by individualism. In conjunction with this displacement, the writer evolved into the author who possesses an inherent degree of eminence, a distinctiveness that, through mass media, becomes celebrity. The author, in this line of thinking, is a publicized figure whose personal visibility carries as much value and meaning as his writings. The author, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse argue, is, in fact, an entire "class of people on whom writing conferred authority by placing them in a new and distinctive relationship with themselves, with other people, and with a world of objects." The emergence of this "class" (a trait of which is distinction or seeming classlessness) Armstrong and Tennenhouse equate "with nothing less than the onset of modernity

---

itself" (1). Like the appearance of the individualistic subject, moreover, the appearance of the author can be traced to events that demarcate the development of consumer capitalism. As Armstrong and Tennenhouse point out, "even the most conventional histories... note the simultaneous lifting of censorship, the emergence of the popular press, the growth of a mass readership, and the increasing importance of popular media in determining the outcome of political conflict" when treating seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England – the period in which the modern author first became visible. As the isolated individual emerged from the economic shift toward capitalism, in other words, so, more specifically, authorship and the author emerged from the literary market fostered by mass media and the lifting of censorship.

This analogy between authorship and individualism exists not just on a historical level, but also on an ideological level. The paradigm that governs this analogy is the commodity fetish, the Marxist notion of an object that has assumed a life of its own, that possesses an artificial and exaggerated presence apart from the transactions of production and consumption that surround it. As the thing we desire (whether a car or a house, or even a job or an education), the fetishized commodity sets an ontological example that, in the long run, defines our relations with other people and ourselves. The result is "a situation where men... no longer determine what things they themselves produce... and consume, ... and [where] instead things... tell people what to desire in one another as well as in the world of things" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 12). While the broad reflexive aspect of this fetish is individualism, one of its cultural niches is authorship as the contrivance and exaggeration of the literary self apart from the circumstances that surround it. Like the fetishized object generally, which "appears to be iconic by nature" and "seems to contain the source of its own meaning and value," the modern author, as demonstrated by the examples of Whitman and Dickinson, is a public configuration of self that assumes a life of its own, circulating through a mass readership not as a passive article but as human capital, or as a presence that has the power to define its own meaning and value. For this reason, I refer
repeatedly to Whitman (and, in passing, to Twain) as capital or currency. Writers such as Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard, who with their genteel peers hover on the vestigial margins of modern authorship, demonstrate, by contrast, a literary identity that is acutely caught up in the circumstances of its creation. So embedded in its material surroundings is this identity that, when the writing life proves burdensome, even destructive, adopting a separatist literary self apart from the oppressive opinions of one's peers or an unreceptive audience doesn't even look like an option.

Finally, a third premise of this dissertation is that the collective vitality against which I have posed individualism and authorship (what Schmitt calls "being-in-relation"), and with which I have obliquely linked the genteel tradition, is itself subject to fetishism, or what some critics call reification. In a capitalist society, it is not only the individual or the individual-as-author that is subject to thing-ification, but also the groups to which that individual belongs. The difference between the genteel tradition and today's dominant culture of literary individualism, it follows, is not that the genteel writers formed a circle (i.e., that Richard Stoddard belonged to the New York Authors' Club, or that he and Elizabeth hosted noteworthy soirées), while Whitman (arguably) and Dickinson (still more arguably) did not. The difference is that the associations the Stoddards and their genteel peers formed were not as reified, or what I call corporate, as the capitalist-cultural institutions that sustain individualism in modern times — namely, the media and (as I address in my Postscript) profit-driven education. Describing precisely this kind of corporate atmosphere, Armstrong and Tennenhouse address how Marx's logic of reification affects intellectual communities.

Another way to express this fetishized identity is to describe authors as scripted or inscribed — as beings who are the source and scope of their own meaning in the manner of letters that spell their own significance. In the words of Armstrong and Tennenhouse, "if the commodity fetish represents the moment when people cease to be defined as producers and come to be understood in terms of what they consume, then the objectification of such bases for identity in writing effects a similar inversion. People cease to write and start to be written instead" (131).
Like the commodity fetish, the collective takes on a sinister life of its own. It situates individuals in relation to one another according to a will that cannot be reduced to the sum total of individuals that have either produced or actively accepted the collective will as their own. In this respect, the collective is no longer the collective... but an ossified structure…” (131).

Antonio Gramsci, in writing about the “intellectual” or interpretive component of the reified object, ventures the following estimation of the fetishized social structure: “If each of the single components thinks of the collective organism as an entity extraneous to himself, it is evident that this organism no longer exists in reality, but becomes a phantasm of the intellect, a fetish.”

In my treatment of intellectual community, with regard both to the Stoddards and the more expansive situational readership that has supported individualism, I borrow from Alan Trachtenberg and his use of the corporation as a trope by which to understand the Gilded Age. Seen as a collective that, on a preliminary level, consists of individuals, but that, on a more purposeful level, absorbs and erases its individual members with its group power, the corporation or, more particularly, the intellectual stance of incorporation serves as a metaphor, in this study, for collective cultural labor that is blinded to its own reifying tendencies. As the legal corporation absorbs the individual liability (and, by implication, conceptual reality) of its members, so cultural incorporation makes the impersonal, capitalist social structure paramount by denying the proximity of individual and collective interests with the assertion that only the collective is real.

Individualism, as an ideology of identity with reactionary, compensatory dimensions that can obscure actual individual interests, is in fact such an assertion – albeit necessarily indirect – of the fetishized collective’s monopoly on reality. For the faith in the solitary, rugged spirit of

---

independence and originality, insofar as its ideological origins are concealed, is the consoling philosophy of the incorporated. The genteel tradition, meanwhile, as an institutionally-based literary culture that did not depend on the ideology of the individual, represents the obverse of incorporation. Thus though the Stoddards inhabited a world built on alliances, theirs’ was not a corporate world. Instead, the Stoddards inhabited what I call a clubbish world, one where the institutions balance individual and collective identities, rather than propound collective interests through circuitous and contrived exaggerations of individual being.

Although Elizabeth Stoddard did not belong to the Authors’ Club, the Century Club, or any of the other literary establishments available to men, she inhabited this clubbish world through informal soirées, through her personal relationships with other writers (including her marriage), and through her own anxious, relative sense of her accomplishments. My treatment of Elizabeth Stoddard’s place in American literary history, and in the genteel tradition in particular, focuses on her first novel, The Morgesons, in part because her experience of official literary institutions was limited by the fact of her sex, but also because that text offers a rich demonstration of her genteel sensibilities.

Richard Stoddard I examine through his dogged climb from struggling iron molder to respected – though still struggling – man of letters. His social ascent from thankless, unrefined poverty to genteel poverty and modest prestige left Stoddard frustrated and bitter, even as it contributed to his faith in the discriminating mobility of rank. Conceivably, Richard Stoddard’s personal, financial, and creative trials could have imbued him with a rebellious, democratic faith in the common citizen. Instead, his trials confirmed his confidence in the power of individual merit in the context of received social structure. Instead of singing his personal self, Stoddard celebrated the self that exists through impersonal arrangements of cultural authority. As a result, he adhered to his genteel circle, even when its judgments and demands whittled at his sense of personal worth. In this respect, Richard Stoddard was the embodiment of genteel culture, which – as I illustrate through his poetry, his writing on poets’ homes, and his seventieth birthday fête at
the Authors’ Club – balanced the nineteenth-century’s growing impulse toward individualistic eminence against the collective dimensions of art and intellect.

My chapter on Whitman focuses on that poet’s strategies for projecting a public image that simultaneously proclaimed his uniqueness and his typicality. This image, cultivated through photographs and the metonymical collapse of man and book, is the perfect expression of individualism, combining as it does a religion of self with an assertion of context that is curiously static and detached. For all of his claims to be the bard of a bustling democracy, Whitman projected or published himself – on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, in his frontispiece to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, and in his stalwart patronage of photographers – in settings that had the still, suspended air of a vacuum. While this form of self-promotion seems at first glance to have allowed Whitman a saving reserve of self-control, it becomes apparent, with further scrutiny, that this kind of publishing entailed a choreography of time and place that bordered on decontextualization. As indicated by his frustrations in old age, such self-publishing exemplifies a *loss* of self-control, for it is a tactic of the ideology that positions the lone, individualistic figure against a reified setting.

The final chapter looks at how Emily Dickinson’s decision to maintain strict control over her writing by *not* publishing was supplanted by the decision of her sister, Lavinia, and the editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, to prepare her poems for publication after her death. The ways in which this promotional intervention altered Dickinson’s poems – with titles, excised words, and misreadings – is well documented. What hasn’t been documented is the way in which this posthumous intervention altered the poet’s identity. In this last chapter I trace how the publicity attending the 1890s editions of Dickinson’s poems transformed the poet from a private, unusual person into an author-as-oddity. The loss of stylistic control that Dickinson feared during her lifetime became a loss of self-control after her death. The different roles that Todd and Higginson played in launching and maintaining Dickinson’s posthumous career are, I further argue, essential to understanding the dynamics of this transformation. The
trajectory of this posthumous career, I conclude, can be understood in terms of Todd's personal life, both with respect to the lawsuit filed by Lavinia Dickinson, and Todd's abiding interest – in connection with her husband – in travel and astronomy.
Identifying herself to readers only as E. D. B., Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard began her literary career when she contributed her first letter to the San Francisco Alta California on October 8, 1854. For forty months, between 1854 and 1858, Elizabeth Stoddard livened up the political and economic fare of the Alta with her accounts of New York City events and her personal thoughts on a wide range of issues. The success of her column was demonstrated by its regular appearance on the front page of the Alta's Sunday edition after only a year of occupying the newspaper's back pages. The longevity of the column, given the many changes in the Alta's ownership and editorial staff, was further testimony to the popularity of E. D. B.'s observations.

Originally the Californian, the West-coast newspaper was first issued on August 15, 1846. In 1849, the paper moved from Monterey to San Francisco, merged with the failing California Star, and became the Daily Alta California. San Francisco's most important newspaper until after the Civil War, the Alta California was the publication that in later years subsidized Mark Twain's overseas travel, which provided inspiration and material for Innocents Abroad. It is uncertain how Stoddard came about her position as columnist for the Alta, but when the daily hired the "Lady" from back east, it became the first American newspaper to hire an out-of-town female correspondent.

Throughout her tenure as "Lady Correspondent," E. D. B. adhered to the general tenet that a writer should communicate whatever she happens to observe. Protocol, pretense, and the conventions of genre should not restrict the range of an author's work, nor diminish its veracity. In her letters to San Francisco, Stoddard reports on a variety of experiences, rallying her vitriolic

---

1 The Alta's "Lady Correspondent," as Stoddard came to be known, chose not to include the "S" among her initials, even though she married Richard Henry Stoddard and acquired the "S" two years before she began writing for the California paper. For an informative overview of Stoddard's tenure as the Alta's "Lady Correspondent," see Sybil B. Weir, "Our Lady Correspondent: The Achievement of Elizabeth Drew Stoddard," San Jose Studies 10.2 (1984): 73-91.
insights around a framework of autobiographical moments. She discusses what she sees, as if her readers were exiled friends who would want to know the details of her daily life back east. Thus E. D. B. raises subjects that range from the constitutionality of the Maine Liquor Law, to Lucy Stone's decision to wear "no hoops" at the Seventh Annual Woman's Rights Convention, to Thoreau's "minute history" of his "Life in the Woods." This last subject — *Walden* — is one of many examples of the "Lady Correspondent's" interest in her fellow writers. E. D. B.'s accounts of who was publishing what, in fact, fill many of her letters to the *Alta*, and transform her distinctive tone of wry reportage into one of passionate engagement, whether enthusiastic or disdainful.

One of the writers whose work the "Lady Correspondent" praises on the *Alta's* pages is Charlotte Brontë. (Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Sand were also well liked by the column.) In June of 1855, E. D. B. announced the death of "Currer Bell" with genuine praise for the simplicity and inspiration of Brontë's writing. "Fame and money were not her incentives," Stoddard proclaims. "[Brontë] wrote, she says, because she felt it 'needful to speak,' and what she experienced in her own life, or what she saw in the life of others she expressed." "Currer Bell," in the "Lady Correspondent's" estimation, differed quite importantly from many other writers who relied more on fantasy and fine feeling than on a sense of reality. In Stoddard's estimation, moreover, Brontë transcended the worldly temptations of success that characterized the careers of American authors such as E. D. E. N. Southworth and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Brontë's status apart from what Stoddard saw as the mass of "lady writers" is, indeed, assured by her reference to *Jane Eyre* as "a daring and masculine work." Femininity, as a literary marker, was frequently used in Stoddard's column as an indication of maudlin propensities and weak thinking. "Women-novels" and "female writers" are, in fact, terms of disparagement in Stoddard's vocabulary, terms that suggest her abiding disdain for many of the sentimental novelists who published during her lifetime. "All the women in this country," she wrote in 1854, "can follow out their fancies, as far as book making is concerned. No criticism
assails them. Men are polite to the woman, and contemptuous to the intellect” (October 22, 1854). In Stoddard’s estimation, the fact that Charlotte Brontë withstood the most trenchant criticism put her into a different category than “female writers.” Her work was “daring and masculine” because, unlike those novelists who followed out their predictable fancies, Brontë used her unconventional eye to build on her actual experiences. Both “a governess at Brussels” and a “teacher or scholar at Mr. Brodhead’s school,” Brontë drew from life the circumstances of her characters. This realism, as Stoddard understood such writing to be, constituted authorial bravery. Brontë was “a little, frail body; sensitive and perhaps morbid, yet possessing more moral strength than the government and gunpowder heroes of the day.”

A key element of contemporary fiction to which Stoddard objects in her column is the “eternal preaching about self-denial,” an element most common in sentimental or domestic novels. According to Stoddard, the popular narratives of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Chesebro’, E. D. E. N. Southworth, Susan Warner and others are driven by a code of self-abnegation (August 31, 1856). Such works pique the “Lady Correspondent” into unladylike impatience, until she is sick of “heroines… indifferent to good eating, …careless about taking cold, and …impervious to all creature comforts” (August 3, 1856). Far better than any feminine ideal of altruistic piety is “the duty that is revealed to every man and woman of us by the circumstances of daily life” (August 3, 1856). Had Miss Chesebro’ been more attentive to the individual “idiosyncracies and necessities” of her characters, rather than adhering to her “dogmatic and pious ideal of a woman,” Stoddard’s notice of Victoria, or The World Overcome would undoubtedly have been less caustic. As the review stands, however, it is succinctly

---

2 Almost thirty years later Stoddard reiterated her opinion about the incompatibility of rigorous criticism and texts authored by American women. In a letter to her friend, the Vermont poet Julia Dorr, Stoddard predicted that the implementation of gender-neutral systematic literary criticism would greatly undercut the “women-novels.” “Oh if we could have sound criticism in our country – we should have better books but what a wailing and weeping there would be among our American Shes” (November 16 1880).
dismissive, closing somewhat oracularly with the claim that “the world has long been lost in a polemical fog” (August 3, 1856).³

Indeed, it is evident from Stoddard’s first letter to the Alta California that she sought to dissociate herself from the popular women writers of the 1840s and 50s. Debating “how to appear most effectively, whether to present myself as a genuine original, or adopt some great example in style,” Stoddard decides against the “pugilism of Fanny Fern, the pathetics of Minnie Myrtle, [and] the abandon of Cassie Cauliflower” (October 8, 1854). The deliberate rejection of Fanny Fern and Minnie Myrtle (the pseudonyms of Sara Parton and Anna C. Johnson) becomes, with the playful addition of Cassie Cauliflower, a refusal of the entire floriculture by which piety and pathos were disseminated as emotional norms for women – to the point of being naturalized into the forms of leaves and tendrils. From the outset of her role as columnist for the Alta, Stoddard recognized that the San Francisco climate could support simple “facts and opinions” as readily as the graceful verdure of sentiment. And so, despite her titular connection with “the lady writers... blossoming on the field of literature” (October 7, 1855), the Alta’s “Lady Correspondent” eschewed what she saw as the flowery and ephemeral wisdom of other women authors. Such sagacity, she would conclude in a later essay, belonged in books with clear print and pretty covers (December 3, 1855).

Stoddard believed that the homogenizing influence of “Duty” as a feminine ideal had its counterpart in the standardized plots that sold so well as both entertainment and edification. E. D. B.’s claim that “the lady writers are blossoming on the fields of literature,” for example, connotes not only the flowery pseudonyms of these authors or the transient nature of their

³ Sybil Weir, in her San Jose Studies article, “Our Lady Correspondent,” argues that Stoddard struggled to find an American literary tradition “within which or against which to define herself.” Being a woman, Stoddard was excluded from the tradition identified in Emerson’s “American Scholar” address. The “tradition of female writing in America during these years,” however, went against Stoddard’s tendency toward elliptical detachment. Weir writes that the “tradition of the sentimental novel... which emphasized tears, piety, and the moral superiority of women, ...[and] which rewarded acceptance of conventional morality with material success” could never have accommodated Stoddard’s style, while that tradition’s uniformity went against Stoddard’s belief that the idiosyncratic temperament of the individual should be
success, but a multitudinous sameness better suited to pink poppies than published texts.

Stoddard saw domestic novels as a body of formulaic narratives, resembling each other in characterization, length, and didacticism.

You ask yourself in reading each one, if you have not read it before. Most of the heroines are obliged to keep school, not but what they might be rich, but some family cloud rises, and they feel called upon to leave the paternal roof, and walk through thorny paths, when, if they had stayed at home, they might ride in a comfortable chaise. It all comes right though about the fourth-hundredth page. I should also say that most of the young ladies have a 'wealth of dark tresses,' but they don't seem to pay expenses (October 7, 1855).

The repetitive nature of these books prompted Stoddard to observe of Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* that it "was an exceedingly narrow book, notwithstanding its title" (January 8, 1855), while of Southworth's bestsellers the columnist states: "We have had *The Deserted Wife* ...and now we have *The Discarded Daughter*. We may soon expect from her lachrymose pen, *The Banished Brother* and *The Frenzied Father*" (February 17, 1856). In this vein of dismissal, Stoddard even advises Harriet Beecher Stowe to quit writing.

Plutarch, or some other 'literary cove,' tells us of an old lady whose son took a prize at the Olympic games. In the heat of her motherly rejoicing, she advised her son to die while he was a victor, lest he should try to win some future prize and fail. So with Mrs. Stowe. I wouldn't really advise her to die (for she mightn't be quite prepared, not withstanding

---

the prime subject of a writer. Ultimately, Weir claims, Stoddard "rejected the sentimental tradition as false to the realities and complexities of human experience."
her husband is a minister), but I would advise her to rest on
the laurels of ‘Uncle Tom’ (June 19, 1855).

Assuming that subsequent works will necessarily be repetitions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (but
without the timely power of that 1852 novel), Stoddard foresees only a pale, painfully imitative
career ahead of Stowe.

Unflinching assessments such as this – whether of contemporary women writers, false piety,
or the lunch fare on the Long Island Sound steamboat – seemed to guarantee E. D. B. a literary
career very different from the one she predicts for Stowe. Both in person and in print, Stoddard
had freewheeling habits of expression and a censorious streak that she often registered through
wit. Her persona as the “Lady” from back east allowed her a breadth and candor that was well
suited to her undiscriminating realist’s eye. At the same time, E. D. B.’s correspondence also
gave her startling and amusing opportunities to express a temperament that was relentlessly
discriminating. This combination, pitched perfectly at Californians’ proud and distrustful
nostalgia for the eastern establishment, made Stoddard very popular with the Alta’s readers, and
seemed to promise a bright future – whether she chose to continue as a newspaper correspondent,
or to venture into the realm of more imaginative writing.

Yet, in spite of her early success with San Francisco readers, Elizabeth Stoddard was plagued
throughout her life by a sense of authorial inferiority that hinged on her desire to be recognized as
a writer of fiction. After her stint as the “Lady Correspondent,” she devoted most of her creative
energies to fiction, publishing three novels and a multitude of stories. Stoddard’s novels, The
Morgesons, Two Men, and Temple House, were published respectively in 1862, 1865, and 1867,
while her short fiction appeared in a range of journals throughout the latter half of the nineteenth
century. Among the publications in which her stories appeared were the reputable journals,
Harper’s Monthly Magazine, the Independent, Lippincott’s, the Saturday Evening Post,
Appleton’s Journal, and the Atlantic Monthly. Stoddard’s first two novels were reviewed,
meanwhile, in a number of widely read New York periodicals, as well as in the Philadelphia North American and Evening Bulletin.

The Saturday Evening Gazette maintained that The Morgesons' "Yankee dialect [is] superior to Mrs. Stowe's," while the Transcript described the novel as "a realistic Balzacian study of New England life" (LC 285-86). The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin carried a front-page review of the novel on June 24, 1862. Written by Edmund Clarence Stedman, the review characterizes the Morgeson family as one "amongst whom the forces in question break forth into turbulent idiosyncrasies, at once fascinating and repulsive." Manton Marble of the New York World claimed that "we know of no such faithful keenly truthful picture of New England life as The Morgesons contains," and George Ripley of the New York Tribune concluded that "the story will be read as a development of powerful, erratic, individual passion. -- a somewhat bitter, perhaps not unwholesome commentary on life and society." The praise continued with George Boker's commendation of the novel, in the Philadelphia North American, for its deliberate and unsentimental development of character in a realistic milieu. But the culmination of these reviews was the response coming from an unpublished source. In 1862, Nathaniel Hawthorne sent a personal letter to Elizabeth Stoddard in which he claimed, "There are very few books of which I trouble to have an opinion at all, or of which I could retain any memory so long after reading them; as I do of The Morgesons."

On a notable if lesser scale, Stoddard's second novel also became the subject of critical admiration. Never selling well when it was originally published in 1865, Two Men was reissued in 1888 to an again unresponsive market. The reappearance of Stoddard's novel twenty-three years after its initial publication, it is plain, resulted from the efforts of poet, critic, and friend-in-high-place, Edmund Stedman, rather than from the public's demand for the book or the publisher's belief that it could carve out a market where it had failed before. Stedman, editor of the New York World and an established author in his own right, arranged that a revised edition of Two Men be published by Cassell because of his conviction that the novel was an extraordinary...
work of American fiction. Elizabeth Stoddard, in a letter to Julia Dorr, frankly acknowledges that she owed the republication of *Two Men* to her friend. “I owe it all to Stedman – he never has rested in his determination to have my book re-published. He has always upheld that *Two Men* was a great book.” Stedman’s enthusiasm for the novel, moreover, was apparently shared by other authors and critics following republication. Stoddard continues in her letter to Dorr, “since *Two Men* was published in June scarcely a day has passed that I have not had private or public testimony of the impression it has made. Think of a man like Julian Hawthorne reading it twice – I have been astonished and am still, at the way in which the book has been taken by men, authors who compare me to Balzac and George Meredith!” Nor was all critical approval confined to the period following the book’s reissue in 1888. William Dean Howells reviewed the novel when it was first published by Bunce and Huntington, concluding that “in plot, in character and treatment, *Two Men* is one of the most original books written by an American woman.”

Of course, “puffing,” or the practice of composing favorable reviews for the work of one’s friends and colleagues, was a not uncommon pursuit in the journalistic circles of the late nineteenth century. And Stoddard, along with her husband Richard Henry, was inevitably situated with other New York intellectuals in the hybrid web of advertising and literary analysis spun by the developing publishing industry. Even so, we must remember that Hawthorne’s praise for *The Morgesons* was a private response, not intended for publication. Howell’s identification of *Two Men* as “one of the most original books written by an American woman,” furthermore, is underpinned not by the kindplatitudes of puffery, but by an attentive delineation of the realism in Stoddard’s narrative. Lending credence to his remarks about the book’s originality, too, is Howell’s expressed impatience, in that same review for *The Nation*, with the novel’s conventional happy ending.

Such favorable criticism was not enough to spare Stoddard years of self-doubt as a fiction writer. For while many of her fellow authors praised her imaginative work, her novels never

---

4 Stoddard to Julia Dorr, October 5, 1888. (Middlebury College Collection.)
garnered an enthusiastic following. Two Men, as already mentioned, failed to sell well – as did Temple House. Published by George S. Carleton and Company, a minor New York house that sought out little-known American writers, Stoddard’s first novel likewise experienced only modest sales. Whether the firm did little to promote The Morsesons, as Stoddard believed, or whether the novel appealed to a small sector of the reading public in spite of respectable attempts at marketing, the thirty-nine year old author was dissatisfied with the pecuniary fate of her first sustained piece of writing. The Morsesons’ lack of success with the public, indeed, precipitated what was to prove a lifelong disappointment, a rancor that in later years prompted Stoddard to remark to her friend, Julia Dorr: “I could laugh bitterly when I think of how I have been ignored, how often in the presence of those who have been lionized whom I knew were not my superiors, I have been passed over and unnoticed.”

At first glance, the novelist and storywriter who was “passed over and unnoticed” seems to be a very different figure from the “Lady Correspondent” who boasted of a front-page column and a loyal following. Yet there are important threads of continuity between Stoddard’s journalism and fiction that not only confirm that the “Lady Correspondent” and the “unnoticed” novelist were the same person, but that shed light on Stoddard’s reception after the publication of The Morsesons and Two Men. As a novelist, Stoddard had an ear for “Yankee dialect” and an ability to paint a “faithful keenly truthful picture” (to use Manton Marble’s phrase) that point directly to her gift for unsparing reportage. The positive responses to Stoddard’s novels (such as the New York Transcript’s description of The Morsesons as a “realistic Balzacian study of New England life”) attest to an unflinching, eloquent objectivity – precisely the objectivity that made Stoddard so popular as a newspaper correspondent. In this respect, the “Lady Correspondent” engendered the novelist. Stoddard the novelist grew out of E. D. B. the Correspondent in another way, though. And it is this latter element of continuity that, to an important extent, accounts for Stoddard’s relative failure as a novelist. For while consistent with one of the “Lady Correspondent’s”

5 Ibid.
abiding preoccupations, Stoddard’s novelistic interest in domestic fiction translated into a confusing, inconsistent mix of convention and iconoclasm that left readers unresponsive.

The “Lady Correspondent’s” preoccupation with “women-novels” and their “dutiful” heroines is evident in Stoddard’s fiction, not in the form of satire (which E. D. B. sometimes approached in her journalism), but in an experimental genre that mixes the familiar sentiments of domestic fiction with the idiosyncrasies and colloquialisms of a terse realism. One of the most reliable features of Stoddard’s fiction, in fact, is her profound engagement with the sentimental texts that she disparages in her newspaper column—texts that generate a wide, normalizing web of ideas about biological and ideological womanhood. Stoddard’s novels and stories unfold within the emotional milieu of domestic fiction, adopting and revising the operative centrality of marriage, the family, and the home that distinguishes such prose. In particular, Stoddard often writes about a woman’s anticipation of marriage, a thematic reoccurrence that overtly links her with the “mass” of female writers she repeatedly criticizes in her Alta column. In this respect, Stoddard draws on the novelistic configurations of emotion that served as one of the nineteenth century’s most powerful narrative arrangements of gender and identity.

Here a third thread of continuity becomes visible in the fabric of Stoddard’s career—the discriminating eye and the censorious elitism that confirmed E. D. B.’s role as a “Lady Correspondent.” While E. D. B. was impatient with all sorts of sham superiority, from the regional to the literary, her intolerance was for pretense, not for the meritocratic recognition of difference. As a correspondent for the Alta and as a fiction writer, Stoddard had a fine and unflagging sense of social hierarchy. Thus as an author experimenting with the genre of the domestic novel, she tends not to hypostatize the sexual identity of her characters with a static

---

6 As historian and literary critic Mary Kelley has observed, the sentimentalists “sought to impress on their female readers a domestic brand of noblesse oblige.” The “privilege” of middle-class womanhood, as understood by these popular writers, entailed the responsibility of superintending “a home that was to embody perfection.” Indeed, the “wife and mother, as the family’s vital, living center was so essential to the functioning of the home that its very existence could not be imagined without her.” Mary Kelley, “The Sentimentalists,” Signs Spring (1979): 441.
ideal of "self-denying" womanhood. The female is rarely a stable element of her fiction, but is like the thesis or antithesis of Hegelian speculation, dissolving into a dream of synthesis or reinventing itself in a new "higher" rupture. In her stories and novels, Stoddard tends to subsume sexual difference into an alternative, even more compelling difference. She creates her characters with only a provisional interest in gender, demonstrating in the course of her narratives that she is more attuned to educational and class differences, for example, than to differences between the sexes.

When Stoddard uses "masculinity" and "femininity" to distinguish between admirable and unsatisfactory writers and editors, she is in fact adopting the language of gender as a metaphoric extension of cultural inegalitarianism. The unequal capabilities and accomplishments of people—particularly in literary matters—absorbed Elizabeth Stoddard for much of her life. She assessed her own talents and the talents of others with an almost obsessive interest in personal merit, perseverance, education, and material circumstance. Partly a result of temperament, partly a consequence of family history, and partly a product of her association with a deliberately refined literati, these assessments illustrate Stoddard's hierarchical sense of humanity that placed culture, class, and condescension before the conventions of gender. The recognition of sexual difference, both in her personal letters and her professional prose, is deployed as a variation on the primary consciousness of social difference, so that "femininity" and "masculinity" become encoded expressions of a simultaneously disdainful, anxious, and ministering elitism.

---

7 Some readers might claim that Stoddard's use of the words "masculine" and "manly," when describing women's accomplishments, indicates her place in what Elaine Showalter cites as the "Feminine" stage of female literary production. The "Feminine" stage is that epoch in which women understand their own intellectual efforts as masculine endeavors because they have internalized patriarchal associations of philosophical and literary success with maleness. An integral aspect of the "Feminine" stage, however, is the "oblique, displaced, ironic, and subversive" style that constitutes a "feminist" component. This style is missing from Stoddard's correspondence, while the spare and cryptic language that appears in her fiction tends to minimize gender difference rather than disrupt male hegemony with a distinctly female outlook. "Toward a Feminist Poetics," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 137-38.

8 Feminist theorists have often expressed uneasiness over women who appear to move beyond the constraints of gender into other fields of struggle and self-definition. The apparent neutralization or absorption of sexual politics into other contestatory experiences, it is claimed, is simply a way of effacing
recognized that this hierarchical outlook could be attributed to her personality. "I have been too high tempered, censorious, had a contempt for my kind, make people fear instead of love." But this "high temper" was also characteristic of the larger, genteel milieu of post-Civil War, northeastern culture. As John Tomsich explains, the genteel culture of postbellum America (a culture in which Stoddard's work was undeniably embedded) was deliberately condescending and judgmental, even as it was plagued by a host of insecurities.

After the Civil War, as social change assumed threatening proportions, the genteel endeavor became distinctly conservative. Its tool was culture, but its motivation was fear. The very idea of respectable culture was the creation of the genteel authors. It was they who forged that peculiar complex of the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the spiritual into a tool for enlightening and civilized the middle classes.¹⁰

With sexual difference frequently a provisional scenario, it becomes apparent that many of Stoddard's narratives detail difference of another sort—namely, class difference and the tensions between highbrow and lowbrow cultures. Gender in Stoddard's work is absorbed into the presence of the genteel.

In a letter to Elizabeth Allen, Stoddard uses the image of the slave to convey genteel culture's exacting bonds. The slave in this portrayal is Stoddard's husband, a man with a literary ambition that will not die. Richard Stoddard, his wife writes to her friend, has received "an appointment

female subordination. Although I respect the wariness of "neuter" perspectives and "universality" that these theorists demonstrate, I disagree with the assumptions that gender is the fundamental structure of consciousness and that other configurations of self and world are necessarily a falsification of consciousness. A plausible view of the matter, I maintain, is that (female and male) consciousness is a matrix of gender, class, racial and/or ethnic, spiritual, and material interests. Frequently these interests overlap and borrow the vocabulary of other perspectives for their expression.

⁹ Letter to Elizabeth Allen, February 12, ?. James Matlack points out that Elizabeth Stoddard's New York friends were keenly aware of her censorious personality, even going so far as to dub her "the Pythoness" because of her "aggressive manner when aroused in conversation" (448).

[for] 1000 a year – a little more than rent, but we were mighty thankful to get that even.”

Conjuring up a scenario of creative servitude in which the poet and editor (Richard Stoddard’s primary capacities as a writer) toils with his pen for a meager subsistence, Elizabeth states that her husband “has worked like a plantation slave this year.” Indeed, the preoccupation with social and cultural inequality that runs through Stoddard’s work in the translated form of gender inequality appears directly in her personal correspondence as the recognition that she and her husband are vassals in the Anglophilic world of New York’s publishing circles and authors’ clubs. At midlife, the couple led a pinched and bitter existence characterized by a sense of missed destiny, of prosperity and literary fame that had cruelly slipped through their grasping hands. In 1879, Elizabeth wrote to Julia Dorr that Richard “is discouraged, ... has lost almost the power and wish to struggle, at fifty-four a failure – he says.” In that same letter, Elizabeth mentions her own chagrin at being overlooked during an honorary dinner for writers. “The Papyrus dinner was a success, a novel pleasure to me, all the lady writers present except EDBS were complimented in the toast given to our guests. You may imagine how gratifying it was to me to be ignored and before women who were not my superiors.”

Events like the Papyrus dinner were symbolic of the ritualism and exclusivity of genteel letters. They were congratulatory gatherings that confirmed the sacrosanct quality of literature and its practitioners, even as they depended on the acknowledgement of a profane public. In the words of Alan Trachtenberg, the “culture of the Gilded Age... contained a particular idea of culture as a privileged domain of refinement, aesthetic sensibility, and higher learning,” and the authors’ clubs, the dinners, the soirées of which the Stoddards were a part, functioned as a

---

11 Elizabeth Allen Collection, Colby College.
12 In a subsequent letter to Julia Dorr, written in 1880, Elizabeth mentions another dinner at which she felt slighted. “I find myself among the successful and satisfied and utterly forgotten. I was at a dinner at the Berkeley the other night. Helen Hunt, Noah Brooks, Dudley Warner &c were there – something was said that made something in my Lolly Dinks book pat and more witty than ever – I believe no one there thought of me – and of course I was mum....” (Lolly Dinks’ Doings is Stoddard’s children’s book that was published in 1874.)
performative dimension of that idea. The often negligible role that the Stoddards played in this performance of high culture, however, positioned the couple on the edges of the "privileged domain," causing them to experience its elitism from the perspectives of the initiate and the disappointed outsider at once. The sense of self-importance and professionalism that motivated the writers with whom the Stoddards usually associated (writers including Edmund Clarence Stedman, Bayard Taylor, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, George Henry Boker, and Richard Watson Gilder) alternately enthused and depressed Elizabeth and her husband. Eventually, Elizabeth grew to feel inadequate even around her longtime friends, the Dorrs. "Just after Christmas the Dorrs from Rutland are to visit us," she confided to Elizabeth Allen, "and much as I like them I would give much if they were not coming. I am in no humor or condition to entertain prosperous and distinguished people — I could bear friends of my own ilk better."

Stoddard (then Elizabeth Barstow) first began to appear on New York's cultural scene in 1852, when during her fall visit she attended the literary soirées of Anne Lynch. It was at one of these gatherings that she met her future husband, the young poet who would inspire her to uproot herself from the small port town of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. She also met Bayard Taylor, with whom she would develop an on-again, off-again friendship in the years to come. After her marriage Stoddard became a familiar presence on the reception circuit, earning modest recognition for her quick tongue and sardonic sense of humor. She and her husband were always comparatively minor figures at the soirées they attended, but these gatherings gave them the opportunity to experience firsthand the intellectual vitality of the city and to form friendships crucial for their identity as writers. At one of her first soirées as Mrs. Stoddard, Elizabeth met


14 An interesting aside to this conflicted pattern of being both in and out of the sacred circle of New York writers involves Elizabeth's brother, Wilson Barstow. In 1866 Barstow found himself about to be elected into the Century Club, an exclusive, all-male organization for writers and artists. Membership, however, required an initial one hundred dollar fee, and Barstow was unable to pay that amount. In a roundabout
Ada Clare, the headstrong South Carolinian who had transplanted herself to New York to reign as the “Queen” of Bohemia. She also met Mary Bradley, the poet and children’s story writer who would become a close confidante (Matlack 107). Over the years, the Stoddards frequented a number of soirées, including those of the publisher George Putnam and the author and editor Caroline Kirkland. They also attended the evening gatherings of Alice and Phoebe Cary, the two sisters from the Midwest who most closely rivaled Anne Lynch in the eclecticism and prestige of their meetings.\textsuperscript{15} With the help of Horace Greeley and Rufus Griswold, the two women launched a series of get-togethers in which the spirit of reform and, specifically, of feminism prevailed. Their soirées attracted a regular following that included not only the Stoddards, but P. T. Barnum, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Robert Bonner, and George Ripley (Matlack 110).

Anne Lynch’s parlor, however, remained the city’s preeminent site for evening debates and recitations. Writing in 1855, Elizabeth Stoddard informed her \textit{Daily Alta} readers of Lynch’s success as a culture broker.

\begin{verbatim}
The friends of Miss Lynch admire and love her, for her kindness toward embarrassed people, whose bread-winners are in their brain rather than in their hands, and who need the benevolence of notice, praise and sympathy. As a writer, Miss Lynch has no name; her success is her position in society. I have never guessed out the mystery, and do not know whether it is genius, tact or common sense that enabled Miss Lynch to draw around her all manner of big and little stars.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{15} The literary activities of the Cary sisters, of course, went beyond their duties as hostesses to New York’s intelligentsia. Both Phoebe and Alice wrote poetry, while the latter also generated an income from children’s stories and serialized novels. Alice gained particular recognition with the 1852 publication of \textit{Clovernook}, a collection of stories that realistically portray life in the American Midwest.
E. D. B. then continues: “her evenings have lost much of their original brilliancy, [however;]
other receptions have risen, and she divides honors with Putnam, Dr. Griswold, Mrs. Kirkland
and others” (January 8, 1855). After her marriage to the Italian philosopher, Vincenzo Botta, and
her move to larger quarters on Twenty-Fifth Street, though, Lynch entered into a new period of
unremitting social orchestration. Soon her soirées began to draw such luminaries as Henry Ward
Beecher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, Helen Hunt, Susan Warner, and Edwin
Booth (Matlack 111).

The Stoddards’ role in all of these settings was one of humble visibility and envy, a conflicted
mix of hope and self-doubt that reinforced their sense of marginality and inspired their desperate
reverence for the exclusionary rituals of genteel culture. For Elizabeth, in particular, the
intellectually discriminating milieu of the soirées fostered a sometimes reluctant respect for the
hierarchical practices of New York’s literati, and a lasting desire to be recognized – not by the
masses – but by her idols and peers. Toward the end of her life, she wrote in a characteristically
bitter vein, “What then is the secret of my being denied my rights – I do not mean popular
acceptance – but that of readers, writers, thinkers? …It has been a pain to me, that I have not
gained the respect of the intellects, whose intellects I respect – common praise I do not care a
copper for… I want that which gives me faith in myself” (Matlack 549).

The fixation on cultural inequality (the respect of intellects versus common praise), social
distinction, and the nuances of acceptance or rejection in a world of codified behavior occupied
the Stoddards for most of their married lives. We might say that their near obsession with literary
fame was the one constant in a world of uncertainty, a world marked by sporadic productivity,
financial vicissitudes, and a nomadic pattern of migration from one boarding house to another.
For Elizabeth Stoddard, this energizing and discouraging interest in the gradations of cultural and
socioeconomic difference – an interest that, as I have indicated, can be traced in her professional
writing, her personal correspondence, and ultimately in the anxious climate of genteel
discrimination – has its origins in the Barstow family history.
Before the author was born, her grandfather, Gideon Barstow, Jr., and his second wife, Deborah, registered a sense of superiority and smug intolerance for relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class in their rejection of son Wilson's choice for a wife. Betsy Drew was a well-dressed Presbyterian (details that would have mattered to Deborah especially), but she was nonetheless a "poor tailoress," to use the phrase employed by Elizabeth in later years. The Barstows, by contrast, were an established family of shipbuilders who had resided in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts for two generations of lucrative industry. By virtue of money, prominence, and overall contributions to the community, a Barstow, in the eyes of Deborah and Gideon, Jr., should be matched with a woman of comparative privilege and refinement, and not with a common "tailoress." Despite all resistance, however, Wilson Barstow and Betsy Drew were married on April 12, 1820 and (as their daughter later described it in her story, "Uncle Zeb") "took to housekeeping with one feather-bed, six small silver spoons, and a hearty affection for each other" (qtd. in Matlack 11a).

The unruffled demeanor of superiority that Wilson's father and stepmother must have had in rejecting Betsy should not deceive us, however, into believing that the Barstow prosperity was secure or uninterrupted. As a rule, the shipbuilding business was a risky affair, known for its sudden losses and its vulnerability to economic ups and downs. Shipyards in Mattapoisett and New England generally changed hands with confusing rapidity, destroying and creating the hopes of many East coast families.\footnote{See Chapter One of Matlack's dissertation for an overview of shipbuilding and whaling in the Mattapoisett area. I am indebted to this chapter for the details of Elizabeth Stoddard's family history.} The first generations of shipbuilders in Elizabeth's family - stretching from Gideon, Jr. back to William Barstow of Hanover, one of the earliest shipbuilders in the Massachusetts Bay Colony - were exceptional in the stability of their endeavors. Gideon, Sr. had had the prescience to discern that Buzzards Bay would be a more suitable site for shipbuilding than the North River, and had thus established Mattapoisett's first shipyard in 1760, changing irrevocably the physical and economic landscape of that community. Many of the
shipyards that appeared following Gideon Barstow's first enterprise suffered during the Revolutionary War. Only the Barstow shipyard was actually strengthened by the conflict, leading to a brief time in which Gideon and his sons monopolized local business. By the time the eldest son and his wife, Deborah, snubbed Betsy Drew for her modest origins, the Barstows had a strong sense of their standing in life.

This standing would too quickly change, for with Wilson's tenure as head of the Barstow shipyard came a series of reversals and recoveries that made Elizabeth's youth a period of precarious comfort, with inherited wealth and prestige slipping grimly toward insolvency. The halting descent toward bankruptcy was partly a result of the whaling industry's decline and largely a result of Wilson Barstow's mismanagement. The shipyard went bankrupt at least three times despite peaks of amazing productivity. The first bankruptcy came unexpectedly in 1843 after Elizabeth's father failed to juggle successfully the employees, the supplies, and the market forces so essential to the firm. With several extant debts to people in the community, the Barstows' collapse was more than a scandalous spectacle; it was a source of genuine distress. The shipyard's second failure came in 1852, in spite of the fact that Wilson built five whaling vessels for New Bedford in that year alone. One explanation for the failure may be the stagnant state of the local economy in 1849, when all of the yards in Mattapoisett were out of operation. It is possible that Wilson was laboring under the burden of debts from 1849 when the firm crashed in 1852. The third bankruptcy came in 1856, carrying losses that were exacerbated by the Panic of 1857 and, a few years later, by the Civil War.

Because of the volatility of the family business, Elizabeth experienced early in life the pleasures of social distinction, as well as its capacity to slip through unlucky fingers. Even before her move to New York and the first of her protracted bouts of frustration as a writer, she observed up close the legerdemain that conceals the proximity of success and powerlessness, the uneasy genius that sees poverty in wealth and anonymity in renown, and that works to maintain the appearance of their separation. Before the first collapse in 1843, Wilson Barstow concealed even
from his closest family members the financial straits into which the shipyard was falling, functioning, as Matlack puts it, "with an outward display of affluence" while "he operated... on the brink of insolvency..." (19). After the 1843 bankruptcy, when the whole family learned of the firm's troubles and the entire community watched as its investments tottered, Elizabeth (along with all the other Barstows) was drawn into the charade of prosperity. As Matlack explains, many people in Mattapoisett resented the fact that the Barstows "conducted themselves like prosperous gentry in the face of Wilson's debts" (20). In particular, they resented that Elizabeth was sent away to private school. The perception was that the Barstows were living a life of privilege at their neighbors' expense (21). Why the family adhered to its observable habits of wealth and leisure can probably be understood in terms of the common resistance to change (especially change for the worse) that unites us all. The Barstows' behavior, if reprehensible, was not incomprehensible.

The ups and downs of the family business and the false demonstrations of affluent stability help to show how early Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard grasped the intoxicating, punishing configurations of social difference, and how her later experiences of refined marginality in New York's literary world were foregrounded in the youthful recognition that impotence can exist within apparent puissance, sometimes even serving to define that power. The peculiar "prosperous gentility" that Elizabeth exercised in Mattapoisett after the 1843 bankruptcy was defined by its vacuousness, somewhat as the intellectual gentility of her evenings in New York salons would be defined by the knowledge that common, near-empty rooms in a boardinghouse awaited her at the night's end. For most of her adult life, she knew the power to produce — whether the product was ships or stories or children — to be defined by profound disablement.

17 In actuality, the future author and her family were neither as carefree nor unattuned to the concerns of others as some in Mattapoissett thought — a truth that is evidenced by Elizabeth's description of the initial bankruptcy, years later, in her largely autobiographical novel, The Morsesons. In that book, the shipyard's first collapse fascinates the reader both for the concealed circumstances that lead up to it and for its ramifications in the small, New England town.
The last Barstow ship was launched in 1878; her work was practically unknown by the time of
her death in 1902; and only one of her three children survived to adulthood.

The history of Elizabeth Stoddard’s early acquaintance with the financial and social
uncertainties of the shipbuilding business is presented incisively, if with stylistic reserve, in her
novel, The Morgesons. Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell observe that much of Stoddard’s
most effective writing “was on the subject of herself,” and that the “special power” of The
Morgesons “derives from its autobiographical basis.” Taking this observation a step further, we
might argue that the “special power” of Stoddard’s first novel inheres not so much in the retelling
of specific incidents and facts, as in the rendering of her psychological maturation within the
unstable but consistently discriminating atmosphere of periodic bankruptcy. The Morgesons is
not a novel that explores openly or extensively the inner thoughts and motives of its characters.
Its first person narration inclines more toward curious detachment than dissection. Yet the
subjective realities of the author’s own life pervade the work in its wry cynicism about human
accomplishments, its regard for the deceptive confluences of actual and apparent worth that
probably stem from Stoddard’s adolescence.

The most thorough of Stoddard’s modern commentators, James Matlack, argues that the
autobiographical dimensions of The Morgesons make it a typical first novel. “In the tradition of
first novels,” Stoddard constructs her narrative around people and places that she really knew.
The Morgesons is “Elizabeth’s own story,” Matlack writes, “an attempt to state and to understand
who she was and how she had developed” (229). This impulse to recount her personal
experiences is balanced, however, against a distaste for too much revelatory verbiage. Stoddard
“keeps her prose taut and brisk, avoiding excessive baggage, shunning… flabby adjectives and
overwrought verbs” (254). Her style throughout The Morgesons is, according to Matlack, “spare,
workmanlike, and vigorous" (254). It is through this forceful economy of language, I would add, that the truth emerges in "Elizabeth's own story." The genuinely autobiographical elements of *The Morgesons* lie in the novel's brevity. The conciseness that some critics have dismissed as mere roughness, and that other critics have praised as an adept realist's re-creation of New England terseness, goes beyond the faithful representation of dialect or its experimental extension into the narrative voice. It is the lesson, rather, of concealed hardship and recalcitrant pride. The "spare," "vigorous" quality of which Matlack writes is the pinched restraint of dignity that has hit hard times. Stoddard wrote her first novel (and many of her subsequent works) with both the strategy of omission that her father used to keep the citizens of Mattapoisett ignorant of his financial problems before the 1843 bankruptcy, and the strength of imagination that the entire Barstow family summoned after 1843 to maintain the apparent gentility that townspeople resented so much. This art of selective communication, bolstered by a stalwart imagination, was not just a legacy from the past, moreover. In the years to come, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard used this art to minimize the meagerness of her subsistence in the presence of Anne Lynch and others whom she wished to impress, and to envision a future in which she and her husband, Richard, would be greatly rewarded for their talents.

The narrator of Stoddard's first novel, a young woman named Cassandra Morgeson who was born and raised in the seaside village of Surrey, acquaints us with her family history in the second chapter. According to Cassandra, the Morgeson name can be traced back to the Puritan settlement of the Massachusetts coast. The mere perpetuity of the name, she remarks, entitles the family to some measure of respect, but it wasn't until the undertakings of her great grandfather that the Morgesons really established themselves as a powerful New England family. With Locke Morgeson's initiative as a shipbuilder emerged the promise of subsequent generations. Cassandra's description of her great grandfather, though, deals not with the details of his calling, but with the more intangible legacy of his pelagic, progressive mindset.
He was a scale of enthusiasms, ranging from the melancholy to the sarcastic. When I heard him talked of, it seemed to me that he was born under the influence of the sea, while the rest of the tribe inherited the character of the landscape.... The spirit of progress, however, which prompted his schemes benefited others. The most that could be said of him was that he had the rudiments of a Founder (9).

Cassandra then sketches the brief lineage that leads to her birth and the birth of her younger sister, Veronica. Sticking loosely to the facts of her own life, Stoddard describes through her narrator the pious, tasteful, and undeniably common origins of her mother, and the opposition that prospective husband and wife encountered from the Morgeson (or Barstow) side. Her mother's maiden name, explains Cassandra, was Mary Warren. The daughter of Barmouth's best tailor, Mary Warren had a modest claim to respectability that was reinforced by the seldom remembered fact that one of her ancestors had been knighted by Queen Elizabeth. Nonetheless, the tailor Philip Warren (who, to the added detriment of his daughter, was "the last of his name") could not impart the patriarchal solidity and distinction that Locke Morgeson had been able to give to his children. As Cassandra observes, "What the Warrens might have been was nothing to the Morgesons; they themselves had no past, and only realized the present" (9). Following the actions of their real-life prototypes, Mary Warren and Locke Morgeson, Jr. married without regard for the objections of the more prestigious family. As the novel unfolds, their two daughters, Cassandra and Veronica, parallel Elizabeth and Jane Barstow in their age difference (four years), and in their respective intellectual vigor and physical delicacy.

The trajectory of the Morgesons' maritime fortunes is presented, in Stoddard's novel, with the understating forces of narrative detachment — a stylistic constant throughout the book — and the heroine's own personal movement toward independence and sexual maturity. The events of the novel deal mainly with Cassandra's efforts to achieve a peaceful autonomy among her family members and peers, and to pursue fulfillment with the — not one, but two — men she comes to
love. The ups and downs of the Morgeson industry are, nonetheless, essential aspects of the heroine's development and punctuate the subjective plot of her emotional triumphs and frustrations with an invaluable contribution to the novel's cadence.

While Cassandra negotiates the challenges of sibling rivalry, schoolroom factionalism, and nascent sexual desires, her family moves into a large, stately house. The growing prosperity of the Morgesons, if unconnected with the specific dealings of Locke Morgeson, Jr. in his daughter's young mind, offers Cassandra key spiritual and social enrichment. With the family's move, she is introduced to a natural world of rugged beauty. The new house, which is set between an orchard and the ocean, inspires her to attentive awe with its vistas. "From [the north] windows, in winter," she comments, "we saw the nimbus of the Northern Light. The darkness of our sky, the stillness of the night, mysteriously reflected the perpetual condition of its own solitary world" (21).

Simultaneous with this new reverence for the sky and sea and earth is Cassandra's entrance into an even finer grade of society than she had known. The Morgeson family expands its retinue of household servants and embarks on the endless rituals of entertaining Locke's business acquaintances. Or, to be more precise, the women in the Morgeson family entertain while the patriarchal entrepreneur continues with his work. "Though father had no time to devote to guests, he was continually inviting people for us to entertain and his invitations were taken as a matter of course, and finally for granted" (22). The Morgesons' increasing wealth also enables Cassandra to attend Miss Black's school for girls, an unforgettable episode that shapes the narrator's opinion of herself.

The wise managerial choices of Locke Morgeson, Jr., in other words, are more than minor incidents in his daughter's life. As are his miscalculations. Further in the novel, when Mr. Morgeson alludes to the uncertainty of his income, Cassandra presses him on the matter. "Do you mean to say that your income does not amount to so much?" she asks. Her father answers vaguely. "My outgoes and incomes have for a long time been involved with each other. I do not
separate them. I have never lived extravagantly. My luxury has been in doing too much” (221).

The anxiety that this conversation elicits in the narrator suggests the uneasiness that Stoddard herself may have felt before her father’s first financial collapse, an uneasiness that “roll[ed] off seaward” like the summer clouds because of its insubstantiality. Only later, when the shipbuilder’s bankruptcy is announced, is the unwieldy entanglement of “outgoes and incomes” revealed for what it is.

It was true. Locke Morgeson had been insolvent for five years.

All this time he had thrown ballast out from every side in the shape of various ventures, which he trusted would lighten the ship, that, nevertheless, drove on to ruin. Then he steered blindly, straining his credit to the utmost; and then – the crash. His losses were so extended and gradual that the public were not aware of his till he announced it (231).

The “general exasperation” that the townspeople now feel against the Morgesons, not to mention the contraction of their once expansive hold on the community, constitutes a very real dive in the narrator’s psyche. Suddenly without the distractions of money and popularity, Cassandra finds time to look around her. What she sees is unpromising. “I... discovered that I had lost my atmosphere. My life was coarse, hard, colorless! I lived in an insignificant country village; I was poor” (232).

This recognition that life can be coarse and colorless where it was once refined and brilliant illustrates just one of the ways the narrator develops through the events of the novel. Cassandra progresses from unthinking acceptance of her family’s good fortune to the understanding that wealth and status are inconstant pleasures that cannot be relied on to define a person’s being. Her growth in this respect, moreover, is not simply a descent into pessimism. Immediately after her realization that she is a poor inhabitant of an “insignificant country village,” Cassandra concludes that if she can make it through that particular day without insomnia, mutilation, or some other
form of disaster, she will be “content” (232). Still a young woman, the narrator has achieved what many people don’t achieve even in their old age – the ability to perceive the uneventful as a blessing.

Cassandra Morgeson is, in fact, an atypical heroine in several respects. Her direct, frequently unforgiving assessments of other people reveal her to be a character of uncommon discernment, while the often frank discord she experiences with her sister and her peers, and her love affairs with two men – one of whom is married – place her far beyond the realm of mainstream nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore Cassandra’s atypicality and the unconventionality of The Morgesons as a whole, since the narrative thrust of the novel, felt through the force of the heroine’s artful cynicism, is a journey away from familial combativeness, through the turbulence of loveless domesticity and adulterous desire, to sexual and emotional fulfillment with a man who accepts the previous erotic experiences of his wife.

When the novel begins, Cassandra is a child whom relatives regard as eccentric and unruly. “That child... is possessed,” says Cassandra’s aunt at the very opening of the book, announcing the theme not merely of demonic (or, at best, morally dubious) behavior, but of control by forces greater than oneself – illicit passion, the melancholy influence of the sea, inherited alcoholism. Only ten years old, Cassandra exhibits a precociousness that is quickly displayed in her love of books (the narrator is climbing a chest of drawers to reach the bookshelves above it when Aunt Mercy pronounces her “possessed”), and that gradually weaves a seamless fabric of mischievously astute observations. An unenthusiastic pupil at the village school, she nonetheless displays a bibliophilia that chafes under the direction of the teacher and the conformity of the “good scholars,” at whom she makes faces. When the local minister arrives at the school in Chapter Three, Cassandra rehearses her lessons “with dignified inaccuracy” and is “commended,” a detail that illustrates her early appreciation of false success and her disdain for received knowledge. By the end of the chapter, Cassandra is withdrawn from “Mrs. Desire’s school” by
her mother, who requires her older daughter’s help at home since the servants are too few, and the younger sister is an invalid.

The tension established in these early chapters between the rote demands of orthodoxy – whether childish subordination (as opposed to “possessed” behavior), schoolhouse protocol, or submissive domesticity – and the desire to be irreverently, watchfully nonconforming is summed up in Cassandra’s remark that “among the Powers That Be, which rule New England, lurks the Deity of the Illicit” (23). A remark prompted by the Morgeseon’s move into a large, handsome house and their admittance into the society of those “Powers,” the narrator seems to regard her family’s stubborn adherence to the licit and the mundane (“an eternal smell of cookery, a perpetual changing of beds, and the small talk of vacant minds”) as further incentive for her to act out the spirit of impropriety that already grips her (23). How can the Morgeseons belong to “the Powers That Be,” seems to be the narrator’s logic, unless someone in the family acknowledges and pays homage to the lurking presence of the illicit? Not surprisingly, then, the conflict between orthodoxy and the passionate defiance described as “possession” grows as the novel progresses, manifesting itself in Cassandra’s unhappy stint at a second, more genteel school, her amorous involvement with her distant cousin, her brief competition with her sister for another lover, and her eventual union with a man whose temperament is “violent, tyrannical [and] sensual” even after he stops drinking (226). Education, marriage, and familial cooperation are sacred clusters of conformity into which the narrator elbows her way, disruptively, time and time again.

A consequence of the Morgeseon’s social and financial ascent is Cassandra’s move to Barmouth and her enrollment in a snobby school for girls. Run by a Miss Black, the instructor “had a conviction that her vocation was teaching” even though her connection with “one of the richest families in Barmouth” relieved her of the necessity to work. The “Powers That Be” in Miss Black’s school are the privileged daughters and granddaughters of successful capitalists, adolescents with a fine sense of social distinction and the protocol of factionalism. When
Cassandra enters the school, not through any decision of her own, she quickly becomes the powerless outsider, the uninitiated newcomer whose tie to prominent shipbuilders counts for nothing.

When I entered the school it was divided into clans, each with its spites, jealousies, and emulations. Its esprit de corps, however, was developed by my arrival; the girls united against me, and though I perceived, when I compared myself with them, that they were partly right in their opinions, their ridicule stupefied and crushed me. They were trained, intelligent, and adroit; I uncouth, ignorant, and without tact (35).

The rigid and exclusionary atmosphere that gives Miss Black’s school the feeling of establishment initially confuses the narrator, sapping her usual brash disregard for the opinions of others. Cassandra suddenly sees herself as lacking the qualities of refinement and knowledge that the other pupils share, so that the boldness with which she made faces at the scholars in Mrs. Desire’s class is replaced by an inhibited impression of her own inadequacy. The narrator, at this early stage of her tutelage under Miss Black, is impotent before the discriminating force of upper-class femininity and the normative tactics by which it announces itself as the guardian of genteel convention.

Before long, however, Cassandra’s fiery independence surfaces. Her mortification and her attempts to win the approval of her tormentors by wearing French kid slippers and pink calico transmutes into open disgust, even violence. The turning point is when Charlotte Alden, a particularly nasty and pretentious student, alludes to what is apparently some hitherto unmentioned blemish in Mrs. Morgeson’s past. “I am angry... and have borne enough,” asserts the narrator one day after Charlotte and another girl have been teasing her. “Who are you that you should be angry?” Charlotte responds. “We have heard about your mother when she was in love, poor thing” (40). Neither Cassandra nor the reader knows, at this point, what Charlotte is
alluding to, but the suggestion seems to be that Mrs. Morgeson has a shameful history, a past in which some form of illegitimacy lurks. The remark triggers an immediate, forceful reaction from Cassandra. Without hesitation, the narrator strikes Charlotte in the face so violently that the blow sends her staggering. Then Cassandra throws her textbook at Charlotte's friend, breaking the girl's comb with her "geological systems" (41).

Charlotte’s allusion to Mrs. Morgeson’s history, with its suggestion of scandal, certainly seems to usher "the Deity of the Illicit" into Miss Black's den of effeminate “Powers.” The reference, at least, inspires a spirited defiance in the narrator that is, in fact, an eruption of her characteristic irreverence, an awakening of the “possessed” self that had been sedated by correctness and fear. Cassandra, not surprisingly, receives all the blame after this incident, being told by her teacher that her “temper equals [her] vulgarity” (41). The already unpleasant lack of empathy between student and teacher is now an undeniable rift, and all because of a passing flirtation many years before. We learn later in the novel that the shameful incident to which Charlotte Alden alludes is nothing more than the fact that Charlotte’s uncle had “paid his addresses” to Cassandra’s mother, that there “might have been an engagement,” and that “the influence of [the uncle’s] family had broken the acquaintance” (137). Presaging the “unequal” match of Cassandra’s parents, this short-lived courtship ended without consequence.

Needless to say, the remainder of our heroine’s stay at the Barmouth school is fraught with antagonism. The unspoken codes of exclusion and allegiance – the very underpinning for the “spites, jealousies, and emulations” that the narrator discerns on her first day at the school – operate to make Cassandra’s life miserable. In turn, “Miss C. Morgeson,” as she is called by the teacher who thinks “Cassandra is too peculiar,” behaves with intensifying resentment and acerbic eccentricity. Finally, the hostilities that began as rituals of initiation culminate in the narrator’s injury at the hands of Charlotte Alden, and with her return to Surrey. Cassandra makes the unfortunate decision to seesaw with her adversary, and is unceremoniously dumped eight feet to
the ground where she strikes her head on a stone and passes out. “Thus my education at Miss Black’s was finished with a blow,” she states (49).

Neither this humiliating conclusion to her Barmouth finishing nor her return to the quiet provincialism of life in Surrey strips Cassandra of her spirited resistance to social norms. She is neither humbled by communal meanness of spirit nor subdued by boredom, but maintains the incisiveness and “candor” that her acquaintances see as “sarcasm,” “cunning” and “coarseness” (59). Resuming the unexceptional round of domestic habits and village connections that make up her life in Surrey, the narrator (very much like Elizabeth Stoddard herself) is “generally thought proud, exacting, ill-natured, and apt to expect the best of everything” by a community that regards her as an aberration (58-9). Only when she meets her distant cousin, Charles, does Cassandra encounter someone as proud and recalcitrant as herself.

Charles Morgeson arrives from Rosville with the explanation that he had seen Locke Morgeson’s name “in a State Committee List,” and had felt curious enough about the shared surname to do some quick genealogical research. After discovering a common ancestor, he made the trip from Rosville to introduce himself to the Morgesons of Surrey. A wealthy entrepreneur with many commitments (he is the owner of a highly profitable cotton factory), Charles stays in Locke’s household only a short time. But the visit is long enough for Cassandra and Veronica both to discern their cousin as a moody, reserved, and judging man.

After the first night of his visit, Charles is so “taciturn” that he does not speak to the narrator, “except in a casual way, more than once” (62). And when he does speak “casually,” his remarks are veiled criticisms that point out Cassandra’s limitations. Upon being asked whether the sea has any “influence” on her, the narrator replies to Charles that she “had not thought of it.” Cousin Charles, in turn, responds with the ungracious assessment: “There are so many things you have not thought of... that this is not strange” (62). Cassandra accepts the man’s brusqueness, however, with an ease that derives from empathy; her own frequently misunderstood “candor” links her temperamentally to this imperious stranger with the same last name, the same initials.
Another “C. Morgeson” who can be identified as “peculiar,” Charles makes an impression on Cassandra that is simultaneously disturbing and reassuring.

It is understandable, then, that when Charles concludes his visit with the suggestion that Cassandra move to Rosville and attend the academy there, the narrator reacts with both charmed compliance and attentive fright. In keeping with her style of understatement, Stoddard does not tell us explicitly what the narrator’s feelings are when this invitation is pronounced. Instead, our attention is directed — with Cassandra’s — to the sea which she had not “thought of” earlier. We are told that the water is “murmuring softly, creeping along the shore, licking the rocks and sand as if recognizing a master.” The ocean mimics the narrator’s awed gratitude, which is an outgrowth of affinity. But at the same time, the ocean also conveys a sense of power and potential destruction, which is an extension of the cousin’s cold, inscrutable pride. From this perspective, Cassandra perceives the “steady, resistless heaving” of the sea as something “insidious and terrible” (63).

After discussing the invitation with her parents, Cassandra travels the one hundred and forty miles to Rosville by stagecoach and train. Accompanied as far as Boston by her mother, her sister, and their servant, Temperance, Cassandra must make the remainder of the trip in the company of Mrs. Morgeson alone. The two women reach Charles’s hometown on the second evening and find their host waiting for them at the train station. Charles drives mother and daughter through the town in his carriage, pointing out the “pretty houses,” the “flower gardens,” and the academy Cassandra will attend. Then he takes them to his “modern cottage” with its “piazza and peaked roof,” and introduces them to his wife, Alice, an elegant, friendly woman who is the mother of their three children. This is where Cassandra will live during her “finishing” at Rosville Academy.

The narrator learns two things very soon after her move to this new town. One is that Rosville is a “secular” community, a place where the urbane tolerance of “rich and fashionable” Unitarians creates a congratulatory atmosphere quite different from the Puritanical milieu of
Surrey. The emphasis in this town, and even in the academy, is on the ever shifting network of rivalries and friendships and infatuations, on the “summer riding parties” and the “winter county balls” that serve as occasions for romance and intrigue. “Surrey and Barmouth would have howled over the Total Depravity of Rosville,” Cassandra claims. “There was no probationary air about it. Human Nature was the infallible theme there” (73). Even the lucubratory, almost penitential niceties of Greek and Latin take second place in the academic circles, behind the debate over who has “superior success... in flirtation” – “collegians” or “natives.”

The other thing Cassandra learns is that there is “little love between [Charles] and Alice” (74). Husband and wife live out daily routines that harmonize into domestic comfort and predictability, but their marriage is more like a business partnership than the companionate, personally fulfilling union that is most nineteenth-century fiction’s matrimonial ideal. Charles is not in love with Alice, but he is considered a lucky man because he has a “handsome, kind-hearted, intelligent, and popular” wife who gladly assumes the responsibilities of motherhood and housekeeping (75). She, in turn, is granted security, wealth, and the satisfactions of parenthood. Her romantic expectations have been replaced by the desire for stability and social respect, so that even if her marriage is loveless, her needs are not unmet. Soon into Cassandra’s stay at this other Morgeson household, she determines that Alice is “not unhappy,” that her “ideas of love ended with marriage,” and that “what came afterward – children, housekeeping, and the claims of society – sufficed her needs” (74). The narrator walks into a home, in other words, that is operatively, materially contented and, therefore, more superficially congenial than the Morgeson home in Surrey. But the place is devoid of passion – or rather, it is a hotbed for incipient passion in the sterility of its politeness and cooperation. The Deity – not just of the Illicit – but of the Mysterious and the Irresistible lurks beneath an impeccable surface.

Consecrated against the “Total Depravity of Rosville” and its abandonment to “Human Nature,” we soon discover, is a “feeling” with a divine life of its own, a godhead of emotion that, to Puritanical eyes, might look like a private sacralization of public immorality, but that to the
narrator is an awe-inspiring chance for love and self-exploration. The bond begins as an inexplicable connection with a life of its own, an affinity that is not initially recognized by the narrator as nascent romance – partly because of Charles’s “imperious, fastidious, and sarcastic” attitude. “An intangible, silent, magnetic feeling existed between us,” Cassandra observes of her relationship with her cousin, “changing and developing according to its own mysterious law, remaining intact in spite of the contests between us of resistance and defiance” (74). As the reader expects, however, the feeling soon acquires the tangibility of a powerful, if unconsummated, sexual attraction, and the voice of undeclared passion that hints at its own existence and then burrows into internal, narrative speculation. The growing love between Charles and Cassandra, illicit in its inception and adulterous in its inclinations, tunnels an underground, textual labyrinth of desires, imagined freedoms, and inaction that becomes the novel’s main interest.

In a symbolic displacement of the beauty and the skittish physicality of this passion, Stoddard uses Charles’s fascination with spirited, sometimes even unbroken horses as a representation of his preference for untamed pleasure over the subdued satisfactions of propriety. His habit of acquiring high-strung mares – a habit that his wife will never understand – in essence points to his willingness to place unlawful passion before the prohibitions of a conventionally enviable marriage. It is fitting, therefore, that Cassandra is frightened neither of Charles’s horses nor of his driving, despite the trepidation of her schoolmate, Helen, and the anxiety of Alice. As we already know from her moody, frequently defiant behavior at home, and from her deliberate appropriation of the label, “peculiar,” at Miss Black’s school, the narrator is not intimidated by forays into eccentricity or emotion unbounded by social laws. Like her cousin, she is willing to put unpredictable, personal fulfillment before the staid rewards of conformity. Following the metaphorical logic at work here, then, it only makes sense that the tie between Charles and Cassandra, a tie based on illicit emotion and a disruptive emphasis on private desire, should find
its culmination, not in a sexual relationship, but in a sudden, dramatic incident that occurs when
the pair is out riding.

After traveling to Pennsylvania on business, Charles returns to Rosville with a horse that is
almost wild, "a reglar brute," as one of the hired hands calls him. Charles invites his cousin out
to the barn to admire the animal, but the narrator experiences only revulsion and fear – emotions
she has never before felt about one of the untamed horses – when she sees the creature. The
horse is "a fine creature, black, and thick-maned," but the look in its eyes and the manner in
which it breathes disturb the narrator with intimations of madness and evil. "...the whites of his
eyes were not clear," Cassandra notices; "they were streaked with red, and he attempted
continually to turn his nostrils inside out" (103). In short, the narrator thinks her cousin's latest
acquisition "diabolical," an adjective that echoes the novel's theme of possession and alters its
suggestion of individualistic fervor with maniacal connotations. The addition of this dangerous,
black beauty to Charles's collection of horses, in other words, brings to life the ambiguity of
possession by a consuming, private love. The beauty of the passion, its sleek contours of
empowerment and freedom, is marred by its demonic potential for destruction. Personal joy
glistens with anarchic force, but only so that it can buck its way into permanent, public loss.

Two chapters later, the cousins harness the horse to a chaise and ride into Fairtown, a place
where Charles has business to conduct. At first, the horse, christened Aspen, appears cooperative
– if less than submissive – in his part of the venture. The animal "trot[s] along as if under
protest," but "without any indication of mischief" (120). A storm is gathering, however, and the
changing atmosphere makes Aspen increasingly uneasy. By the time Charles finishes his
business in Fairtown and is ready to return home, the horse has reverted to "his old trick of trying
to turn his nostrils inside out" and is resisting attempts to re-harness him to the chaise. Cassandra
expresses alarm at Aspen's restlessness, but agrees to ride back to Rosville with Charles
nonetheless. When they are within just a short distance of the "secular" town, a heavy rain begins
to fall and the couple stops to raise the top of the carriage. The chaise-top frightens the horse,
whose eyes are glazed and whose mouth is foaming in the throes of some apparent "disorder."

Aspen then runs off in a frenzy, pulling along the chaise and its passengers as he leaps a ditch and tries to climb a stone wall. The fall from the carriage only injures the narrator, but it kills the man whose fondness for untamed horses stripped him of reasonable caution.

This abrupt and violent turn of events occurs at a significant point in the novel. In the chapter preceding this accident, Cassandra and Charles have a characteristically evasive, yet simultaneously revealing encounter that moves them decisively toward adultery. The heroine is walking in the garden when Charles springs around a tree and embraces her. "I am glad you are here, my darling," he says in an unusually direct expression of love (118). The narrator tells him to release her, then rebukes him for paying more attention to her than to his newest born child, whose cries can be heard from Alice's window. Still, the cousins speak of their desire for one another with gestures, and with the allusive, lingering language of deferred pleasure. When Cassandra asks her suitor if love is a "matter of temperament," he replies that, on the contrary, love "is life – it is heaven – it is hell" (118).

The once "intangible, silent" bond between the two Morgesons becomes the palpable, audible connection of an embrace and of aroused repartee. And because it is followed so quickly by Cassandra's enthusiasm to take Aspen riding, it is difficult not to see Charles's literal death as a petit mort transcribed into melodrama, a wild – indeed, bestial – consummation of the sexual attraction that has been growing between the cousins. Symbolically, the incident that prevents the fulfillment of desire on an immediate, narrative level can be read as a violent enactment of that very pleasure, even, perhaps, as a rape. Cassandra's face is permanently scarred by the accident, a detail that corroborates her victimization in this scenario. As Sandra Zagarell points out, though, Cassandra is not like her fictional counterparts in other novels, "feminine victims of overpowering seducers" who die as a result of their seduction ("Repossession" 50). Unlike Clarissa and Charlotte Temple, for example, Stoddard's heroine survives the onslaught of passion, and even bears her scars with a degree of pride. In fact, it is the powerful, male seducer
who suffers obliteration in this text—a twist that can be understood as a deliberate revision of sentimental gender dynamics, as they are played out textually, socially, and (looking at this other C. Morgeson as a kind of animus figure) psychologically, in the internal impulses of submission and resistance. As Zagarell notes, moreover, Charles’s death is a reminder that, in Stoddard’s view, “men and women’s battle for power is, in its extreme form, a mortal one” (50).

The point in The Morgesons at which the fatal carriage accident occurs is also significant in that it is only about halfway through the novel. Immediately after the accident, we realize that the heroine must continue on without Charles for another hundred and thirty pages or so, that she must venture again into the world with the sexual knowledge she has acquired shaping her expectations of the future, rather than having it squelched with the fictional device of a concluding, inscrutably “happy” marriage. Stoddard quickly makes it clear that her heroine’s individuality is not merely a matter of a lone person’s defiance of familial pressures, educational conformity, or even matrimonial strictures. Cassandra’s power as a unique and haunting character in American fiction also derives from her existence beyond the boundaries of love and loss, her persistence beyond the hope of happiness with the first man she has loved. She is rare and irrepressible in her determination to live on, free from guilt (to Alice she admits, “I hunger now for the kiss he never gave me”) and receptive to the possibility of another romance.

Cassandra meets Ben Somers while she is living in Rosville, while she is alternately struggling against and giving in to her desire for Charles, in fact. Ben, a senior at Harvard who was recently suspended for fighting, is closer in age to the narrator than her married admirer, and shares with her a penetrating eye for matters of the heart. His quick interest in Cassandra develops partly in response to her innate attractions, her intelligence and independence of imagination, and partly out of his curious perception of the burgeoning love between factory owner and year-long guest. The coincidence that Ben is drawn to Cassandra while her involvement with Charles is unfolding, in turn, makes her reaction to the “tall and stout” young man “with red hair, and piercing black eyes” ambivalent (88). For a time, the narrator seeks the
young man’s company, responding to her own immediate if unsteady interest, and to an instinctive need for a rival who might help her to circumvent her cousin’s potentially crushing magnetism. The chapter in which Charles embraces the narrator in the garden concludes, indeed, not with a conversation between Cassandra and Alice’s husband, but with a brief stroll with Ben. Cassandra sees Ben walking after she leaves the garden, and calls to him. Their moments, here, are fleeting and fraught with the anxiety of Cassandra’s narrow escape from adulterous temptation. But the stroll marks an important counterpoint to the disturbing future Charles’s advance seems to promise. Ben represents the prospect of an honest romance, free from the turbulence of scandal and the constraints of a previous commitment.

Given that Stoddard’s heroine is never one to follow the paths of correctness and conformity for the sake of ease alone, it is not a shock when the budding courtship between Ben and Cassandra dissolves, even after Ben’s only rival is killed. The narrator’s irascible, supercilious temperament makes a smooth courtship with a man like Ben Somers – a man who, despite his suspension from Harvard, appears to be perfectly respectable – almost impossible to imagine. Surprising, here, are the people to whom Ben and Cassandra become attached as a consequence of their own passing relationship. Before the narrator has fully recovered from the carriage accident, Ben is apparently well on his way to falling in love with Veronica, whom he met on a previous visit to Surrey. Alice tells Cassandra that when Veronica came to visit the still delirious narrator, she offered not one, but both of her hands to Ben in greeting. “And he?” asks Cassandra. Alice responds, “Took them, bowing over them, till I thought her wasn’t coming up again” (125). Later on, the narrator is enamored by Ben’s brother, Desmond, in a neat, converse arrangement of affections.

No exception to Stoddard’s stylistic rule that characters and events be portrayed with a minimum of emotional or confessional exploration, this shift of amorous feeling from one sister to another allows us only random glimpses of the jealousy, insecurity, and occasional moments of selflessness that ordinary mortals experience in such situations. The short-lived competition and
mutual doubt that arises between the two sisters can only be inferred from episodes like the following.

[Veronica] pushed her chair from the table, and stood by me quiet. Tall and slender, she stooped slightly, as if she were not strong enough to stand upright.... I counted the bows of ribbon on her dress, and would have counted the crosses, if she had not interrupted me with, “What do you think of me?”

“Do you ever blush, Verry?”

“I grow paler, you know, when I blush.”

“What do you think of me?”

“As wide-eyed as ever, and your eyebrows as black…” (131).

The halting conversation that inches toward an honest discussion then veers off into platitudes. It is clear, though, that the narrator is once again living and feeling against the grain of convention, both ideological and literary. The rivalry between the sisters, however understated, places Cassandra squarely outside the realm of true womanhood, with its privileging of altruism and nurturing over competitive desire, while it also sets her apart from the usual range of marriageable protagonists who typically fall in love with only one man and vie, not with their own sisters, but with questionable women whom they barely know.

As with the emotions between Veronica and Cassandra, we are left to infer the reason for Ben’s change of heart. The red-haired man with “piercing black eyes” never offers a direct explanation for the change. Probably, though, the younger sister’s appearance of not being “strong enough to stand upright” has a lot to do with the shift. Repeatedly, Veronica is described as delicate and sickly. She is an invalid whose comportment is decidedly childlike. This, of course, is in stark contrast to Cassandra’s demeanor, which is strong, sensual, and capable of standing alone. Quite likely, Veronica makes Ben feel more secure in the masculinity that prompts him to boast of winning the fight for which he was expelled from Harvard. Veronica is a
soft-spoken, innocent girl whom Ben can fathom and control more easily than her sister. His
reaction to Cassandra’s scars suggests this. Reading these scars (which were acquired as Charles
was undergoing his literal and “little” deaths) as emblems of the narrator’s sexual maturity, Ben’s
response indicates regretful confusion in the face of female knowledge and power.

Ben stood before me; his eyes, darting sharp rays, pierced me
through; they rested on the thread-like scars which marked
my cheek, and which were more visible from the effect of
cold.

“Tattooed still,” I said in a low voice, pointing to them
“I see” – a sorrowful look crossed his face; he took my
hand and kissed it. Veronica… met my glance toward her
with one perfectly impassive…. I think both would have
annihilated my personality if possible, for the sake of
comprehending me, for both loved me in their way (156).

The passionate, experimental disposition that initially attracted Ben to Cassandra now repels him
with its symbolic transformation into experience. Where he had once seen lively independence
he now sees the mystery of the narrator’s particular sexual initiation, an initiation from which he
will always be excluded. The egoistic pain of such ignorance, at least, will not have to be
endured in a relationship with the childlike sister.

As Ben is falling steadily, safely in love with Veronica, Cassandra’s attentions turn to Ben’s
brother, Desmond, whom the narrator does not meet until two-thirds of the way through the
novel. Evoking the Byronically “imperious” and “sarcastic” air that had both drawn the narrator
to and repelled her from her cousin, Desmond’s initial impression is haughty and dissolute.
Cassandra first meets him after she and her father have traveled to Belem, Ben’s hometown.
Father and daughter are engaged in polite conversation with Mr. Somers, a victim of gout who is
“bolstered up in bed, in a flowered dressing gown, with a bottle of colchicum and a pile of
congressional reports on a stand beside him” (163). Desmond enters the room, unaware of the family’s guests, and demands money “in a remarkably clear, ringing voice.” “Tomorrow will do,” states Mr. Somers, to which his son responds insolently, “To-day will do” (164). Once Desmond becomes aware of the narrator and her father, he amends his behavior so that it is at least nominally decorous. “Beg pardon, good morning; and he pulled off his hat with an air of grace which became him, though it was very indifferent” (164).

This first impression Desmond makes of irreverence and self-indulgence is bolstered when Cassandra perceives that the man is a carouser who can alternately assume the most manipulative charm and judging reserve, a heavy drinker who chases after heiresses with obsequious disdain. Accomplished in the conversational nuances of seduction, Ben’s brother eventually practices his craft of sensual small talk on the narrator. Evidently, her facial scars compensate in uniqueness for her lack of standing as an heiress.

Before the laughter subsided, I heard a low voice at my ear, and felt a slight touch from the tip of a finger on my cheek.

“How came those scars?”

I brushed my cheek with my handkerchief, and answered,

“I got them in battle” (173).

Desmond’s interest in these scars – an interest uncomplicated by sorrow or uneasy adulation – quickly sets him apart from his brother. An unexpected recommendation for debauchery, Desmond’s appreciation of experience and worldliness allows him to approach Cassandra receptively, with an uninhibited sense of himself. The brother’s dissolute habits form an immediate barrier between the narrator and himself, but paradoxically they also permit a connection premised on the understood integrity of knowledge. In any event, Desmond’s lifestyle is less insurmountable than Ben’s insistence on innocence.

Naturally, the gradual pairing off of brothers and sisters that culminates in Ben’s marriage with Veronica and Cassandra’s marriage with Desmond is not without complication; no
relationship in Stoddard’s novel develops without shades of distrust, illness, or remorse. From the first moments that the narrator appears responsive to Desmond, for example, Ben shows signs of discomfort that is motivated, apparently, by his brother’s history of licentiousness and his hope of protecting his future sister-in-law from disappointment. A few moments after Desmond whispers into the narrator’s ear about her scars, he withdraws from the parlor where a small group has been joking and conversing. The narrator watches as he then reenters the room quietly.

As Ben stretched himself on his sofa with an air of relief,

Desmond emerged from the dark and stood behind him,

leaning against a column, with his hands in his coat pockets
and his eyes searchingly fixed upon me. Ben, turning his head in my direction, sprang up so suddenly that I started; but Desmond’s eyes did not move till Ben confronted him; then he gave him a haughty smile, and begged him to take his repose again (173).

Ben’s excessive surprise at Desmond’s appearance suggests that the former is usually somehow guarded in his dealing with his brother. An element of suspicion, even dislike weakens the bond between these siblings, prompting Ben to discourage Cassandra from her mounting fascination with the rake. “Finish your jelly,” says Ben as he catches the narrator marveling at how champagne has transformed the “brutal-tempered, selfish, bored” Desmond into “a brilliant, jovial gentleman.” “I prefer looking at your brother,” she replies. “Leave my brother alone,” Ben responds (184). A petulant retort – “Leave my brother alone” – that leads us to believe that a lingering possessiveness has as much to do with Ben’s watchful eye as the more detached concern of a future-in-law. Quite possibly, Cassandra’s emerging interest in Desmond stirs residual feelings of attachment in the red-haired brother.

Just as Stoddard incorporates aspects of sentimental fiction in her novel and uses them for her particular purposes, so, too, does she employ elements of reform fiction – specifically, of what
David Reynolds calls dark temperance fiction— in her work. Distinguished by reproving yet oddly titillated accounts of madness and violence, dark temperance fiction portrays the deleterious effects of alcoholism and, as a rule, the ever-present hope of committed sobriety. Often it is written from the perspective of the reformed alcoholic, or from the moral vantage point of the families who have survived alcoholism’s ravages (68-73). The Morgesons falls into this pattern in the last third of the novel, where the hereditary, almost notorious alcoholism of the Somers family occupies our attention. The narrator is warned of this family “curse” even before she meets Desmond, and at the conclusion of the novel she is speaking as one who has witnessed the pain and death uncontrolled drinking can bring.

Surprisingly, the one who ultimately abandons himself to temptation is not Desmond, but Ben. Proof of the possibility of reform, Desmond goes off to Europe for two years to overcome his alcoholism before marrying Cassandra. He returns from Spain looking weak and prematurely aged, as if he has been engaged in an incessant, drawn-out struggle. Despite the loss of his youthful looks and vigor, however, the man will make a much better husband than he would have before embarking on a sober life.

Ah, Cassy! I couldn’t come till now. You see what battle
I must have had since I saw you. It took me so long to break
my cursed habits. I was afraid of myself, afraid to come; but
I have tried myself to the utmost, and hope I am worthy of you (250).

To the gratification of our sometimes automatic, readerly preferences, Desmond does prove worthy of the narrator, and the couple enjoys a stable, respectful marriage. Ben, on the other hand, slides steadily into dissipation after his marriage to Veronica. For all of his warning to Cassandra about Desmond’s habits, Ben himself proves the least able to resist the family predisposition to intemperance.

Whenever Ben went from home, and he often drove to
Milford, or to some of the towns near, he came back disordered
with drink. At the sight my hopes would sink. But they rose again, he was so genial, so loving, so calmly contented afterward. As Verry never spoke of it..., I imagined she was not troubled much (248).

The supposition that Veronica, or Verry, is not troubled is dispelled, however, when she gives birth to a deformed child, and when her husband dies in delirium tremens. Although she endures her fate with quiet resignation, the bleakness of Veronica’s life in the wake of unmitigated alcoholism is too plain for us to suppose that she is untroubled.

Neither the conventionality of this conclusion to The Morgesons, given the usual patterns of closure in dark temperance fiction, nor the narrator’s sentimentally formulaic arrival at a happy marriage diminish Cassandra’s intractable individuality as a character. Stoddard successfully imports components of popular fiction into her novel without taking away the eccentricities that mark her heroine as “possessed.” Through stereotypical events and narrative asymmetries alike, Cassandra remains a strong-minded, sometimes strangely dynamic character who elicits critical interest on the basis of her independence. For this reason, some readers find Cassandra worth examining within the critical framework of the bildungsroman, or the novel of growth and education. Such an approach plays with the elasticity of the heroine’s uniqueness. Other readers prefer to look at the chiaroscuro effect of her individuality against the backdrop of sentimentality, melodrama, and dark didacticism. In any event, most readers focus on Cassandra’s exceptionality and her desire for personal autonomy.

Stoddard’s most comprehensive critic to date takes the approach that Cassandra Morgeson is an intriguing individual who moves from immature self-indulgence to reflective, at times perverse self-restraint. Writing in 1968, James Matlack argued that Stoddard’s first novel is a bildungsroman because it presents “the education of a young person to the realities and responsibilities of adult life.” According to Matlack, Cassandra’s “domestic misfortunes” and her “two extended and difficult romantic involvements” lead to an inner freedom and maturity that
make this work a chronicle of education (229). Likewise, critics Sybil Weir and Sandra Zagarell read *The Morgesons* as a novel of growth and self-discovery. Weir refers to the book as a “feminist” rendition of personal growth, while Zagarell emphasizes how the novel “critiques the masculine shape” of traditional bildungsromane. In her article, “*The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman,*” Weir begins with the statement that bildungsromane typically depict “the coming to manhood of the male.” Matlack writes as though the “education theme” of the novel can be addressed in gender neutral language, but Weir quickly makes clear her conviction that *The Morgesons* is a deliberate revision of a usually male-centered narrative pattern. “In the nineteenth-century American novel particularly,” she writes, “it is the men who embark on voyages of self-discovery. The women, as described by both female and male novelists, stay safely on the shore, content to accept society’s definition of themselves.”

In creating a heroine who explores both her inner needs and her social potential, Stoddard adopted a form of fiction that was implicitly and almost without exception embedded in ideas of masculinity. This act of appropriation, which Sybil Weir sees as feminist because it transfers the power of self-definition to a female character, is played out in three particular journeys: the trip to Miss Black’s “genteel school;” the journey to Rosville, where Cassandra stays with her cousin, Charles; and the trip to Belem, where Cassandra meets her second lover and eventual husband. Sandra Zagarell, like Weir, argues that the novel is constructed around a series of journeys in what amounts to a departure from a male-dominated literary tradition. For Zagarell, however, the work is not “feminist” in the effective sense of creating an ultimately self-defining female character. Cassandra’s choices are always limited, Zagarell maintains, by the imposed constraints of her sex. Even if capable of journeying toward maturity and fulfillment as few women characters have done, Cassandra Morgeson is nonetheless hindered by the fact that she is female. Her education

---

lies precisely in the balance between physical, social, and economic mobility, and the realization that her sex limits how far she can go (46-47).

The “education theme” that Matlack sees as such a key element of The Morgesons he associates with Stoddard’s descriptive strengths as a novelist. In particular, Cassandra Morgeson’s development is depicted, he claims, in the language of realism and the images of regionalism, a literary feat that should ensure Stoddard’s place as an important author. The heroine’s growth, Matlack argues, is inextricable from the details of everyday life in a coastal village and the minute interests that vitalize the various households in which Cassandra resides. And it is the everyday, the minute, the idiosyncratically mundane that inspires Stoddard’s worthiest writing. With “regional realism... one of the prime virtues in The Morgesons,” the reader can’t help but admire “the vivid and detailed portrayal of Cassandra’s adolescence and struggle to maturity in Surrey’s latterday Puritan culture by the shores of Buzzards Bay...” (245, 234). Alongside this impressive regional realism, however, Matlack discerns a compromising reliance on the conventions of sentimental fiction. While Cassandra’s development is represented through regional description, the characterization and plot techniques of sentimental writing speed the narrator toward unoriginal intimacy and a formulaic marriage that disallow genuine growth. Superficially, the narrator’s romantic involvements are a necessary ingredient of her education, but their contrived treatment, Matlack claims, strains the credibility of this bildungsroman, creating almost a complete dichotomy between the novel’s regional realism and its stagnant dependence on the devices of domestic fiction (234). Obviously hostile to the body of popular writing that nineteenth-century women writers produced, Matlack sees Stoddard’s use of the “dream vision,” “the reformed drunkard,” and the eventual “happy marriage” – all typical elements of the sentimental plot – as regrettable, serious lapses in an otherwise sophisticated text.

Susan K. Harris also sees The Morgesons as a book that incorporates the imaginative tactics of the sentimentalists. Unlike Matlack, though, Harris regards Stoddard’s use of familiar devices not as mindless imitation, but as a bold and effective enlistment of recognizable patterns in the
service of iconoclasm. "Stoddard... read, reviewed, and criticized many of her contemporaries' works," Harris writes, but in creating The Morgesons the author "used their conventions to challenge the assumption that women are endowed with free will so that they can choose to submit themselves to others." Stoddard must have perceived how again and again in domestic fiction, women are compelled to subordinate their identity to the interests of others. As Harris points out, the majority of sentimental novels close with an overt message of obedience as "the heroines submit to husbands, God, and social pressures" (12). Crediting Stoddard not simply with the understanding that the message of obedience is a deceptive rhetorical design (the argument Harris advances in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels), but with the sagacity to work simultaneously within and against a lexicon of seeming submission, Harris asserts that Cassandra Morgeson is both a product and a subversion of the sentimental tradition. Despite the usual "happy marriage" at the novel's end, Stoddard's heroine never sacrifices her identity for someone or something else. Instead, Cassandra discovers that in this mad world of disintegrating families, fluctuating fortunes, and self-destructive personalities, only the woman who can cling to her selfhood despite the criticism self-possession draws will survive the pitiless universe where neither history, religion, nor family unity can impose order on the forces of destruction (21).

Far from compromising the integrity of the novel, Stoddard's use of the sentimental tradition and its apparent suspicion of female self-possession make The Morgesons a surprising triumph for both its author and its heroine.

The emphasis both in my own summary of The Morgesons, and in the interpretations that I have presented here, is on the gathering strength of the narrator as a distinct, independent

---

character negotiating the transition from adolescence to womanhood. Harris, Zagarell, Weir, and other critics writing in the past several years tend to approach Stoddard's first novel as a chronicle of self-discovery contextualized within the gender dynamics of nineteenth-century New England and the residual influence of Puritan culture. In this respect, Stoddard is amenable to the expectations of feminist readers who have been trained in a tradition of individualism. Of all Stoddard's published works, *The Morgesons* is the only one that has aroused steady interest within the parameters of what might generously be called her revival, and this is because the novel sustains critical emphasis on female unconventionality and the exploration of personal possibilities. It is important to recognize, nonetheless, that *The Morgesons* is a multivocal text in which the narrator's spirited account of unsanctioned desires and actions is only one of several stories. The voice of feisty, female independence greets us from a polyphonous composition that includes the oratory of pinched family pride, the bluster of male self-doubt, the prophesies of biological and moral determinism, and the judgments of elitism. Like Stoddard's other works, *The Morgesons* exacts attention on levels other than the ground of oppressed womanhood. Even Matlack's dissertation, which, completed in 1968, does not even begin to articulate the concerns of feminist criticism, assumes the primacy of Cassandra's personal development from dependence to mature autonomy. Insisting that the novel be read, first and foremost, as a bildungsroman, Matlack, in what now proves a demonstration of the conceptual continuity between feminist theory and earlier masculinist interpretations of American literature, privileges the narrator's individual progress toward independence over the text's other stories.

Obviously, this work is named not after the narrator alone, but after her entire family which, taken literally, must include cousin Charles's branch of the Morgesons. This fact suggests that Elizabeth Stoddard never intended her readers to isolate Cassandra from family influence, or to understand the account of her heroine's maturation apart from others' actions and interests. Detailing the growth of a marriageable, young woman, *The Morgesons* indeed presents such development as inextricable from the rising fortunes and falling fates of those around her. The
steps by which Cassandra attains apparent strength and self-assurance are framed by the desires, the insecurities, the dissatisfactions, even the deaths of family members. An unchaperoned journey in the company of strange men, for example (an unusual venture that, completed successfully, would have bolstered the independence of any unmarried woman), is quickly followed by the sudden death of Mrs. Morgeson. Always close to her mother, Cassandra discovers the woman’s body in a scene that replaces the flush of independence and vitality with the pallor of loss (204-6). The narrator’s attendance at Miss Black’s school – a difficult period that is nonetheless crucial for Cassandra’s dawning sense of “peculiarity” and resistance – is circumscribed by her simultaneous residence in the home of Aunt Mercy and “Grand’ther Warren;” her near plunge into adultery – an involvement that contributes much to her feelings of defiance and self-fulfillment – takes place within the realm of kin; and her eventual marriage to a man whose mother despises her – an antagonism that hones her already pointed self-awareness – is juxtaposed with her sister’s marital fate. The resolute “self-possession” that Susan Harris sees as Cassandra’s saving trait in a world of “disintegrating families, fluctuating fortunes, and self-destructive personalities,” in other words, is really a centripetal rather than a solitary force, a pluralistic energy that emanates from the narrator’s familial environment and concentrates itself in her dynamic subjectivity. The integrating as well as the disintegrating patterns in the Morgeson family, its changing fortunes, its nurturing, humorous, perverse, and angry personalities all contribute to Cassandra’s identity, creating a textual counterpoint in which the narrator’s voice is foremost, but by no means solo. Were the narrator’s words meant as a solo part, a kind of meditation on the virtues of self-reliance and individual survival, the novel surely would not conclude as it does. Instead of ending with some confident observation about female fortitude and freedom, the novel closes with Desmond’s pronouncement: “God is the Ruler…. Otherwise let this mad world crush us now.”

The relational nature of Cassandra’s ascent toward self-knowledge and independence is evidenced by its juxtaposition with her family’s meandering descent into bankruptcy. As I have
already shown, Cassandra progresses toward sexual and emotional self-realization as her family moves toward "a life of self-denial" that is laid out by an impoverished Locke Morgeson (231). The story of personal independence is told against the stories of family interdependence and the unthinking dependence on changeable, material circumstances. Put more broadly, the narrative of "self-possession" praised by Susan Harris and other feminist critics unfolds through a multifaceted account of the self's possession by inequality, by the self's defining position in a number of settings that emphasize money, education, and pedigree. Stoddard's novel presents a tale of female growth and exploration that can—indeed, must—also be read as a dramatization of allegiance and discrimination based on class. The journey toward sexualized autonomy consists of several excursions into social and cultural (as opposed to strictly gender) differences, demonstrating, in the end, that Cassandra's development as a character is as much a negotiation of economic and educational disparities among her biological peers, as it is an assertion of womanly strength in a man's world. The multiple voices of which Stoddard's first novel is constructed, many of which belong to Cassandra's female kin and companions, communicate how identity is differential rather than reflexive and monolithic, and how difference is as powerfully gleaned from socioeconomic reality as from gender.

The stages of Cassandra's narration on which I have focused—the heroine's attendance at Miss Black's school, her amorous involvement with Charles, and her connection with the Somers family—can all be read as tableaux vivants that portray the characters' grasp of social hierarchy. Key phases of the novel's plot, each of these tableaux represents the narrator's personal growth within a context of power and its uneven distribution. Indeed, none of these scenes I have summarized can be fully understood without the recognition that Stoddard created them as parts of a larger picture, a picture that depicts egotism in the midst of inequality and desire refracted through social difference.

From her first day at Miss Black's school, the narrator's initial experience of formal, female education is framed by an awareness of caste. As I have already pointed out, Cassandra
recognizes that the student body, which has been fractured by adolescent envy and admiration, will rally in a unifying distaste for the new pupil. Her perception that she is about to undergo the ritualistic exclusion of the newcomer, however, is magnified by her belief that the other students are partly justified in their imminent behavior by their superior refinement and accomplishments. Cassandra almost invites persecution in her belief that the other girls' upper class training – their deliberate decorum – places them beyond the necessity for decency. Initially accepting the other students as her superiors, the narrator is psychologically tortured (in confrontations evocative of Jane Eyre's trials at Lowood) until she is "filled... with a dumb, clouded anger which [makes her] appear apathetic" (35). Cassandra feels powerless and inferior even after the victory during recess, when she strikes Charlotte Alden and breaks another girl's comb with a geology textbook. Told by Miss Black that her temper equals her "vulgarity," Cassandra is given "a fresh sense of [her] demerits" by a teacher whose insensitivity and unprofessionalism lead her to collude with her well-to-do students in the ostracism of the new pupil. The "Deity of the Illicit," which had emerged as a violent epiphany of individualism and subversion, that is to say, is replaced by the "Power" of a severe tutelage. The spirit of insubordination is reined in by the discipline of discrimination.

Even before observing that the girls at Miss Black's school are divided by personal vendettas, Cassandra notes that the pupils are ranked according to the families to which they belong. Some girls, such as Charlotte Alden, Elmira Sawyer, and Hersila Allen, belong to preeminent families whose wealth was acquired by enterprising grandfathers in the shipping industry. Other girls belong to families with old (and, by implication, largely depleted) money, "Decayed Families" that are "as exclusive as they [are] shabby" (35). Still others are "parvenus" – the category to which the narrator consigns herself despite the fact that her own great-grandfather was "a Somebody" (34). Family, in effect, is the primary ground for these girls' identities. Family and, by extension, class are the defining loci of their ideas and emotions in what amounts to a fictional depiction of the "particularism" that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sees as arranging women's lives.
according to social groups, to "social rank [that is given] priority over gender."21 Whatever
experiences the students might share as girls are eclipsed by their familial differences, so that an
atmosphere of factionalism is produced in which the ostensibly neutral presence of the teacher
only reinforces disparity. In fact, the news that some of her "Barmouth schoolmates [have] the
fulcrum of a moneyed grandfather" is of more importance to the narrator, when she enters the
school, than the particular idiosyncrasies and predilections of the students. Even for Cassandra,
who does not benefit from the "particularistic" environment of Miss Black's school, lineage and
inherited wealth figure into the assessments of other people before the specific attributes that
differentiate them as unique personalities.

The reader may wonder why Cassandra accepts abuse by her schoolmates in Barmouth when,
as Stoddard states more than once, the narrator is the great-granddaughter of a shipping magnate
whose descendants are highly respected in the not-so-distant town of Surrey. Indeed, the
financial turmoil that eventually disrupts the Morgeson prosperity has yet to appear when
Cassandra joins Miss Black's school, so that as far as the narrator and her aunt are concerned,
Locke Morgeson (Cassandra's father) is still "the richest man in Surrey" (34). Despite such
wealth and position — wealth and position that are certainly comparable to Charlotte Alden's —
Stoddard's heroine does nothing to correct Aunt Mercy's introduction of her "simply as her
niece," rather than as the daughter of Surrey's most powerful businessman. While she does
wonder in a moment of facetiousness why it is only in Barmouth, and not in Surrey that her aunt
articulates such consolatory, Christian dicta as, "We are all equal in the sight of God," the query
subsides, nonetheless, into an unquestioning, almost absolute acceptance of inferiority (34-7). By
the end of her first day in the new school, Cassandra has tacitly accepted the role of the boorish
newcomer.

21 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Feminism Without Illusions (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
There are several possible explanations for the narrator's humbled status in Barmouth. One line of reasoning is the literal explanation provided at the beginning of Chapter Nine, the recognition that while great-grandfather Locke Morgeson was "a Somebody," it was not the man's "destiny to make a stir in the world" (34). The modest nature of the first Locke Morgeson's power, coupled with the diminished fortunes of the grandfather, John Morgeson, constitute sufficient reason for the narrator to perceive herself as a parvenu. So far as Barmouth is concerned, the prominence of Cassandra's family stretches back only as far as her own father's exertions. In keeping with the unostentatious demeanor of the great-grandfather, moreover, the narrator and her immediate family never learned to flaunt their resources the way that Miss Black's pupils, with "their heads dressed as if they were at a party," advertise their station with the accouterments of delicacy and taste. Cassandra leaves the classroom in which every other student is wearing curls, braids or ribbons, only to confront her reflection in the mirror and observe that her hair is "parted zigzag," her hands red, and her nails chipped (36). Until now, it has never occurred to the narrator that her appearance and comportment should communicate her father's success.

Moving beyond the literal details that Stoddard's heroine does not have "the fulcrum of a moneyled grandfather" (even if she can boast of a moneyled great-grandfather), and that her uncouthness visibly marks her as a neophyte in the world of wealth, it is conceivable that Cassandra's persecution by her Barmouth schoolmates is an enactment of what historians Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis have called "the limits of sisterhood." The vocabulary of sisterhood was a potent political discourse in Stoddard's time, a mobilizing rhetoric employed by feminists and other reformers interested in transforming the lives of American women. Elizabeth Stoddard was aware of this rhetoric, but, as I have already indicated, disparaged its assumption that women are properly united by the fact of gender alone. Targeting

---

the most vocal proponents of sisterhood, Stoddard, as the *Alta*’s “Lady Correspondent,” distanced herself from feminists as “those females professedly strong-minded, whose rights are hydra-headed and argus-eyed,” females, in truth, who are compelled to organize political conventions precisely because women, as a category, *are* inferior to men (January 11, 1857). As the author of *The Morgesons*, Stoddard creates scenarios such as Cassandra’s “finishing” at the hands of Emily Black and her protégées, scenarios that reveal the contrived quality of female solidarity. In a novel that represents the biological sisterhood of Cassandra and Veronica as fraught with antagonism and mutual incomprehension, the natural interaction between females who are brought together by chance is one of distrust, envy, and friendship built on shared pettiness. The sororal harmony that a feminist reader might hope to find in the account of Cassandra’s Barmouth education is nonexistent. Instead, the reader encounters a painful tale of division and adversity that might, on a symbolic level, account for why Cassandra fumbles her way through a year of genteel edification as Mercy’s niece, rather than as Locke’s daughter. Insofar as patriarchal position determines the rank of a particular pupil, the bonds of girlhood support or constrain her. Sisterhood in Miss Black’s classroom is merely a function of paternal status, as is the intimacy of oppression by one’s peers. The narrator of Stoddard’s novel, from this perspective, is particularly vulnerable to persecution precisely because her only passport to respectability, so far as Barmouth knows, is her connection with another woman, her aunt. In an environment where female sensibilities are determined by male prerogatives, and where the possibility of sisterhood is foreclosed by paternal differences, the tie between one female and another is not sufficient to establish personal worth.

A third reason why Stoddard subjects her heroine to the trials of the academy may be that the author is making a point demonstrated in her own life through financial vicissitudes and cultural experimentation – namely, the point that power is parochial. Parochial in the sense that its locus is often narrow and its tenure as intense as it is restrictive. In this era when we tend to envision power as impersonal control of an Orwellian magnitude or a Foucauldian sprawl, it is easy to
forget that force is most effective where it is isolated. The abusive lover who isolates his or her partner from friends, family, and coworkers knows this well. The social heft that Cassandra takes for granted in Surrey is, it turns out, ineffectual in Barmouth. Her power is local just as the prestige and intermittent notoriety of the Barstows were generally confined to Mattapoisett. The narrator’s importance is circumscribed, just as Charlotte Alden’s status depends on the constricted atmosphere of the classroom. Connecting the novel to Stoddard’s experiences of New York’s cultural scene, the author seems to be saying that the parochialism of power, moreover, is not merely a product of rural or village life. For the distance between Surrey and Barmouth is, metaphorically, the distance between Anne Lynch’s parlor, where the author projected intellectual bombast, and the boardinghouses where she and her husband staved off penury in bitter and phobic postures of introspection. The transformation that occurs between Surrey and Barmouth is the transformation that occurred between the literary soirée and the private rooms where Stoddard pondered her anonymity. Grandiloquence, she knew, was as limited – if potent – as girlish taunts.

Ultimately, we should recognize that Cassandra, in her experiences at Miss Black’s school, enters a closed world defined by family alliances, a world where, for the first time, she feels the difficult side of inequality. Cassandra’s acquaintance with Charlotte Alden, in particular, can be read as a paradigm for the novel’s preoccupation with rank. Aunt Mercy asks her niece whether Charlotte Alden has spoken to her, an inquiry prompted by Cassandra’s remark that Charlotte “wears French kid slippers every day” (37). The niece responds, “No; but she made an acquaintance by stares.” Mercy then goes on to advise Cassandra to disregard any “unpleasant” comments that Charlotte may make; “the Aldens are a high set,” the aunt explains (37). Not accepting her aunt’s implication that high station constitutes a monopoly on incivility, however, the narrator treats Charlotte with as much “unpleasantness” as the latter might herself muster. Cassandra’s rudeness becomes, in fact, an attempt to appropriate the outward signs of superiority, as does her desire to replace her “red prunella boots” with her own French kid slippers (37). The
newest pupil in Miss Black's school tries to subvert through emulation the hierarchy that fills her with "dumb, clouded anger." The humiliating fall that concludes her stint at the Barmouth school, though, is a very clear message that even a heroine "possessed" by a "Deity" of passionate anarchism cannot disrupt an inegalitarian system run by the "Powers" of pink calico. Cassandra's decision to seesaw with Charlotte Alden is symbolic of her desire to rise in Barmouth's estimation. The rising and falling motion of the seesaw conveys both a false sense of concord between the girls, and the illusion of vertical mobility that inspires the narrator to dress and act like her superiors. Both illusions are dispelled, however, when Charlotte asks the narrator if she "dare[s] to go higher," a question that plays on Cassandra's audacious ambition to become, like her playmate, a member of "a high set" (48). The narrator's affirmative response enables Charlotte to dump her partner eight feet to the ground, and thus show that only with "the fulcrum of a moneyed grandfather" can one indeed "go high" on a Barmouth seesaw.

Class and the display of status also prove an essential part of Cassandra's stay in Rosville, where the heroine makes a second attempt at genteel education. Again, her associations and the manner of her dress are signs interpreted by female eyes, ciphers that will either spell the fate of "a nobody," or signify respectability. In this case, Cassandra is able to communicate power and refinement. Unlike the situation in Barmouth, too, the most penetrating female eyes in Rosville do not belong to a schoolmate, but to a grown woman who is herself the epitome of delicacy.

Cassandra wonders whether Alice Morgeson would have accepted her into the household had the narrator been "plain" and "unnoticeable" — a speculation that leads us to assume it is, indeed, a good thing the narrator makes "an agreeable impression" (75). Alice's willingness to look after Cassandra rests, apparently, on the fact that the younger woman elicits favorable notice at the Academy and among her hostess's "set." It is even arguable that Alice looks the other way in the matter of Cassandra's attraction to Charles because — and only because — the narrator is a tasteful, well-received member of the right crowd. Alice's lack of love for her husband might not prevent her from gracefully ignoring the flirtation between the cousins, if it weren't for the acknowledged
charm and attractiveness of the younger woman. With Cassandra’s willingness to observe Rosville’s codes of gentility, however, Alice is inspired to dismiss the threat of infidelity.

In a scene that concisely captures the primacy of gentility over monogamy, Cassandra is on the verge of confessing to her hostess her attraction to Charles.

No; I meant to say - my choice of words must be poor – that it was possible I might be thinking too much of him; he is your husband, you know, though I do not think he is particularly interesting or pleasing (86).

The narrator’s claim that she does not think her cousin “particularly interesting or pleasing” is an unconvincing addendum to what is plainly an acknowledgment of illicit emotion. Alice, a perceptive, self-controlled woman, surely catches the drift of Cassandra’s words, but rather than confront the message openly, she changes the subject with decisive levity.

[Alice] laughed, as if highly amused, and said; “Well, about our dresses. You need a ball dress, so do I; for we shall have balls this winter, and if the children are well, we will go. I think, too, that you had better get a gray cloth pelisse, with a fur trimming.

We dress so much at church (86).

The change of subject, in itself, suggests Alice’s awareness and acceptance of the developing liaison, even if her reference to church and the winter balls can be construed as nods in the directions of moral scrutiny and courtship by other men. The course that the conversation takes is particularly revealing, moreover, in the parataxis it creates between transgression and fashionable propriety. Stoddard is implying, it seems, that good taste – whether sartorial or social – balances evenly against ethical misconduct, that the right dress is the best response to the conflict between love and loyalty. It is acceptable to break the rules, in other words, as long as the violation is conducted with superior refinement and self-possession.
A variation on this juxtaposition between adultery and the discriminatory symbolism of dress occurs at the end of Chapter Sixteen, when Alice, Charles, and Cassandra meet for breakfast the morning after the women's roundabout conversation. "What do you think, Charles?" Alice says without warning. "Cassandra seems worried by the influence, as she calls it, you have upon each other." Charles's reply to his wife is typically laconic: "Does she?" The sudden resumption of this delicate conversation unsettles the narrator more than it does the wife, who anticipates betrayal. Alice even announces in an almost amiable manner that her husband's "oddities" never "trouble" her, a statement that implies it isn't only Charles's penchant for unbroken horses that she overlooks. The husband, meanwhile, fixes "his strange, intense eyes" on Cassandra, thus emitting "a blinding, intelligent light" that fills her "veins with a torrent of fire" (86). The chapter concludes, soon after this, with the narrator sending a letter to her father in which she requests money for clothes. Claiming she has "nothing to wear," Cassandra is metaphorically petitioning "the richest man in Surrey" for the status to carry off her intrigue among people who consult class before conscience. Locke Morgeson's answer, which is a hasty plea for the narrator "to clothe [herself] at once," can be read, in turn, not as a concession to amorality, but as an entreaty for modesty and self-restraint (87). The urgent nature of the father's reply suggests a reversal of the priorities that prevail in "secular" Rosville.

The bold, illicit love that readers often understand as a distinguishing element of The Morgesons is, it turns out, framed by the conservative, collective rules of inegalitarianism. Passionate love, as represented in fiction, is frequently read as a celebration of personal power, a triumph of individuals over society's restrictive forces. Lovers are often kept apart by the received values of a community, only to be joined in the end through their assertion of private feelings and ideas. Critics of Stoddard's novel venture a step further, arguing that the adulterous nature of Cassandra's first romance demonstrates her individuality and nonconformity that much more. Writing about the scars that appear on Cassandra's face after the carriage accident, Sybil Weir states that they "signify [the narrator's] victory over a society which proclaimed women..."
sexual imbeciles and which would automatically condemn Cassandra for loving adulterously” ("Feminist Bildungsroman" 433). Even though Charles and Cassandra are not united in defiant love at the novel’s end, the young woman bears the scars from her liaison as an alternative statement of her personal independence. The problem with Weir’s reading, as with most other interpretations of the affair, is that it decontextualizes the romance from the collective protocol that surrounds it. The liaison is not an unequivocal violation of social codes, but is instead a particular transgression that is incorporated and, in a sense, neutralized by the stringent dictates of elitism. Cassandra’s popularity at the Rosville Academy, her acceptance into Alice’s “set,” and, most importantly, her approval by Alice herself – all epitomized in the attainment of proper clothes – precede and even make possible the narrator’s involvement with her cousin. Once the illicit love is revealed, furthermore, the attachment is allowed to develop to the extent that Cassandra abides by Rosville’s rules for gentility. The individualistic empowerment of romance and its fantasy of resistance, therefore, must be interpreted in its context of correctness and social obligation. The “victory over society” that Weir discusses is strictly an emotional interregnum in the fabric of collectivity.

To reinforce her message that romantic love, as an expression of individualism, must be read in a context of inegalitarian social dynamics, Stoddard presents another love affair that, in its minor representation, is embedded in capitalist hierarchy. This second love affair, which is briefly depicted while the narrator’s own attachment unfolds, involves one of Charles’s employees at the factory. The rumor that Charles struck one of his clerks reaches Cassandra, prompting her to ask her cousin whether he “often knock[ed] men down in [his] employ.” “When they deserve it,” Charles answers, a response that leads the narrator to observe sarcastically that such behavior is “a generous and manly sort of pastime” (81). Moments after this tense conversation, a messenger brings a note from the very employee who was hit. In it, the clerk announces his decision to quit his job and move to Boston. A “Yankee [cannot] stand a knock-down,” he explains; it is “too damned aristocratic for an employer to have that privilege” (82).
After reading this note, Charles tells Cassandra that the employee “is in love with a factory girl,” and that the man had “quarreled with one of the hands” out of jealousy. Knowing that the clerk “would have been whipped by the [other employee] and his friends,” Charles intervened by knocking the jealous lover down. Although this act embarrassed and enraged the clerk, it spared him the humiliation of being worsted by his inferior. For all the clerk’s bluster about “Yankee” independence and the impermissibility of “aristocratic” authority in the American workplace, the man, Charles knew, would not have been able to accept defeat at the hands of a manual worker.

The hierarchy of the factory is paramount, even for an employee who prides himself on his democratic rights. So paramount, that a whipping by one’s superior is far better than a whipping by one’s subordinate. The fact that Stoddard chose to have Charles handle the altercation between his employees with a violent assertion of authority, rather than through peaceful, conciliatory measures, further illustrates the inescapability and final power of social hierarchy, even when it comes to love. Not surprisingly, the situation ends well – with the clerk agreeing to keep his job and the employer encouraging his pursuit of “the girl” (82-83). Had Charles not intervened, the text implies, the clerk would never have been able to show his face again at the factory, and a budding romance would have ended prematurely.

Cassandra’s connection with the Somers family, like her experiences in Barmouth and Rosville, is forged on the perception of inequality. As with the situation in Rosville, the narrator is scrutinized and judged by an older woman. This time, though, the scrutiny is unfriendly and the judgment unfavorable. A reversal of her success with Alice Morgeson, Cassandra’s association with Mrs. Somers is marred by the latter’s conviction that the heroine is beneath every member of the Somers family. The attitude of this unforgiving matriarch can be attributed, in part, to jealous suspicion of any marriageable woman who moves within her sons’ orbit. But Mrs. Somers forms an immediate opinion of the narrator before she learns the exact tie between Cassandra and Ben, and before Cassandra even meets the brother who will become her husband, a detail that indicates that the older woman’s assessment is not merely a reflection of her maternal...
insecurities. The first time they meet, in fact, the narrator is acutely aware of Mrs. Somers's disapproval as the cold, deliberate disdain of an elite woman for an apparently meager specimen of humanity.

I glanced at Mrs. Somers, who sat remote in the act of inspecting me, with an eye askance, which I afterward found was her mode of looking at those whom she doubted or disliked; it changed its expression as it met mine, into one of haughty wonder, that said there could be no tie of blood between us. She irritated and embarrassed me. I tried to think of something to say, and uttered a few words, which were uncommonly trivial and awkward (164).

Mrs. Somers perceives the narrator as so wholly inferior, so “other” from the distinguished – if at times debauched – identities of her own sons and daughters, that she can’t believe the claim, put forth by Ben earlier, that the Morgeseons are distant relatives of her family (a twist that confirms the novel’s almost incestuous insistence on consanguinity). Mrs. Somers’s “remote” inspection of Cassandra is, in actuality, the psychological construction of one human being by another into an object, a thing so qualitatively different that even eye contact does not transform “remoteness” into empathy, but only elicits “haughty wonder.”

During this initial encounter, Mrs. Somers differs from her daughter, Adelaide, on the assertion that Cassandra is “a great belle.” The daughter thinks the narrator resembles Caroline Bingham, a local beauty, while Mr. Somers ventures that Cassandra is even “fairer” than the familiar belle. Mrs. Somers then joins in with the question, phrased “in a tone of denial,” – “Do you really think she looks like her, Somers?” (164). This indirect hostility escalates, throughout the next three chapters, until Cassandra and Mrs. Somers reach an undisguised animosity. In a scene that pits the matriarch against the disputed belle, the women almost come to blows over an “insulting gesture” that Mrs. Somers uses to suggest that Cassandra is a lowlife “adventure” of Desmond’s. The narrator feels an anger that is “like a fierce rain... (striking) flat a violent sea.”
She lays her hand on the older woman's arm, at which Mrs. Somers "snaps... like a wolf" (186). Stoddard, here, uses the language of true womanhood to satirize once again the ideal of universal, sisterly affection. Cassandra addresses her adversary: "You tender, true-hearted creature, full of womanly impulses, allow me to light my candle by yours!" Then, in symbolic skepticism of how effectively the myth of true womanhood will pass from one generation to another, the narrator lights her candle and stares into her enemy's face (186). Moments later, Cassandra leaves the room and prepares for bed. When she extinguishes her candle, she observes that it is "like a one-eyed demon" — an observation that reveals the half-blind brutishness beneath true womanhood's angelicism (187).

Near the novel's end, we are told that Mrs. Somers "never forgave" Cassandra for her marriage to Desmond. The rest of the husband's family, meanwhile, always considered the union "a misalliance" (252). Like the romance between the narrator and her cousin, Cassandra's marriage is framed by social boundaries. An atmosphere of arrogance and intolerance establishes the foundation for a courtship that must survive the hubris of Desmond's alcoholism, while the consummation of the courtship precipitates the resentment of exalted egos. If the bond between husband and wife represents the integrity of unifying affection in the midst of differentiating forces, the marriage is not, nonetheless, meant to convey democratic individualism's triumph over hierarchy. On the contrary, inequality prevails in the world of The Morgesons. Desmond's claim, at the novel's conclusion, that "God is the Ruler" only renews the leveling influence of love in a Decalogue-like assertion of power. As if to dispel any doubt in the reader's mind that inequality has the last word, Stoddard translates secular hierarchy into a cosmic chain of being, a divine inegalitarianism presided over by an authoritative deity.

The foregoing summary and interpretation of The Morgesons is intended to delineate the horizon of Elizabeth Stoddard's preoccupation with difference. Most of the critics who have paid attention to Stoddard over the years have generally either construed her fiction as a record of
regional difference or as a portrayal of gender difference – sometimes melding the two in a look at sexuality and parochialism. Regional peculiarities and the disparities between men and women are encompassed, however, within a broader range of class difference. The discriminatory impulses of the nineteenth-century’s genteel culture, its valorization of art and knowledge as forms of capital, and its attempts to position an expanding working-class population with its hierarchy of values, set the stage for Stoddard’s dramatic episodes of love and loss and personal growth. The novelist’s own anomic experience of this genteel culture, first through her individual participation in New York City’s social scene and then, more poignantly, through her marriage to Richard Stoddard and her tenuous association with an ambitious circle of writers, magnified every nicety of endorsement and rejection by which the culture operated, making her fiction an expansive rendering of inequality. Stoddard’s writing is a distillation of the pain of exclusion. She administered her works, one might say, as sustained homeopathic attempts at her own healing and inclusion.

As early as her correspondence for the *Alta California*, Stoddard demonstrates an intense concern with the preemptive rituals of wealth, the pursuit of recognition, and the general enactment of caste. On the first anniversary of her debut as the *Alta’s* East coast connection, Stoddard (or E. D. B.) half-jokingly addressed the lack of accolades acknowledging her year of hard work.

Though I have written industriously for the whole year, the

---

23 Lawrence Buell’s treatment of *The Morgesons* in *New England Literary Culture* is an interesting synthesis of the regional and gender-oriented approaches to the novel. Identifying Stoddard’s “first and best” novel as an example of “provincial gothic” literature, Buell connects the idiosyncratic and inert qualities that distinguish *The Morgesons* as a regional work with the progressive dynamism of its “initiatives,” initiatives that signal Cassandra’s desire for personal and financial autonomy. “Provincial gothic,” as defined by Buell, embodies a “doubleness of vision,” an “awareness of social change [that] is grounded in the premise that institutions and values resist change” (351, 358). The post-Puritan dimensions of Stoddard’s novel, which Buell analyzes through the depiction of Cassandra’s grandfather, offer the resistance to change that is such a key ingredient of the genre, while the protagonist’s search for “economic control and enlightened marriage” constitutes the move toward social change (i.e., female independence in a male-dominated society). Linking *The Morgesons* with *The House of the Seven Gables*, Buell ultimately argues that Stoddard and Hawthorne engaged in “the quintessential mode of regional writing” – provincial
government has taken no step to appoint me letter laureate.

No committee of gentlemen have waited on me with an
address and medal. I have not yet waked up on the right morning
as Byron did! Not but what these letters excel “Childe Harolde”
in power, “Don Juan” in wit and “the Corsair” in sentiment, but
the public don’t appreciate me… I confide in posterity
(October 4, 1855).

Intended as the humorous debunking of her own upstart ambitions, this recognition of anonymity reveals an element of genuine disappointment. E. D. B. may not have actually expected a crown of laurels, but her chagrin implies an honest conviction of her literary worth and the anticipation of reward. Read as the colorful, public beginning of a thread that ran throughout Stoddard’s life and work (a fabric that finally unraveled in the private disclosures of the “failure” that “broke” her), this 1855 letter to San Franciscans commences the warp of her fixation on success.

E. D. B., like the Elizabeth Stoddard of later years, occupied an intermediate position between the privileged world of “the fashionables” or the truly tasteful, and the more austere world of the laboring classes. As a young writer, though, E. D. B. had a sense of the possibilities in a success more democratic than that to which the older author aspired. E. D. B. knew her San Francisco readers to be generally a hardworking, egalitarian bunch, subscribing to an ethos of independence that, strangely enough, still took its cues from the hierarchical culture of the east. Thus she stationed herself squarely between fashionable sophistication and frontier simplicity.

Her grievance about not being appointed “letter laureate” notwithstanding, the Lady Correspondent knew how to win the respect of her California readers – an audience she envisioned as having “no opera, no picture galleries, no Boulevards, no great tailor or distinguished milliner” (October 22, 1854). The columnist sold herself as an informant on
gothic – which “reveals the superiority” of representation to the “insubstantiality and bleakness” of the objects represented (370).
matters of good taste whose knowledge was frequently acquired from “afar off” and peppered with the irony of a plebeian distrust. In this manner, she won much of the “common praise” that, by 1889, she claimed not to “care a copper for” (Matlack 549).

As a mature writer, Stoddard’s endeavors were increasingly framed by the personal desire to pass from her modest sphere as a genteel pauper into the luminous world of high culture. Thus while the preoccupation with inequality is a constant in Stoddard’s work, from her early writings as a journalist to her later fiction, the declension of her career from a popular correspondent to a little-known, “broken” novelist reflects the evolution of that preoccupation from a fluid interest in the gradations of learning and labor – a versatile ability to step “up” or “down” in the scale of cultural differences – to a hardened idolatry of upper-class accomplishments, a paralyzing reification of refinement. The “failure” of which Stoddard wrote in her later years was a failure of elasticity before it was a failure of imagination or execution. In this respect, Stoddard mimicked the uncompromising atmosphere of the genteel world she and her husband haunted until the end of their lives.
CHAPTER II

The Burden of Song: Richard Stoddard and the Genteel Tradition

To readers who focus on the individualistic and subversive aspects of her writing, Elizabeth Stoddard's connection with the genteel tradition looks to be a chance affiliation, rather than a meaningful ideological or aesthetic bond. It seems that she simply strayed into the thick of that urbane romanticism which we associate with New York's genteel circle—a group that included Bayard Taylor, George Henry Boker, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, George William Curtis, Richard Watson Gilder, Charles Eliot Norton, and, of course, Richard Henry Stoddard. With her penchant for New England rusticity and her hard-edged realism, Elizabeth Stoddard was indeed an unusual presence among the poets, editors, and scholars with whom she exchanged ideas—often vituperatively—for decades. Eager to escape Mattapoissett, she apparently arrived in New York out of curiosity and a dissatisfaction with small-town life that stemmed from a restless and experimental temperament. Although she and Richard would come to host soirées that were a distinct alternative to Bohemian culture, Elizabeth was not unakin to the group of intellectuals who gathered at Pfaff's Beer Cellar to debate social and artistic innovations, and to exhibit their disregard for convention. John Tomsich, quoting a letter in which Stoddard tells her husband that she wishes she were “sitting in the gutter in Bleecker St. or at an apple stand,” asserts that the former “Lady Correspondent” “fancied herself a Bohemian” (156). Nonetheless, it was not the unconventional crowd that included Walt Whitman, Henry Clapp, Adah Menken, and Fitz-James O'Brien with whom Stoddard sought to connect herself. Rather, she gravitated toward the self-consciously refined circle that had initially formed with the friendships of Boker, Taylor, and Richard Stoddard.

William Dean Howells, in Literary Friends and Acquaintance, claims to have admired the Stodddards precisely because “they were frankly not of that Bohemia which I disliked so much,
and thought it of no promise or validity” (87). Howells’s suggestion that both Stoddards equally disavowed Pfaff ingenuity might appear to downplay Elizabeth’s own tendency toward unorthodoxy, if we didn’t read on the same page his observation that “Mrs. Stoddard” left on “whatever she did... the stamp of a talent like no other.” But Howells’s general impression that the Stoddards were intellectually sober and discriminating, as well as hospitable, at least conveys Elizabeth’s effort to yoke her prickly eccentricity with genteel attitudes. Whether or not Elizabeth privately “fancied herself a Bohemian” while giving the public impression that she thought Bohemia “of no promise or validity,” it is clear that she defined her literary orbit by the habits and associations of the conservative – rather than unconventional – writers.

 Perhaps “Mrs. R. H. Stoddard,” like some of the characters in her novels, thrived on an ambitious existence tinged with animosity and miscommunication. When viewed in retrospect, the volatility of her suspicious, jealous personality and her restless artistry, balanced against genteel restraint, evens into a kind of tense equipoise, a personal history of transgressions and reconciliations that unfolds like the subtle traumas in her fiction. In any event, Elizabeth Stoddard’s life among the New York, genteel circle was fraught with irritations and misunderstandings. Her marriage to Richard, moreover, only intensified rather than quelled these tensions. “That damned Lizzie!” became an often implied, sometimes explicit refrain in the correspondence between Taylor, Aldrich, and Boker.

 In one of her own letters, “damned Lizzie” vaunts her “want of refinement” with the explanation that she is “coarse by nature.” James Russell Lowell had returned one of her short stories, presumably because it was too frank for the Atlantic Monthly’s pages. The story’s author responded with a personal letter in which she attributes such unpalatability to “an overwhelming perception of the back side of truth” (qtd. in Tomsich, 156). Howells himself points out that “Mrs. Stoddard... [made] her distinct and special quality felt in the magazines, in verse and

---

fiction” (87). To Howells, Elizabeth Stoddard’s uniqueness as an author had everything to do with her impatience with sentiment and euphemism. “In a time when most of us had to write like Tennyson, or Longfellow, or Browning, she never would write like any one but herself” (87).

Publishing his “Personal Retrospect” after the pinnacle of his campaign for realism, Howells saw Stoddard’s unpopularity as proof of anachronism. She “has failed of the recognition which her work merits,” Howells proposes, because her “tales and novels have in them a foretaste of realism, which was too strange for the palate of their day, and is now too familiar, perhaps.” Mrs. Stoddard’s “is a peculiar fate,” Howells concludes, “and would form the scheme of a pretty study in the history of literature” (87).

The personal impression that Elizabeth Stoddard made stayed with Lillian Aldrich for many years. Reminiscing well after the turn of the century, the wife of Thomas Bailey Aldrich recalled the first time she had seen Mrs. Stoddard more than fifty years earlier. Elizabeth’s initial entrance into the home of the actor, Edwin Booth, was far from prepossessing. To Aldrich’s eye, the aspiring author had an “expression of face and figure... withered like a brown leaf left on the tree before the snow comes.” Describing the newcomer as a middle-aged woman of “angular slimness,” Aldrich observes that Stoddard “wore a dull brown dress” which could have done nothing to enhance its wearer’s appeal. “No aura of charm whatever,” is the dismissive verdict (13). This flat disinterest is replaced by admiration, however, as Aldrich discovers Stoddard’s personality and accomplishments. Quickly the narrator of Crowding Memories discerns that there is “no prototype” for this “singular woman” who can “sway” all people who come “within her influence.” “Brilliant and fascinating, [Elizabeth Stoddard] needed neither beauty nor youth, her power was so much beyond such aids” (14). What did it matter that the woman resembled a “brown leaf?” The sounds that the withered leaf could make when agitating on the wind of political, artistic or philosophical controversy surpassed the murmurs of any rosy bride. Stoddard spoke “on every variety of subject,” Aldrich claims, “with originality and ready wit.” Her...
nondescript "aura" was transformed by "impassioned speech expressing an individuality and insight most unusual and rare" (14).

One of the most distinctive features separating Elizabeth Stoddard from other New York figures was the social, learned magnetism that she, in conjunction with her husband, exerted among the literati. James Matlack's dissertation and other subsequent treatments of The Morgesons' author tend to emphasize the surly and resentful underside of Stoddard's life. But it is important to remember that, during the 1850s and early 1860s, Stoddard was (in the words of Lillian Aldrich) hostess to "authors, actors, artists, musicians, mathematicians, professors, journalists, critics, and essayists" (15). She and her husband were a gravitational center of the city's intellectual life for several years – at least of the intellectual life that eschewed bohemianism. "An invitation to [Mrs. Stoddard's] rooms on the evening she entertained was," Aldrich claims, "...what a ribbon is to a soldier, and prized accordingly" (15). By the time Aldrich met Elizabeth Stoddard at the Booths' home, the "singular woman" had been presiding, with Richard, over a regular series of gatherings.

The Stoddards were living at that time in a house on Tenth Street where they had been for many years, occupying rooms up one flight on the corner of Fourth Avenue.... It was said that there were three literary centers in New York at this time: this unique house in Tenth Street; the Bohemian circle that used to frequent Pfaff's beer cellar in Broadway; ...[and] the Century Club... (15).

The beer cellar, we can safely infer from Lillian Aldrich's memoir, is repugnant for its crudity, while the Century Club, because of its exclusion of women, is remote cultural terrain. Exclusive on its own terms, the Stoddards' salon is "rather a solemn thing to belong to," and is entered by the newcomer "with somewhat the same feelings that would have represented his complex mind had [the Stoddards' door] been the portal of a church" (15).

Writing to her friend, Margaret Sweat, in 1854, Stoddard mentioned these "learned soirées," claiming (despite other accounts) to "play a very quiet part" in them herself (qtd. in Matlack, 103). Elsewhere, in her turn-of-the-century essay, "Literary Folks as They Came and Went with Ourselves," she reflects back on the early years of these gatherings, remarking that these "evenings which in time came to be known" began in a "small parlor in Third Street," then "went on for years in whatever place we happened to dwell, with changes and additions the same in charm and originality" (qtd. in Matlack, 103). In his study of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Charles Samuels captures some of the contemporary influence of the Stoddards' meetings in their atmosphere of self-importance and inspiration. Specifically, the authors who convened at the Stoddards' salon were, Samuels observes, "dedicated" writers "devoted to the cultivation of the Muse and intoxicated by their own young genius."

Samuels's characterization of the Stoddards' crowd is ironic and, like many academic assessments of the period's New York intelligentsia, disdainful of that group's accomplishments. The versifiers are, in Samuels's estimation, mere "poetasters," "minor artistic celebrities" who flocked to the salon as if to (in Bayard Taylor's words) a "Shrine of Genius" (35). Yet the serious ambition and mutual esteem of these "artistic celebrities," which is depicted in Samuels's alternately respectful and demeaning study of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, conveys some of the fervor distinguishing the Stoddards' gatherings. Thomas Bailey Aldrich himself had mixed feelings about these gatherings, sometimes finding them a little too formal or "stuffy." "After he became associate editor of the Saturday Press... [Aldrich] occasionally dropped in at [Pfaff's] beer cellar" instead of at the Stoddards', finding that "criticism was not muffled there as it was" at the salon (Tomsich 10). More typical among the Stoddards' coterie, however, was the excitement felt by Bayard Taylor. Taylor wrote to Richard Stoddard of their "unselfish homage [to] that spirit of art and beauty which men call Poetry," expressing with his injunction to "cling... closer to that

---

worship” the missionary enthusiasm that infused the soirées with an almost apocalyptic preeminence (qtd. in Samuels 35).

Of course, the Stoddards’ were not the only nor even the most popular soirées in New York at the time. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Anne Lynch and the Cary sisters hosted successful gatherings that attracted a broad array of artists and intellectuals, while various lesser groups competed within the shifting matrices of the city’s culture. The existence and, indeed, relative prominence of the Stoddards’ salon, however, delineates an important connection between Elizabeth and the genteel tradition. The social draw that husband and wife exerted during their early years as intellectual arbiters was short-lived when compared with the entire length of their tenure as public authors. Part of the reason for this was the sheer proliferation of groups and clubs that artists and writers might attend in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and hence the competition that the Stoddards and other hosts faced in trying to keep a loyal, lively coterie. Part of the reason, too, was surely Elizabeth’s irascible, exacting temperament, which sometimes struck others (such as Lillian Aldrich) as “an exceptional and interesting character” (15), but which more often than not alienated the friends and associates who had convened in varying degrees of deliberate self-importance. Despite Elizabeth’s often difficult personality, though, the Stoddards cultivated a literary circle long enough for the “exceptional and interesting character” to immerse herself in an integral aspect of genteel culture.

Today’s assessments of nineteenth-century genteel society tend to focus on its moralism (which, as in the case of George Henry Boker’s marital infidelities, was frequently hypocritical), its Anglophilic aestheticism, its distrust of democratic individualism and consequent political conservatism, and what George Santayana first identified as a “grandmotherly,” “sedate” spirit of emasculated wonder.4 While these traits may be accurately described as elements of the genteel tradition, they are rarely recognized as part of the hierarchical yet communitarian mindset integral

---

to Victorian high culture. The genteel pursuit of letters (particularly as it existed in New York) was distinguished by collective configurations of educated, artistic labor, ranging from the most informal soirées to authors' clubs to publishing and editing circles. These networks or clusters of cultural activity functioned as the material basis for an ethos of creative interdependence and continuity, which—being more than mere traditionalism—presaged and even introduced the mentality of professionalism examined by such historians as Burton Bledstein, Stuart Blumin, T. J. Jackson Lears, and David Levine.\(^5\) The genteel writers inhabited a world where literature, theater, art, and music (culture with a capital “C”) were brokered along progressively conglomerate lines of dissemination, through formal clubs and not-so-formal associations, through the simultaneously personal and institutional alliances of journalism.\(^6\) The experience of genteel authorship, therefore, must be considered in terms of the institutionalization of art and knowledge, an institutionalization that was not only caught up in the emerging culture of professionalism, but that participated in the capitalist transformation of literature into a commodity.\(^7\) Consequently, Elizabeth Stoddard's part in the “learned soirées” that she and Richard began holding in “a small parlor” (even if its was a “quiet part,” as she claimed to Margaret Sweat) connects her with the genteel tradition through its clubbish custodianship. Her

---


\(^{6}\) Even the Bohemians who congregated at Pfaff's Cellar were not removed from the consolidating influence of journalistic ties and prejudices. The individualistic experimentation that prevailed at the Cellar (incomparably articulated by Walt Whitman) was at least balanced against the more careful spirit of the magazines, represented most regularly at Pfaff's by Henry Clapp. Clapp, who was editor of the *Saturday Press*, solicited work of such beer cellar patrons as Fitz-James O'Brien, Ada Clare, and William Winter.

\(^{7}\) Among the foremost theorists of this transformation is Pierre Bourdieu, who writes that works of art, as symbolic objects, are “socially instituted” and “received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such....” Bourdieu argues that the capitalist context for the creation of art (or, specifically, literature) dictates the analysis not merely of a work's “material production,” but also of its “symbolic production... i.e., the production of the value of the work.” Adopting these terms for our study of genteel culture, we might argue that the various authors' clubs and "learned soirées" were the instruments of genteel literature's symbolic production. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." *Poetics* 12 (1983): 318.
presence at the “Shrine of Genius,” however damned by Richard’s friends, locates her within the genteel nexus of collective aspiration and affirmation.

While the Stoddards’ visibility as intellectual socialites in that “unique house in Tenth Street” was not especially long-lived, Richard Stoddard’s influence as a reviewer for the New York World (and later as literary editor of the Mail and Express) was in many instances truncated by his interpretive candor. In this respect, Richard Stoddard was a lot like his wife, whose blunt assessments may have extended her tenure as the Alta’s “Lady Correspondent,” but not without threatening to abbreviate her relationships with other writers. Both husband and wife, in other words, possessed a propensity for unsparing honesty that, while not enough to alienate them from the world of genteel letters, exacerbated their sense of that world’s polite conformity as oppressive. Of course, the term “influence” in connection with Richard Stoddard must be understood in the context of genteel expectations about publishing and reviewing, expectations that prevailed in the highly personal, gentlemen’s network that the publishing industry remained until the last decades of the nineteenth century. An “influential” reviewer or editor in this milieu considered the public image of authors sacrosanct and took it upon himself to preserve the literary dignity of his contributors. The reviewer, from this perspective, had to have what Stow Persons calls, in connection with New York’s literary associations, “clubability,” that “happy combination of qualities that made a man good company” (106). As John Tomsich observes, a fine line in fact separated the literary clubs and the publishing world, making “clubability” a requisite for poets and reviewers alike. “Before 1900,” Tomsich writes, “the clubs were always an adjunct to the world of publishing” (14), with the latter constituting a “pre-professional world... where personal relationships meant everything” (21). Nineteenth-century publishers and authors – those who wrote or authorized the reviews and those who produced the literature subject to such public scrutiny – “shared to a remarkable degree a common set of values,” states Tomsich, values that positioned the careers of authorship and publishing as polite pursuits transcending brutal rivalry, or even just the pitiless truths of competitive professionalism. As one genteel poet, George
Woodberry, put it: "What bothers me is the system of business competition as applied to the literary world... Why should I have to be a party to putting money values on intellectual and soul outcome?" (qtd. in Tomsich, 19). Recognizing this pose of resolute amateurism, literary historian Susan Coultrap-McQuin bases her argument that Victorian publishers and women writers shared key sensibilities on the premise that the publishers (like idealized Victorian women generally) "professed beliefs in personal relationships, noncommercial aims, and moral guardianship" (28). A powerful and respected reviewer or editor within this atmosphere of personalized merit, in other words, had to exemplify "clubability" not just in the immediate capacity of the amiable, witty dinner partner, say, but also in the role of the sympathetic, respectful promoter who valued his tie with an author above any ideal of critical rigor. Moving frequently between the literary men's clubs and the club-like publishing circles (of the magazine industry in particular), a reviewer was expected to observe a consistent protocol that would maintain good relations in print as well as in person.

Richard Stoddard, unlike most of his genteel colleagues, believed that he should hold the work of all writers — especially poets — to the exacting standards supporting his view that literature — especially poetry — "is the revelation of ideal truth and beauty" (Recollections 97). Stoddard, indeed, acquired a reputation for exercising stringent judgments against his fellow authors, a reputation that remained even after his death. As Ripley Hitchcock points out in his afterword to Stoddard's 1903 memoir, Recollections Personal and Literary, the author of Songs of Summer and The Lion's Cub occasionally "roused antagonisms, sometimes by the spoken, sometimes by the written word" (312). In an appraisal to which Stoddard himself might have raised an eyebrow because of its conflation of authorial and personal responses, Hitchcock asserts: "His standards were high for letters and for men, and he hated smug literary affectation, or moral cowardice, with all the force of a singularly vigorous nature" (312). By the same token, though, Stoddard was zealous in his praise of real literary excellence. "If he was frank in denouncing shams... he was equally prompt to point out promise or performance, and all that he
said was sure to be infused with a spirit due to long and reverent association with the masters of English letters" (312-13). Isolated demonstrations of such enthusiasm were not enough to make Stoddard "clubable" in the journalistic sense, however. For his positive assessments were too much a reaction to the poem or the story itself, and too little a response to expectations of geniality.

A biography of Bayard Taylor published in 1936, when American literary criticism stood on the threshold of its New Critical heyday, presents a similar picture of Stoddard, with the difference that a subtle irony pervades its description of genteel, literary propriety. Of Stoddard Richard Croom Beatty writes, "As a critic, he believed – unlike Taylor and Longfellow and most of their literary acquaintances – that the fact of friendship should not be permitted to influence one’s estimate of a friend’s work."8 Registering skepticism and amusement over the late nineteenth century’s view of criticism, Beatty describes how Stoddard was intellectually at odds with his circle of poet and editor friends. Referring to Stoddard’s disregard for personal ties, Beatty writes:

Here was the shoal on which, to his contemporaries, Stoddard was constantly floundering. It was inexcusable, they thought. After all, what is criticism anyhow but a cabalistic ritual your well-wishers exercise in print in order to cajole ordinary buyers into purchasing your book? The sole excuse for public comment is this kind of subtle advertising. For God’s sake, if you can’t praise, be silent! (251)

Well placed among the northeast’s intelligentsia, Stoddard refused to enhance his own career by “puffing” the accomplishments of others. He declined to play by the rules of the then reigning

---

literary establishment, even as he gleaned from it the modicum of money and prestige he always wished to expand.

An example of Stoddard’s staunch critical independence can be seen in the different reactions he and Edmund Clarence Stedman had to Lowell’s collection of poems, Under the Willows. Published in 1868, the collection fell into the hands of Stedman and Stoddard alike and was reviewed by both. Writing for the Post, Stedman pronounced the poems a success. A letter from Taylor to Stedman, on the other hand, reveals not merely that Stoddard reviewed Under the Willows unfavorably, but that Taylor, a recognized poet and travel writer by 1868, believed it the duty of established authors to overlook the compositional weaknesses of other writers in the interest of their “genius,” a quality discerned as much through social contact as through critical experience. Expressing disagreement with Stoddard’s “Albion notice,” Taylor confides to Stedman that “there is truth in [the] charge of ruggedness and occasional want of finish,” but that Stoddard’s review “does not do justice to the splendid qualities of Lowell’s genius” (qtd. in Beatty 252). Lowell’s verse may have limitations, and his appeal may not be broad, but the “depreciatory air” of Stoddard’s review Taylor is nonetheless “sorry to notice.” “Lowell has not had his due of recognition – and perhaps cannot have from the mass – and we, who know what he is, ought therefore to be all the more free and unstinted in our appreciation” (qtd. in Beatty, 252).

The message that Taylor conveys to Stedman, here, is that the northeast’s writing and publishing circles constitute a specialized world, the inhabitants of which have a responsibility to display only each others’ strengths to the larger, reading world.9

---

9 Although Stedman differed from Stoddard on the matter of Lowell’s poetry, he could not have agreed with Taylor’s general view of criticism as mutual back scratching. On the contrary, Stedman’s understanding of literary criticism was as stringent – if not more so – than Stoddard’s. Worthy criticism, in Stedman’s estimation, should be almost scientific in its impartiality and exactitude. As Robert Scholnick observes, Stedman believed that American criticism should “become more ‘philosophical,’ carefully define its premises, and then proceed objectively and consistently.” While Stedman and Stoddard shared a view of criticism as properly objective, on the other hand, Stedman’s approach was undoubtedly tempered by a more diplomatic disposition than Stoddard’s, which Lowell himself recognized back in the 1850s as excessively frank. Robert J. Scholnick, Edmund Clarence Stedman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977) 39.
It is clear from a letter that Stoddard wrote to Taylor that the latter did not confine his disappointment to his correspondence with Stedman. In a straightforward response, the vehemence of which suggests Stoddard's impatience with charges of critical impropriety as well as the intensity of Taylor's censure, the writer of the Albion review explains his understanding of aesthetic judgment and discrimination.

To answer your strictures on my notice of Lowell: in one word, the difference between you and me is, that you think a man should not be criticized much, at any rate not to his disadvantage, after he has made a certain reputation, while I hold the exact contrary. The reputation of no artist is saved, in my eyes, when he writes badly. Lowell is a damned bad artist, and I said so frankly. I should have said the same of you, under the circumstances, and you would have liked it not at all (qtd. in Beatty, 252-53).

Certainly not the language of a "clubable" man, Stoddard's words indicate the point of his departure from genteel values. The expectation that a reviewer be "good company" among New England and New York's literati was less meaningful to Stoddard than his own expectation that creative work be judged according to objective standards. Artistry — not clout or personal contacts — was the key to a successful literary career.

Logically, if somewhat surprisingly, Taylor had a tendency to construe Stoddard's insistence on objective merit in terms of individual recalcitrance and eccentricity. Consistent with his view that professional advancement born of critical acclaim was an extension of personal identity and interaction, Taylor similarly perceived the professional enunciation of an aesthetic philosophy as, in Stoddard's case, a projection of personal disposition. Stoddard's argument that poetry should be "the revelation of ideal truth and beauty" — a revelation "we must not pull... down to us," but to which we must "rise" (Recollections 97) — is discerned by Taylor as unnecessary rigor, the
learned manifestation of a spiteful, contrary nature. In actuality, Stoddard and Taylor were friends for many years, from their first meeting in the office of the New York Tribune to the end of their lives. Like many long-term relationships, though, their friendship suffered from bouts of unkindness. The Lowell incident, and Taylor’s general frustration with his friend’s literary expectations, should therefore be regarded less as a reflection of the poets’ tie to one another, and more as an indication of the disparity – fated to intensify – between the gentlemanly or polite concept of letters, and the emerging professional ideals of literature and criticism. While the collective embodiments of genteel culture presaged the institutional aspects of professionalism, gentility’s habits of personal favoritism were nonetheless a far cry from the professional emphasis on competition and impartiality. Taylor’s allegiance to the personalized ethos of gentlemanly writing and publishing proved incompatible with Stoddard’s principles, leading Taylor to conclude that Stoddard had a contrarian, incomprehensible personality. Stoddard’s unfavorable review of Under the Willows, and indeed the gamut of disappointments the unindulgent reviewer suffered throughout his career, appeared to Taylor not as a consequence of critical idealism, but as an extension of pettiness and private idiosyncrasy.

In another letter to Stedman, predating by two years the 1868 letter about Stoddard’s treatment of Lowell, Taylor expresses his misgivings about “Dick’s” prospects with the Galaxy. Started in 1866 in a deliberate attempt to counter the perceived provinciality of the Atlantic Monthly, the Galaxy was in principle consistent with Stoddard’s ambition to expand and objectify the old-fashioned approach to literature. Stoddard’s attempt to obtain the editorship of this new magazine (which ironically sold its subscription list to the Atlantic Monthly when it proved financially unstable) suggests that he recognized this affinity, and imagined using the Galaxy to

---

10 For his own part, Stoddard considered Taylor’s “pretensions in philology” annoying. Beatty maintains that “the two men [had] a rather fundamental difference in character, a difference which might, on the occasion of some incidental dispute, mount to outrageous proportions” (255-56). Despite these blow-ups (explosions precipitated as much by Stoddard’s wife, “Lizzie,” as by immediate conflicts between the two men), the writers cultivated a bond which was to last years, and which helped to define both their private and their public experiences of collegiality.
implement his view of American criticism as the impartial, systematic rendering of poetic truth. Under his guidance, the Galaxy might usher American literature from an affected and narrow elitism to a receptive, yet principled enterprise.

As events would have it, however, Stoddard was not granted the editorship. This fact Taylor attributed to his friend's temperament. In an earlier letter to Stedman, Taylor confides his belief that Stoddard will get the position "if he will only resolve to be entirely catholic" in attitude. The job is his if he will persuade himself to be receptive and not too judging. The bane of narrow-mindedness, which Taylor sees not as characteristic of the Atlantic, but of the Galaxy's aspiring editor, is understood, here, as a personality issue. Taylor doesn't merely think that Stoddard should be more "catholic" in his intellectual expectations; rather, Stoddard's success would require his "throwing his personal prejudices and jealousies aside." "You can give him a word of advice on this point, better than any other living man," Taylor tells Stedman, apparently believing the editorship still attainable, "but I fear, I fear."

If, indeed, Stoddard (or "Poor Dick," as he was often called by his friends during the compassionate interludes between provocations) did from time to time act out of "personal prejudices and jealousies," the behavior was at least fathomable within the contexts of his upbringing and his early career. Stoddard's past was not the sort likely to impart a secure sense of self worth, especially in genteel literary circles that operated on various staunch (if not objective or meritocratic) ideas of superiority. At the very least, Stoddard's precepts as a literary critic can be understood not solely as the expression of a demanding intellect (which they certainly were), but also as the emotional ingestion and transformation of his early trials. Stoddard's belief "that the fact of friendship should not be permitted to influence one's estimate of a friend's work" can be grasped as the fruition of an adolescence characterized by relentless labor, and by the formative experience of work as something separate and distinct from friendship. The protocol of mutual indulgence governing the genteel habit of "puffing" must

11 Letter from the Edmund Clarence Stedman Collection, Butler Library, Columbia University.
have seemed insurmountably artificial to a man who carved his literary career out of the
enervating labor so familiar to the poor, and whose profession as a poet and editor always bore
the traces of his early, often lonely rigor.

In the words of Richard Croom Beatty, “Stoddard’s life had not been enviable” (250). A
sickly child who lost his father at an early age, the future poet attended school sporadically while
striving to fight off the poverty that beset the family with the elder Stoddard’s death. Among the
boy’s earliest memories was that of his mother doing laundry and “general ‘slop work’ for
sailors.” While remarriage often provided relief for struggling widows and their children, Sophia
Gurney Stoddard’s remarriage brought little respite from worry and labor. On the contrary,
Richard’s teen years marked the advent of a difficult epoch, a span of years in which the aspiring
poet fought the exhausting effects of demeaning toil, near pennilessness, and declining health.
According to Beatty’s account, which plays with his readers’ attachment to the notion of
progress, Stoddard “fared no better until 1870, when he was discharged [from his customs house
post] abruptly. And then for a time he fared even worse” (250).

Stoddard’s own account, written near the end of his life, conveys the wry levity of a man
looking back on hardship with the knowledge that the hardship led (albeit slowly) to some degree
of recognition and respect. Stoddard’s narrative of struggle is infused with a confidence and
humor that relieve the bleakness of his upbringing and impart a sense of predestination, of
inevitable uplift from poverty and ignorance. Nonetheless, the story he presents is striking in its
deprivations, particularly when contrasted with the more comfortable experiences of his friends,
Bayard Taylor and George Henry Boker. The urge to write poetry was a constant throughout
Stoddard’s life, but the sanctifying, steady energy of that desire was all too often frustrated. Is it
any wonder, then, that the mature poet and critic looked askance at the genteel circle’s habits of
favoritism? The fact of friendship had been less influential in Stoddard’s transformation from an
iron molder to an artist than the qualities of talent and assiduity.
Beginning as an errand boy and then a shop boy, the young Stoddard eventually obtained employment as a legal copyist for less than one dollar a week. In this position, Stoddard wrote "second [and] third transcription[s] of affidavits wherein Simple Simon, being duly sworn, did depose and say whatever he had persuaded himself was the grievance from which he was suffering at the time" (Recollections 22). Despite the meagerness of his income as a copyist (a meagerness intensified by the son's dutiful surrender of most of his earnings to his mother), the already inspired Stoddard managed to save fifty cents each month for books. "I haunted old bookstalls after office hours," the poet recalls with a presentiment of his mature biases, "and picked up bargains in the shape of odd volumes, mostly of the English poets" (Recollections 23).

The copyist's early exposures to literature, moreover, were not limited to such carefully planned purchases. Among the clients "who visited our little office," Stoddard reminiscences, was the "bright-eyed, good-looking, and... dandyfied" J. H. Ingraham, "the first novelist I ever met face to face and hand to hand" (Recollections 24).

After working as a legal copyist, Stoddard "became a sort of factotum in the office of a new and short-lived journal which reported the sayings and doings of Dickens." In this capacity, one that offered a "distant connection with authorship," the young man met Lewis Gaylord Clark, one of antebellum New York's most prominent editors. The impression that this encounter made proved enduring, but the Dickens journal did not. So from his responsibilities as literary factotum Stoddard moved into a job in a tailor's shop. From there he was "installed as a bookkeeper in a bankrupt brush and bellows factory." And from there he was "transplanted to an occupation for which [he] was most unfit...," that of a blacksmith. Before each day of Stoddard's brief stint as a blacksmith was over, his "right hand was so blistered that [he] had to open its fingers with [his] left hand, and detach them from the handle of the sledge-hammer" (26-7). When the still aspiring poet took up iron molding at eighteen, the work of carrying forty pounds of molten iron in a ladle was a comparative relief. The work was hard, but it was such an improvement over blacksmithing that Stoddard stuck with it for three years. By the end of his third year, he was
earning $3.75 per week. In the meantime, Stoddard was burning the midnight oil. His “one consolation” during these years of grueling labor was that at the end of each workday “night would come, and then [he] could write poetry.” Much of this early poetry he “wisely committed... to the flames,” but the experience of regularly writing verse prepared him for a respectable if plodding literary career (Recollections 28-9).

From the iron foundry Stoddard made the transition to remunerated, although ill paid, intellectual labor. Confiding to Boker, “I don’t want to die till I get out one good volume of poetry,” this twenty-five year old whose ambitions and trying past gave him a heightened sense of his mortality, began to publish his poetry in a range of journals. His work began to appear in Graham’s, the Knickerbocker (of which Lewis Gaylord Clark was editor), the New York Literary World, and the Southern Literary Messenger. As James Matlack observes, however, this “creeping fame” was not always “convertible into cash” (66). It wasn’t until the middle of 1851 when James T. Fields agreed to publish a book of Stoddard’s verse that the frustrated author began to feel he could survive by following his true calling. The appearance of Poems in October of 1851 launched Stoddard on a sustained but rocky career in letters. Vowing that he would live by poetry or starve, he came close to doing the latter almost as often as he succeeded in the former. During the years ahead, Stoddard eked out a literary living by publishing volumes of verse, placing his poems in various magazines, printing his reviews in the World, and serving as an editor for the Mail and Express.

Given the challenges of this personal history and their manifestation in the professional credo of an objective (i.e., unindulgent, even severe) criticism, it would not be a surprise if Richard Stoddard had lived his mature life as a staunch individualist, a critic not only of other people’s poetry, but of the social institutions and the ideologically sanctioned imbalances that too often stifled the creativity of the underprivileged. It would make righteous sense for Stoddard to have turned out, like Whitman, as a democratic bard, celebrating the capacity for song even in the
unlikely setting of an iron foundry. The biographical reality, however, forces us to confront the fact that Stoddard turned out quite differently from Whitman. While his views of literary criticism presumed an equality of opportunity for realizing the poetic ideal, Stoddard’s actions throughout his life demonstrated an abiding conservatism. Drawn to people, to organizations, and to events that upheld the increasingly inegalitarian social structure of the industrializing nation, Stoddard reacted to his personal history of working-class hardship by embracing a culture of paternalistic elitism. The former iron molder who had rushed home in the evenings to write poetry despite his physical exhaustion grew into a banquet-going, cigar-smoking proponent of genteel values. While he never attained the financial security of his genteel peers, Stoddard thrived deliberately within the comfortable atmosphere (often just a rhetorical projection of imagined ease and congratulations) that distinguished establishmentarian culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. When he appeared to thrive less than merely survive, he strove that much harder for legitimation within the refined world of polite letters.

Whether because of a shared contrarian temperament (Bayard Taylor’s view), or because of an aesthetic detachment and professionalism that placed them ahead of their time, Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard were – it should be clear – frequently censorious of their literary peers. Adamant in their judgments, they adhered to their intellectual standards, even when doing so put them at odds with the cultural world they inhabited. In spite of the tensions and conflicts arising from their views, however, the Stoddards never disavowed the genteel world in which they moved. They never detached themselves from the club-like culture that, in the close circle of its refinement, asserted the power of community through its obverse powers of exclusion. If anything, the Stoddards’ often disruptive roles gave them a magnified sense of the tension at the heart of genteel culture – namely, the disdainful yet solicitous need to articulate one’s community, to discriminate and, in the act of doing so, to be accepted. Outsiders with an unrelenting eye for the inside, the Stoddards were like the genteel tradition itself, which was

12 Letter to George Henry Boker, June 15, 1850. Qtd. in Matlack, 66.
steadily edged to the periphery of an increasingly diverse population, and as steadily convinced of its centrality, however inscrutable. Whether or not the Stoddards ever grasped the degree to which they epitomized this tension in the genteel circle, they chose to lead lives of modest, intellectual alienation through their sense of cultural belonging.13

Of the many ties that connected the Stoddards to genteel culture, Richard's affiliation with the Authors' Club was perhaps the most explicitly binding tie. Founded in Richard Watson Gilder's home in 1882, the Authors' Club was an important source of Richard's creative camaraderie and professional affirmation for fifteen years. Indeed, the Authors' Club, in conjunction with its older, more prestigious counterpart, the Century Club, provided a collective sense of solidity for a number of New York writers. The latter club, in particular, was an organizational umbrella not just for men of letters (and its members were all men), but for an array of individuals who subscribed to an edifying notion of culture. Established in 1847 by the Knickerbocker's owner and editor, Lewis Gaylord Clark, and the merchant, Frederick S. Cozzens, the Century Club included among its members William Cullen Bryant, Parke Godwin, Edwin Booth, and John Jacob Astor — a poet, a journalist, a tragedian, and a fur tycoon, respectively.14 Considered "the most active center of culture in New York," the club attracted

---

13 This peculiar tension between belonging and not belonging comes through in Elizabeth's assessment of her husband in the 1871 essay, "A Literary Whim." Among the "merits" of her "better half" is Richard's "aptitude for getting into difficulties with his literary brethren." One of Richard's transgressions was, apparently, a tendency to say too much about his "brethren" when compiling biographies. "Considering the individuality of genius an interesting topic, and living among his books, breathing the atmosphere of their truth, is it any wonder that he should continue his reading in living books, and so make a conventional mistake? It may be hard to draw the proper lines. Perhaps an author can be called tall, not short!" After attempting to rationalize Richard's faux pas, Elizabeth then dismisses the matter by claiming that "'Honor among thieves' is a proverb which does not hold entirely with said better half." If Richard failed to subscribe to a unifying code of restraint when dealing with other authors, Elizabeth nonetheless felt compelled to assert that their intellectual values were the shared values of a distinct literary community. "At any rate, we — of our set — talk about all our celebrated contemporaries, and are eager to collect any details concerning them, or to see any relics." The term "set," here, of course resonates with the self-conscious boundaries of Charlotte Alden's "high set" in The Moreesons. Elizabeth Stoddard, "A Literary Whim," Appleton's Journal 14 October 1871.

14 In a letter dated July 18, 1880, Edmund Clarence Stedman informed Richard Watson Gilder that he would "take the most unusual and genuine pleasure in nominating" his friend for the Century Club. "I nominated and wrote a letter for... [Mr.] Bishop just before you returned," Stedman informed Gilder, "but I think I can venture upon one more nomination. Get Swain Gifford or someone else to second you and he also must write a letter." As this correspondence suggests, membership in the Century was both widely
many educated entrepreneurs as well as artists, and became the setting for a range of discussions on the roles of knowledge and art in society.\textsuperscript{15} The American Museum of Natural History, the National Academy of Design, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art all had their origins in conversations at the club.

The Authors' Club, to which much of the genteel circle belonged, provided an incomparable forum for the collectively oriented sanctification of cultural labor. Through informal discussions and formal talks, through honorary dinners and other rituals of recognition and commemoration, the club that feted Richard Stoddard, among other authors, offered a legitimating, social sense of enterprise for New York's white, male writers.\textsuperscript{16} Both the Century Club and the Authors' Club, to use Tomsich's words, were "among the fundamental institutions of genteel culture," organizations that "elevate[d] the tone of American civilization" by "providing places for literary fellowship" (14).

In \textit{The Decline of American Gentility}, Stow Persons claims that clubs such as the Century and the Authors' Club were inferior to the less formal soirées because they excluded women, many of whom made invaluable contributions to the intellectual life of the city. Frequently "dinner or supper clubs restricted to the male sex," these organizations were "hardly an adequate substitute for the salon" (104). Nonetheless, the clubs were an important aspect of the genteel tradition's institutional culture, a ritualistic arrangement of aspirations that demonstrated both the complacency and anxieties of (not just gendered) exclusion.

\textsuperscript{16} Tracing the New York clubs to Boston Brahminism, Stow Persons identifies the Saturday Club as a model for the Author's Club and the Century Club. With no prescribed speechifying, the Saturday Club depended on the convivial, spontaneous intelligence of its eleven members for its success. Horatio Woodman, Samuel Gray Ward, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Louis Agassiz, John Sullivan Dwight, Ebenezer R. Hoar, James Russell Lowell, John Lothrop Motley, Benjamin Pierce, and Edwin P. Whipple met on the last Saturday of each month for a seven-course dinner and the repartee of unrehearsed debate. Following the Saturday Club, a number of other all-male dinner and conversation societies appeared in Boston, including a Wednesday Club, a Thursday Club, a Friday Club, and a fraternity entitled simply, The Club. In New York, the Sketch club and the Bread and Cheese Club served as precursors to the many literary clubs appearing until the end of the century (106-7).
Writing for *The Critic* in 1897, James Lorimer Graham, Jr. (identified with gentlemanly pseudo-anonymity as J. L. G.) described an Authors' Club gathering at which Richard Stoddard was honored with “Filet de boeuf, Richelieu” and “Terapene a la Maryland.” Included in his description is the observation that Mrs. Stoddard, along with “Mrs. Stedman and a few other ladies, watched the dinner from a balcony box in a corner of the room.” A departure from the outright ostracism of women that characterized most meetings of the club, the confinement of Elizabeth Stoddard, Laura Stedman, and the “few other ladies” to a corner balcony box illustrates Person’s claim that the formal clubs of genteel literary society were inhospitable to women. It is proof of the dinner’s perceived momentousness that “the ladies” were present at all. Their controlled presence (controlled through spatial separation and confinement) merely provided the “exception” that proved the rule of gender-based discrimination. This controlled presence is replicated, moreover, in the very text of *The Critic*’s account. Elizabeth Stoddard, as the wife of the “illustrious” poet honored at the March 25th dinner, is acknowledged as an author in her own right, but her presence is textually separated from the explicit accolades showered upon Richard, and confined to the mere allusions of guest speakers – allusions that are in turn confined to a mere sentence in the entire article. “Throughout the evening, the speakers alluded more than once to Mrs. Stoddard’s work as poet and novelist – the equal of Poe and Charlotte Brontë, Judge Howland called her, – and the dinner may be said to have been in her honor as well as in that of her illustrious husband” (227).

This restriction of women should be regarded, not as an isolated pattern of imbalances, but as part of the more encompassing climate of discrimination that distinguished nineteenth-century genteel culture. The identification of women as innately unsuited for the activities of the

---

18 Susan Coultrap-McQuin similarly identifies the exclusion of nineteenth-century women from certain experiences and opportunities as, oddly enough, key to their inclusion in a larger matrix of events. Looking in particular at the exclusion of women contributors to the *Atlantic Monthly* from John Greenleaf Whittier’s seventieth birthday celebration, hosted by the journal’s publisher, Coultrap-McQuin asks, “How can we explain women’s persistence and success as writers in the face of attitudes and behaviors that could
Authors' Club or the Century Club rested on a pervasive habit of judgment and prohibition that operated within the most established New York circles of cultural production. Women were not the only—nor even a consistent—target of this exclusionary mindset. Individuals and groups were excluded from the deliberately defined ranks of genteel erudition on the basis of geography, class, money, ethnicity, politics, and vision.19

The discriminatory atmosphere in which the genteel circle flourished was intensified by the existence of propitious— but difficult to come by—political sinecures. Competition for these positions was fierce, and depended greatly on a candidate’s connections. Authors who competed for these well paying, undemanding jobs so that they would have both the resources to survive and the time to write had to have cultivated the right friendships, or to have produced (as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne) a campaign biography or other work of propaganda for a victorious political party.20 Consulships, such as the one Hawthorne was awarded at Liverpool for his biography of Franklin Pierce, provided the opportunity for travel and inspiration in addition to financial security. Venetian Life (1866), Italian Journeys (1867), and Modern Italian Poets render them invisible?" (3). The answer coultrap-McQuin proposes is, in its simplest terms, that the literary profession operated on principles recognizably feminine, a fact that countered women authors’ (feminine) invisibility with a distinct prominence. For example, the ideological construction of authorship as a leisured, nonproductive pastime coincided enough with the middle-class, Victorian construction of womanhood as domestic and passive to impart a surprising visibility to female writers. See Chapter One of Susan Coultrap-McQuin, Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). My own take on the restrictions placed on women at the Stoddard dinner—and on their general exclusion from the genteel clubs—is that such discrimination, both in its imposition by men and its tolerance by the wives of the “illustrious,” connected these women to the culture of their invisibility through an ethos of inequality.

19 As demonstrated in a letter written by Richard Stoddard and addressed to Edmund Clarence Stedman, the culture of discrimination could cross the line from theorized privilege into active exclusion with startling ease and hostility. The certainty of ostracism for the Native American becomes the threat of extinction when Stoddard confides in passing, “I have taken a hard view of the red man, [namely] that he ought to be exterminated.” (Letter dated December 27, 1871. Edmund Clarence Stedman Collection, Butler Library, Columbia University.)

20 Commencing his campaign biography of Franklin Pierce after the completion of The Blithedale Romance, Hawthorne, in fact, exhibited some doubt about the legitimacy of such a project. In the words of Perry Miller, Hawthorne began his biography, all the while “apologizing that this species of writing was foreign to his tastes, that he had, sacrificing a foolish delicacy, stooped from ‘the high region of his fancies.’” Evert and George Duyckinck, recognized literary authorities on the New York scene and dedicated Democrats, admonished Hawthorne for his reluctance. As Miller explains, the Duyckincks claimed that “the biography was a salutary thing for Nathaniel Hawthorne.” Such writing, in the...
(1887) were the tangible products of William Dean Howells's consulship at Venice, an office awarded for his 1860 campaign biography of Lincoln. Bayard Taylor struggled for a foreign appointment during most of his career. At various times throughout the 1860s and 70s Taylor expected an appointment – once as a commissioner to Japan, once as a minister to Russia, once as a delegate to Brussels, and once as a minister to Persia. The popular author of Views A-Foot was frustrated, however, until 1878 when he received a position at Berlin.

Besides foreign appointments, the sinecures for which literary men competed included customs house inspectorships. Melville's nineteen-year stint as an outdoor inspector, in conjunction with his declining public favor, was conducive to silence rather than to literary creativity. Similarly, Hawthorne experienced a literary dry spell while working as Surveyor of the Port of Salem. Usually, though, literary men regarded customs house positions as desirable posts for individuals seeking hidden leisure and financial security. With a tenacity approaching desperation, Richard Stoddard sought a position as inspector of customs in New York, and finally obtained the appointment through Hawthorne's aid and through a fortuitous interview with Franklin Pierce himself. Between 1853 and 1870, Stoddard held the post with an appreciation gleaned from his previous back-breaking labor as an iron molder, and from his steady desire to find time and energy for poetry. Two days after Stoddard began his position as inspector, Elizabeth divulged to Margaret Sweat the laxity that would make her husband's literary output possible. "The first day they smoked and talked, the second his duty was to walk to a certain pier to see about a certain vessel. Five hours a day is the time to stay in the C. H." (Matlack 92). Only after President Grant's Collector, Moses Grinnell, was pressured to rotate out of office a lingering Pierce appointee (and one who, in the punitive atmosphere of Reconstruction, was remembered less than favorably as having had Southern sympathies) did Stoddard lose his post. The ax fell heavily on the inspector and his wife, despite the fact that Stoddard had staved off the
inevitable longer than many officials. The transience of political appointments was as
unavoidable in the nineteenth century as it is now, and those writers who benefited from the
informal government patronage had to function with the knowledge that the ultimate exclusion
lay ahead. The competitiveness of official candidacy could lead to reward, but the reward in turn
would lead to expulsion.

The exclusive temperament of New York’s literary gentry further manifested itself against
many of the United States’ own writers. Partly as a result of the lack of an international copyright
law (which made the pirating of British works more profitable than the publication of American
books), and partly as a result of a continuing intellectual colonialism, the city’s most influential
editors and publishers read American writing through the lens of a trenchant Anglophilia. This
Anglo-adulation – a particular mode of genteel exclusion that registered as the intolerance, or at
best ambivalence, toward the distinctly native – devolved into the internalized discrimination of
factionalism as debates about nationalism and literature filled the pages of the city’s journals. As
Perry Miller puts it, the nineteenth century “was a brutal age (for all that we suppose it decorously
Victorian), and New York was a world capital of invective....”

Lewis Gaylord Clark spent much of his career embroiled in the debate over whether
American literature should strive for a distinctive quality, an originality and independence that
would not hesitate to depict the unrefined dimensions of a new world or the strenuous
possibilities of a democracy. Clark maintained that the deliberate fashioning of a national style
amounted to little more than articulate jingoism, a kind of forced politicizing of expression that
properly transcends the political.22 If few American authors were published, Clark argued, it was

(New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956) 186. An in-depth look at the complex, volatile world of
nineteenth-century journalism, this work provides a classic examination of the foundations for an American
literature.

22 To make his point with the appearance of nonpartisan objectivity, Clark reprinted in the Knickerbocker
an essay that had originally been published in the North American Review, a journal known for its lofty,
apolitical demeanor. The essay, written by Cornelius C. Felton, a Harvard professor, included the
following pronouncement: “The more universal its intellectual acquirements, the grander and more
imperishable will be the monuments of [a national mind’s] intellectual existence. A petty nationality of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
because the young country had not yet produced many writers of serious merit. A willful emphasis on the crudity of American culture was not the solution to this dearth, but would only complicate the deficiencies of American authorship.

On the other side of this issue stood Evert Duyckinck, Cornelius Matthews, and other members of the Young America movement. Duyckinck and his colleagues sought to free American writers from the example of Sir Walter Scott and the influence of the historically laden romance. “Truth is now better than fiction,” they announced in Arcturus, the first formal enterprise of Young America. “The present is greater than the past” (Miller 89). If publishers would only take the risk of investing in American works, more writers would feel at liberty to cultivate a distinctively democratic style. “In view of the well known paucity of home literature,” Duyckinck and Matthews wrote in another Arcturus piece, “it certainly cannot appear unreasonable to ask encouragement for the production of at least one volume more which shall bear the impress of a true American spirit” (Miller 90). The presence in the literary marketplace of that “one volume more” would, in fact, contribute to a transformation in public taste, an acceptance of non-European attitudes and experiences that would eventually lead to monetary rewards for the publishers who initially risked the production of “home literature.” Struggling, in effect, to declare literary independence, Duyckinck and his comrades were forced to wrestle not so much with the direct cultural control of Europe, as with the “home” mentality of genteel connoisseurship through which that control was exerted.

All of these examples of literary discernment, cultural competition, and social discrimination attest to the self-consciously selective atmosphere in which the Stoddards strove for artistic fulfillment and recognition. The myriad solicitous biographers and poets who vied for a governmental “career,” and the rejection of American authors and their work as typically crude point to the hierarchical arrangement of the genteel literary establishment, to the habit of

spirit is incompatible with true cultivation. An intense national self-consciousness, though the shallow may misname it patriotism, is the worst foe to the true and generous unfolding of national genius” (qtd. in
demonstrable respectability and the anxiety of rank. The opposite of that inclusive, democratic spirit projected by Walt Whitman, the spirit of genteel letters was deliberately exclusive (even if, by today's standards, its criteria for acceptance do not seem particularly stringent). Inextricable from the genteel tradition's production of culture was the business of drawing boundaries, boundaries that not only kept literary "ladies" in their place, but that separated authors from scribblers, club members from non-club members, high art from low art. Where the formal New York clubs excluded women (to return to Person's point), the soirées excluded the unconnected and the half-educated.

A very clear demonstration of the culture's obsession with boundaries as simultaneously communitarian and exclusive are the lists of names that typically appear in journalistic accounts of New York literary hobnobbing. The Critic's account of Richard Stoddard's honorary dinner, held in 1897 when Stoddard had reached the final stages of his often thankless career, includes a complete list of guests' names on its second page. Observing that the dinner was for the Authors' Club's "only active member who has ever been promoted to honorary membership," the article then proceeds to identify the individuals who gathered to celebrate the septuagenarian's accomplishments. The event "was presided over by Mr. E. C. Stedman, at whose right sat the guest of the evening." Accompanying Stedman and Stoddard "at the table of honor were Messrs. Parke Godwin, F. R. Stockton, Laurence Hutton, R. W. Gilder, Edward Dickinson, C. G. Whiting, C. P. Daly, G. H. Putnam, F. H. Williams, ex-Judge H. E. Howland, Richard Harvey, O. G. Kiliani and Lorimer Stoddard, the poet's son." The article then supplies in alphabetical order the names of the remaining guests, beginning with Henry Abbey and ending with W. C. Witter.

This fixation on the legitimating power of names is not confined to those individuals who were actually present at the Stoddard dinner. Appended to The Critic's description of the celebration are many of the regrets of those unable to attend the event. Recited during the evening by "Mr. Ripley Hitchcock, the Secretary of the Club," these messages are printed in a
textual re-creation of their ceremonial reading. They include the apologies and lavish praises of Donald G. Mitchell, Edmund Gosse, Edward Everett Hale, Arthur Conan Doyle, William Dean Howells, Charles Scribner, and Edward Eggleston. "Seven hundred miles of regret," wrote Eggleston, while Howells pronounced: "No man honors or values him more, or has greater reason to thank him for such joy as remains in the heart and mind from noble verse, than I who have the misfortune not to join you in hailing him at first hand." Paying homage from London, Edmund Gosse observed, "America, in my judgment, does well to be proud of Stoddard — true singer, true lover of intellectual beauty, true inheritor of the great spirit of the poets" (230). The Critic also acknowledges the letters of regret not read aloud or printed, letters "received from Bishop Potter, Prof. Charles Eliot Norton, Dr. Andrew D. White, Felix Adler, William Allen Butler, F. F. Browne, editor of The Dial, and Edward Abbott, editor of the Boston Literary World" (231).

What are all of these names doing in a piece that recounts an evening devoted to Richard Henry Stoddard? They are helping to construct the collage of credentials that was, in the public sense, Richard Henry Stoddard. The Authors' Club was a hub of cultural commerce, the chief commodity of which was not literature or inspiration or ideas, but — authors. Authors as discrete producers of words, and authors as, ultimately, collective proof of the autonomous imperturbability of high culture. It is one thing to say that Stoddard was deeply attached to the club through ties of friendship and habit. And this, in fact, is what Ripley Hitchcock says in his afterword to Stoddard's Recollections Personal and Literary. Writing both of the club that honored the aging poet in 1897 and the larger organization started by Lewis Gaylord Clark, Hitchcock observes that Stoddard's "social interests, outside the close-knit circle of his friends, were centered in his beloved Century and in the Authors [sic] Club." Stoddard, Hitchcock points out, was "a member of the Century since 1863, [and] ... followed the affairs of the club with an affectionate interest unabated by the passage of forty years" (310). It is another thing, however, to say that Stoddard was in a fundamental sense indistinguishable from the affairs that he followed with such fond interest.
The Authors' Club consisted of individuals with literary aspirations, and it consisted, in a public reification of separatist taste, of associatively invented intellectual connoisseurs, spokesmen for a newly rigidified cultural hierarchy who, like the admen in a new industry, spoke on an immediate level for their product ("the great spirit of the poets"), while on a profounder level the product (in actuality the "greatness" of the poets' spirit) spoke for them. Richard Stoddard was an individual who labored alone, over a period of many years, for the recognition granted him on March 25, 1897. At the same time, the Richard Stoddard honored on March 25 and represented in The Critic was evidence of the solidarity and success of genteel culture, what Stedman described in his opening speech as "one of our own." Stoddard was both "one," in all the solitarily musing, individually enterprising senses of the word, and "our own," to the extent that such oneness is the construct of a community, the ideological creation of a particular society and economy.  

Richard Henry Stoddard was a man of individual and collective dimensions, for which reason it makes perfect sense that The Critic should include every invited guest in its...
account of the Hotel Savoy dinner and the honorary recipient. The authenticity of the celebrated poet was the authenticity of the genteel community – the clubs, the editorial alliances, the ambitious friendships – so that the list of guests’ names demonstrated the influence both of Stoddard himself and the self-appointed, interdependent elite we call the genteel circle.

It is true that when Stedman referred to Stoddard as “one of our own,” he was not consciously establishing a boundary between this elite and the rest of American society so much as he was explicitly pointing out that the honored poet was neither European nor bound for another country. The distinctions of class and cultural eloquence with which “our own” resonates to modern ears – distinctions ideologically formulated and maintained within nineteenth-century American society – are absorbed into the distinction between New World and Old, between American and European. The internal separatism of gentility implied by such “ownness” is displaced onto the issue of national difference, which in the hands of Stedman and his colleagues was not nationalism per se, but a kind of pride tempered by the emulation of things British. Thus Stedman pronounced in the gala’s opening speech, “To-night’s gathering is indeed exceptional, being in public honor of an American author here resident – of ‘one of our own,’ – who is not booked for a foreign mission, nor leaving the country, nor returning, nor doing anything more unusual than to perform his stint of work, and to sing any song that comes to him…” (227).24


distinctness of Richard Stoddard as a representative of the genteel tradition – an approach that applies to everyone in his literary circle – derives in large part from the work of Williams. 24 An invitation dated more than thirty years before the Stoddard dinner reflects the tendency of New York’s literary gentlemen to acknowledge an associate’s return to or departure from the United States with a formal gathering. On November 16, 1866, the friends and colleagues of James Lorimer Graham, Jr., held a 9:00 supper at Delmonico’s in recognition of his impending “departure from this country for a prolonged residence in Europe.” The invitation was sent to twenty-five residents of the city, each of whom was asked to pay fifteen dollars for the occasion. Four “non-residents” of New York were asked to attend as “invited guests,” a request that presumably exempted them from the fifteen dollar fee. This invitation is, in fact, a good illustration of the demarcating temperament I have been discussing. Listed on the note are the names of every man invited, including the four “non-residents” of New York City, George Henry Boker, Samuel Bowles, R. M. C. Graham, and Donald G. Mitchell. The appearance of these names on the invitation signaled to its recipients who did and did not belong to the inner circle of New York’s genteel culture. Among the names listed are Edwin Booth, George William Curtis, Bayard Taylor, Edwin Lawrence Godkin, Winslow Homer, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Stoddard. Ironically, Graham’s connection with Stoddard at one point served to demonstrate the indeterminacy of the genteel boundaries. A mere two years before Graham’s bon voyage supper (of which Stoddard was one of the principal organizers), the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
During the course of his claim that this is the first time the Authors' Club has paid "tribute to one of its own number," Stedman concedes that the organization has "many festivals counted in its private annals." The club, the presiding figure's comments suggest, has been accused of perfunctoriness, even monotony in its repetitive presentation of honorary dinners. "We have heard something of late concerning the 'banquet habit,'" he admits, "and there are banquets which make it seem to the point." In a dignified assertion of momentousness, however, Stedman proclaims that "there are also occasions which transfigure even custom, and make it honored 'in the observance'" (227). The celebration of Richard Stoddard's presence on the literary scene, the "homage... rendered, with love and enthusiasm, for his service to 'mere literature,'" is elevated above customary feting by the poet's Americanness and by his stationary pursuit of letters (227). Precisely because the author of Songs of Summer and The Lion's Cub, and Other Poems is not going overseas or returning from a trip abroad does the occasion warrant particular note. Meanwhile, in the interstices of Stedman's insistence on exceptionality and momentousness, skulks the specter of tedium, the awareness that the public (and perhaps some of the Authors' Club's own members) see banqueting as mere "habit."

Like the almost incantatory listing of guests' names, the frequent dinners hosted not only by the Authors' Club, but by various other educated coteries functioned as ritualistic demonstrations of the genteel, exclusionary temperament. An extension, one might argue, of postbellum America's obsession with an evolutionary, competitive model of social and economic interaction, the genteel emphasis on cultural selectivity found an elaborately codified expression in the "banquet habit." Selectivity and exclusion constituted only half of the ceremonial significance of these dinners, however. The other half consisted of the inclusive definition of a community, the articulation of membership that legitimated the values and beliefs of those who belonged within the community. The Stoddard dinner (like the much earlier farewell supper for Graham or the

Century Club organized a birthday celebration for William Cullen Bryant. When Graham suggested Richard Stoddard as a possible guest, George Bancroft, who was in charge of the celebration, said, "Who is
famous Whittier birthday dinner of 1877) was a prominent assertion of group identity and validity. In honoring a particular individual, the fete also honored (and, therefore, implicitly identified as honorable) the group of intellectuals who upheld Stoddard’s credentials. The list of names in The Critic’s account of the dinner, it follows, spelled out the inner constitution of prestige (a beckoning, almost exhibitionist gesture) even while it announced that prestige in an unavoidably prohibitive tone.  

An interesting expression of how genteel society’s regular gatherings (whether elaborate, honorary dinners or informal meetings) contributed to a collective sense of cultural authority, to an inclusive grasp of the shared responsibilities and privileges of intellectuals, is found in Richard Stoddard’s poem, “At the Authors’ Club.” Published in the Saturday Evening Post, the poem celebrates the camaraderie of the New York writers who convened at the reputable club.

Stoddard, I never heard of him” (qtd. in Matlack, 324).

25 The ambiguous nature of these honorary dinners as both a statement of genteel consolidation and elitist force, and as an almost solicitous exposure of alliances is particularly underscored by the fact that Stoddard’s dinner was a public affair. The exclusionary status of the event was balanced against a yearning recognition of the public’s power, resulting in an occasion that brought together hauteur and accessibility. According to The Critic, “The plan of a dinner offered to [Stoddard] by his fellow members had been suggested at first, but when this project became known, the interest in it shown by a larger public became so great that the Club decided not to restrict the homage due to the poet, but to admit all his admirers, whether members or not” (226). Restriction, here, was lifted for the sake of a broad enthusiasm, and yet, at the same time, the criterion of admiration for Stoddard presumed a degree of erudition and class that prevented the dinner from being a vulgar affair. “Thus it came to pass that about 140 people prominent in many walks of life sat down to the dinner...” (226, italics added). The Critic’s explanation of why the event was made public joins clubbish pride with popular fervor, alleging the (in fact debatable) celebrity of Stoddard in the process. What this explanation doesn’t convey is that Stedman and Elizabeth Stoddard, the two who convinced the poet to endure the elaborate tribute despite his failing eyesight, sought public involvement with a fervor equaling the supposed zeal of Richard’s general audience. The genteel end of the arrangement, in other words, was privately as clamorous as the public was said to have been. In a typically perverse construction of the fete as obituary, Elizabeth wrote to Stedman, “I am anxious to have my place in the funeral, and what publicity is to be given to the obsequies through the press” (qtd. in Matlack, 610). Elizabeth, like most male members of the genteel circle, sought the attention (if not always the approval) of the public, even while claiming in other contexts not to “care a copper” for its opinions.
"At the Authors' Club"

by Richard Henry Stoddard

Meetings like this, dear comrades of the pen,

Though new with us, were old with lettered men;

They carry us back in thought three hundred years,
To the days of gentle Will and rare old Ben:
Who at the Mermaid Tavern loved to sit,
Fresh from the parts they played, the plays they writ,

And while they set the table in a roar

Indulged in combats of good-natured wit.

Nay, further back. For many a learned tome
Recounts how in the palmy days of Rome

Maecenas, Horace, drained their cups of wine,
And sometimes Virgil from his rustic home.

Johnson in Boswell's pages still we see
Presiding at the Mitte, drinking tea:

But was it tea he drank there? I forget:

Hardly, I think, so disputatious he.

The poet in the time of good Queen Anne
What'er he was not, was a thirsty man,

Frequenting coffee-houses, Button's, Will's,
Where blood did often end what ink began.

Less prodigal in these less poetic days,
We prosper more in more prosaic ways;

Good husbands, fathers, some good business men,

Preferring solid cash to empty praise.
We are happier, wiser, stronger now than then,
Since, governing ourselves, we govern men:
They knew of old no weapon but the sword;
We know to-day a better one – the Pen!

Taking as his inspiration a particular meeting of the club, Stoddard asserts that his fellow writers and club members are “dear comrades of the pen,” a phrase suggesting the intense bonding of martial pride. The club’s meetings, which are still too new to constitute a “banquet habit,” serve as the foundation of this affinity, supporting in a novel reciprocity of ambition and beliefs a self-defined community of creators. Whatever tenuousness might result from the newness of these meetings, furthermore, is offset by their connection with the meetings that writers from earlier generations held. New to Stoddard’s contemporaries, these gatherings in fact comprise a profound link between the Victorian authors and the creators and cultural purveyors of the past. The community established with the Authors’ Club extends beyond the immediate presence of its turn-of-the-century members to include Horace, Virgil, Samuel Johnson, “gentle Will” Shakespeare, and many others. In effect, Stoddard invites his reader to construe “the club” not as the actual group of men who convened at Seventh Avenue and 56th Street, but as a company of artists whose genius is choreographed over centuries. From this perspective, mortality and the distance of generations are less prohibitive of membership in the club than, say, class difference or the declaration of bohemian views. While Stoddard’s “dear comrades” are, on the one hand, carried back to the Mermaid Tavern and Button’s “coffe-house,” the writers of the past are in a sense transported to Victorian New York where they can boast of being “At the Authors’ Club.”

On a literal level, of course, the poem presents Johnson, Shakespeare, and the others in their proper epochs, illustrating how they convened with their own contemporary “comrades of the pen” and argued with their intellectual rivals. These “lettered men” of old – actors and playwrights and poets – gathered in benign displays of repartee (“combats of good-natured wit”), as well as in occasionally violent demonstrations of their ideas (“blood did often end what ink
began”). Whether setting a “table in a roar” of amusement or luring the poet Virgil from his retreat, moreover, these authors were united (and then sometimes divided, as the case might be) by a love of alcohol.

Indeed, the thirst of these deceased authors, not only for knowledge but for wine emerges in this poem as the one rupture in the time-transcending club. The lettered men of old “drained their cups of wine” while exerting their minds over poetry, drama, and the literary treatment of ideas. At times the effect was ribald, at others “disputatious.” Ultimately, the authors’ thirst accounts for a philosophical and temperamental difference between the Victorians and their predecessors, a prodigality that gives rise to strife and that betokens a lack of self-control. The authors who prospered during Rome’s “palmy days” and “in the time of good Queen Anne” were prone to envy, distrust, and the heated defense of their work, all qualities that point to ungoverned passion. Such passion, Stoddard implicitly states, was only made more ungovernable by the uncontrolled indulgence in alcohol. By contrast, Stoddard’s nineteenth-century companions at the Authors’ Club are sober and controlled. They create literature that reflects their level-headed pursuit of domestic happiness and business success, while their meetings — “meetings like this” — dramatize the harmonious effects of clear-mindedness. Authors who thrive on “prosaic ways,” the Victorians differ from their forebears in a shared consciousness uninterrupted by drunken disputes. Thus the club that transcends mortality and time is most inclusive, most seamlessly communitarian in its present form, as a nineteenth-century institution. When action is required, the pen and not the sword is the “weapon” of choice — a claim that sustains the martial fervor introduced in the first line of the poem, while emphasizing the difference between the staid New Yorkers and their vehement predecessors. Literary community, here, extends beyond the present

26 Scholars will note that the image of creative harmony Stoddard projects downplays the literary feuds that actually occurred in nineteenth-century New York. Albeit the pen and not the sword was the preferred means of conflict, the writing and publishing scene witnessed an intellectual ruthlessness that can best be attributed to the uncertain, formative stage of American letters. From an ideological stance, however, “At the Authors’ Club” is revelatory in its effort to depict a well-defined community of intellectuals,
into the distant past, but it is most cohesive, Stoddard appears to be saying, where imagination
and sobriety converge.

In situating the ideal of sober artistry against a backdrop of less-than-perfect historical
exemplars, Richard Stoddard essentially brings together two major preoccupations of postbellum
America – the tradition-oriented establishment of lineage (that is, the lineage of people and of
ideas), and the faith in an inexorable progress. “At the Authors’ Club” yokes the pedigree of “the
Pen” with the progress of morality. More characteristic of the genteel disposition, though, is the
focus on the issue of pedigree. As a general rule, Stoddard and his circle were more concerned
with the prestigious power of the past than with the progressive promise of the future. Indeed,
they were interested in constructing the present with the authenticating materials of the past. A
symptom of its conservative distrust in a rapidly changing world, the genteel mind, anchored by
the bourgeois, Euro-centric concept of civilized learning, often expressed a cultural solidarity
resting on the accomplishments of deceased authors and artists. As if to say that immigration (for
example) could not alter the purity of its (Western European) outlook, or that the sudden gains
and losses of the nineteenth-century economy (as another example) could not destabilize its
hierarchical perspective, the genteel mind articulated an experience of community that
acknowledged its specific, Victorian habitus, but that also claimed a creative pedigree reaching
back into a legitimating history.

Another poem by Richard Stoddard, “At a Dinner of Artists,” provides a different perspective
on the social and (loosely speaking) ancestral dimensions of creativity. Published in 1890 as part
of The Lion’s Cub, the poem depicts its speaker in the company of his artistic peers. In this case,
though, the company of peers are apparently the poet’s contemporaries, and not figures from the
past.
At a Dinner of Artists

Sitting beside you in these halls to-night,
Begirt with kindly faces known so long,
My heart is heavy though my words are light,
So strangely sad and sweet are art and song.

Twin sisters, they, at once both bright and dark,
Clinging to coming hours and days gone by,
When hope was jubilant as a morning lark,
And memory silent as the evening sky.

Where are the dear companions, yours and mine,
Whom for one little hour these walls restore,
Courteous and gracious, of a noble line,
And happy times that will return no more?

Farewell and hail! We come and we depart:
I, with my song (ah me!), you, with your art.

A sense of temporal immediacy is established in the first line of the poem as the speaker addresses "you," an unidentified artist who lives in the present and occupies "these halls to-night." This immediate, creative camaraderie, for all its unifying power, does not serve as a direct link between those present at the dinner and the creators of previous generations, as it does in "At the Authors' Club," however. On the contrary, the poet and visual artists of the past are conspicuously, disturbingly absent. "Where are the dear companions, yours and mine,/ Whom for one little hour these walls restore,/ Courteous and gracious, of a noble line,/ and happy times that will return no more?" Indeed, the absence of these "dear companions" from a bygone time attests, the speaker suggests, to the vacuousness of immortality. Not even "song" and "art," the "twin sisters" of poetic and visual work, can ensure a lasting presence among the "kindly faces"
of the gifted. “Farewell and hail! We come and we depart:/ I, with my song (ah me!), you, with your art.”

Insofar as disappointment registers the intensity of expectation, however, the poem belies its own lament that artists “come” and “depart” without laying some claim on posterity. The absence of the “dear companions” from the past is more like the unreliability of fair-weather friends than the utter demise of one’s predecessors. The poem, in fact, indicates that these members “of a noble line” have attended such dinners before, even if “for one little hour.” The very walls of the room in which the speaker and his fellow artists dine “restore” these noble forebears, presumably in the physical presentation of their portraits, but also in the enclosed vitality of the coterie. This setting, expanded to its limits, implies that the genius of classical, Enlightenment, and Romantic forebears emerges from the reverberations of Victorian debate. The poem, consequently, charts not the anxiety of influence, but the angst of the unpredictable confluence of past and present. The speaker is in a morbid state precisely because his companions “of a noble line” have left him hanging. No-shows at this particular party of genteel poetry, they are in effect muses who choose to be tauntingly aloof from time to time. On a happier evening, when inspired by the presence of his forebears, the speaker might as vociferously proclaim the continuity of art, the immortality of authors, the timelessness and camaraderie of the Pen.

Read on a more figurative level, “At a Dinner of Artists” actually asserts the powerful presence of the precursor, rather than the absence or even the teasing, intermittent company of the forebear/muse. In its presentation of a speaker who, while surrounded by other figures (“kindly faces known so long”), is overcome by a solitary sense of impermanence, Stoddard’s work states the pensive presence of the British Romantic poet. “I, with my song” and “you, with your art’ come and depart, Stoddard claims in a Keatsian melding of the aesthetic and the humanly evanescent. Like the poet who sees “Grecian grandeur” mingling with “the rude/Wasting of old Time,” Stoddard discerns amid the arranged grandeur of the artists’ dinner the insurmountable
Stoddard may not be surveying a band of ancient figures from the Parthenon, but his extraction of a cosmic “Farewell” from the frieze of seated dinner guests amounts to the claim that Keats is in the room. Amazingly, the author of “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” has not merely been “restored” by the walls of the dining hall, but is actually standing at the head of the table proposing a toast!

On a more serious, literal note, Keats exerted a tremendous influence on Richard Stoddard. In the summer of 1849, when Stoddard first met Bayard Taylor, the two writers formed an almost instantaneous friendship conceived out of a shared love for poetry generally, but fleshed out by their fantasy that they were “the poetic inheritors of Shelley’s and Keats’s inspiration” (Beatty 61). Taylor took as his literary exemplar the author of “To a Skylark” and “Ode to the West Wind” (a homage expressed in his own “Ode to Shelley”), while the less established Stoddard fancied himself the twin of Keats (Tomsich 9). As derivative and callow as this emulation may sound today, Stoddard’s and Taylor’s admiration for their British forebears demonstrates once again the tendency of the genteel imagination to elide individual and historical differences in the interest of defining a distinct literary community. By envisioning themselves as the direct inheritors of Romantic, poetic inspiration, Stoddard and Taylor in effect defined a creative

27 The preceding quotations are from Keats’s 1817 sonnet, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.” The entirety of the sonnet is provided below.

My spirit is too weak; mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep;
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with rude
Wasting old Time – with a billowy main,
A sun, a shadow of a magnitude.
community, the unifying principles of which were immune to the accidents of geography and
time.

Such keen admiration for Shelley and Keats, in fact, led to the congenial inception of yet
another genteel coterie, a steady fraternization that only retrospectively acquired the formal title
of a club. Stoddard and Taylor, who quickly adopted the habit of meeting in each other's rooms
and sharing literary ideas, hit upon the pastime of parodying well-known authors, contemporary
and deceased. Along with Fitz James O'Brien ("a brilliant young Irishman," in Stoddard's
words, "a fluent journalist, a clever magazinist, and a more than promising poet"), the young
writers engaged in "neck and neck race[s]" to outdo one another's imitations. Their contests
Stoddard described as "tournaments of rhyme," with the three participants "young knights...,
crossing swords, splintering spears, and unhorsing each other in honor of their beautiful Queen,
Poesy!" Only in the published recollections of these "tournaments" years later was the jousting
preserved as the playful proceedings of a club. In 1876 Taylor published The Echo Club and
Other Literary Diversions (based on a series of Atlantic Monthly articles from 1872), adding to
the parodies a prologue by his companion and opponent, Stoddard. Whether in the informal,
competitive atmosphere of the actual contests, however, or in the published presentation of their
clubishness, the literary sense of a connection with other authors contributed to a defining
experience of camaraderie and discrimination. The love of Keats and Shelley, as well as the less
reverent desire to satirize Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe, were used to construct an almost
meta-historical comprehension of literary class.

The conviction that literary people (to be read usually as literary men of Western European
extraction who have a certain humanistic training) constitute not only a distinct class, but a
distinct world unto themselves is expressed in Stoddard's claim that his Saturday nights with
Taylor and O'Brien represented a "happy side of life," a side separate from the workaday

28 Bayard Taylor. The Echo Club and Other Literary Diversions. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company,
1876. Quotations from Prologue xvi-xvii, by Richard Henry Stoddard.
existence of most Americans. These Saturday nights “represented a side of life of which I had read in the memoirs of men of letters, – poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who wrote in conjunction, as in the Lyrical Ballads, or Keats, Shelley, and Hunt, who appealed to me more warmly than their opinionated elders....” The reenactment of these predecessors’ collaboration and friendship extended, for Stoddard, the unique camaraderie of authorship from the past into the present, and “reproduced this happy side of life between Taylor and myself” (ix). More than a continuation of literary habits, these evenings helped Stoddard and his new companion (who was already a recognized travel writer) forge a shared, legitimating conception of themselves as poets. “That we were poets, we both believed, and this belief was not weakened the more we saw of each other, but rather strengthened, for constant collision between our minds helped to discover us to ourselves, and to awaken powers which till then had been dormant” (ix-x).

As if to demonstrate his heightened sense of authorial pride, Stoddard begins his Prologue to The Echo Club with the identification of a “literate class.” This class, of course, includes writers like Taylor and himself, but it also includes readers with an educated appreciation of literature, readers whose love of letters goes beyond mere texts to the creators of those texts and their horizon of inspiration, composition, and criticism. “If the readers of this book belong to the literate class,” Stoddard writes, “whose interest in books which they enjoy is not confined to the books themselves, but extends to and embraces their authors, and the circumstances under which they wrote, they will not, I fancy, be averse from reading what I may write about the Echo Club, and its accomplished and versatile author” (v). “If the readers of this book belong to the literate class,” – implying that whoever is deciphering the words on the very first page of The Echo Club should want to be counted among the readers who acknowledge and confirm (in effect, help to construct) the oddly dependent yet forbidding celebrity of authors. If the reader understands that his or her most enviable possibilities qua reader amount to voyeurism (that is, a remotely privileged participation in his or her own exclusion), then the details of Bayard Taylor’s life, along with any other stray details of poets’ lives, will be readily consumed. The reader is like the
waif who, while peering into the windows of the well-to-do, tries to conform to the ethics laid down by warm, comfortable, fashionable people; the reader may be cold and hungry, but he or she is at least of the right mind and temperament. The reader may not be on that “happy side of life” known to poets, but he or she is at least among “the literate class.”

Bayard Taylor repeats this gesture of exclusionary hospitality in his own introduction to the work, claiming to protect the esoteric sympathies and interests of Echo Club members while permitting the “literate” reader glimpses of the Club’s proceedings. “Without lifting from [these poets’] intercourse that last veil of mystery, behind which only equals are permitted to pass, I may safely try to report the mixture of sport and earnest, of satire and enthusiasm, of irreverent audacity and pure aspiration, which met and mingled at their meetings” (3). You may have a peek into the inner sanctum of poetry, Taylor is saying, but you will only be allowed to observe what I, the presiding author, deem appropriate. Through my book I will censor and dispense the knowledge you seek, even as I confirm your appetite for the unattainable. For an ideal reader “is most desirous, I know, to be present at the private diversions of a small society of authors, and to hear them talk as they are wont to talk when the wise heads of the world are out of ear-shot” (3).

The reportage that Taylor provides, it turns out, serves ironically to position the members of the Echo Club themselves as “literate readers” — readers of a revered tradition who wish to demonstrate their comprehension through imitation (however jesting), even as they recognize the gulf between their great forebears and themselves. Like the “literate reader” who cranes to hear the hushed conversations of the “small society of authors,” the members of the Echo Club hang on the stylistic nuances of their predecessors in the uneasy, mock dismissiveness of parody. The club (“a small private circle”) consists of “three or four young authors” who spend their evenings “improvising imitations of older and more renowned poets” (xxiii). While these imitations occasionally alternate with “the filling up of end-rhymes (usually of the most difficult and incongruous character), …the writing of double or concealed acrostics…, spurious quotations from various languages, and whatever else could be devised by the ingenuity of the company,”
the primary focus of the circle is on emulating the works of the older and the more renowned. Not surprisingly, given the implicit pressure such "amusement" generates, many of the Club's original parodies "seemed withered and insipid" when Taylor inspected them at a later date. Imitations of Browning, Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Longfellow seem ineffectual when "removed from the genial atmosphere in which they had spontaneously grown," while other pieces are "simply parodies of particular poems, instead of being burlesque reproductions of an author's manner and diction" (xxv). The "literate reader" who suddenly stammers when asked to recite the poem he has been poring over privately, Taylor sees a sudden need to rewrite the parodies until "not more than three or four of the [parodied] ... poems" survive intact from "the original private diversions" (xxv).

---

29 The modem critic most often associated with the study of poetic influence both as a compositional reality and an interpretive paradigm is Harold Bloom. In a deliberate departure from the New Critical tenet that literary texts are isolated entities, Bloom articulates a theory of poetic creation that insists on the interrelationship of any given poem with its canonical predecessors, and of any given poet with his established precursors. As Bloom states in The Anxiety of Influence, "Poetic history... is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5). Always a response to an existing corpus of literature, the writing of poetry is a kind of willful mis-emulation. According to this conceptualization of poetic influence, which in the words of Annette Kolodny "does away with the static notion of a fixed or knowable text" (46), neither the imitativeness nor the lack of verisimilitude in the Echo Club's parodic pastimes should exclude Stoddard, Taylor, or O'Brien from the trajectory of a legitimate literary history. On the contrary, the Anglophilia and even the inaccurate imitations generally thought to characterize the genteel tradition as a whole should not exclude that tradition from a secure place in the larger history of American letters. As it turns out, however, a fundamental operating assumption behind Bloom's theory of misreading, and behind Kolodny's critique of that theory on the premise that it presumes a monolithic, masculinist tradition, is the idea that originality prevails as a mark of authenticity. Embedded in a learned past, Bloom's poet nonetheless swerves or breaks away from, completes or isolates himself from his creative forefathers (14-16). In the case of Kolodny's critique, women's writing must no longer be regarded as "caprice or exception, the irregularity in an otherwise regular design." In calling for such a change, however, Kolodny proposes another kind of rereading - what she calls "re-visionary rereading" - which amounts to an original swerving away from patriarchy. Quoting Adrienne Rich, Kolodny cites the need for an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (59). This seeing anew, like Bloom's misreading, is a deliberate reconstruction of history that implicitly underscores the resistant volition of the viewer or the reader. While the fixed or knowable text is done away with, in other words, the individual agency of the poet is posited in its place. Both Bloom's and Kolodny's dichotomizing emphasis on tradition and originality renders the critic blind, in my estimation, to such authors as the genteel poets whose promise and accomplishments lay within the institutional boundaries of the club, the magazine, and the publishing house. The model of creative misreading presupposes a power of individualistic response that was simply not a dominant part of the genteel psyche. Constructed around the value of the collective endeavor, the genteel poet's identity fails to fit the individuating strategies of twentieth-century criticism. Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts." Showalter The New Feminist Criticism 46.
The elitism of The Echo Club, qualified as it is by the dependence on a “literate” readership and the subtle slippage of superiority into self-doubt, nonetheless demonstrates the cultural value of the coterie as constructed by the genteel writing and publishing establishment. Further evidence of this cultural value appears in the pages of The Critic with Carolyn Shipman’s 1903 essay, “A Poet’s Library.”30 Like the parodic pastimes of the Echo Club, and the immortalizing representations or “restorations” of dead writers in “At the Authors’ Club” and “At a Dinner of Artists,” Shipman’s essay presents a defined circle of literary influence that survives the passing of generations. The circle, in this case, consists not of the satirized voices of Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson, nor of a perpetuated camaraderie. Instead, the group consists of the literary texts that a respected poet has acquired during his lifetime. Not only published texts, but rare books, manuscripts, autographed works, and letters make up this library, contributing to “a mass of documents... rich in association and pedigree” (317). So rich, in fact, that the massed intertextuality of canonical prestige becomes a “shadowy company” as Shipman transforms two-dimensional printed matter into personal contact. Scott, Thackeray, Cowper, Lowell, Hawthorne, Wordsworth, Emerson, and the Brownings “seem to be leaning over one’s shoulder... as a letter from each one is read,” Shipman writes (318). We can imagine the poet sitting in his library, like a spiritualist communing with a closed circle of the dead. The transformation from inanimate genius to the dynamic, time-defying presence of literature’s elite is complete when Shipman observes that such letters “prove beyond any possibility of doubt the truth of Personal Immortality, that is, the immortality of influence” (318).

The respected poet who owns all of these written testaments to “Personal Immortality” is, as the reader might expect, Richard Henry Stoddard. Shipman’s essay helped publicly to bring to a close the long twilight of Stoddard’s career (Stoddard was to die that year) while, at the same time, suggesting that the aging poet might live forever through the “immortality of influence” evidenced in his library. The essay begins by recounting how Stoddard has given part of his

library to the Authors’ Club, a “pathetic” gesture which Shipman uses to alert the reader that the poet’s end is drawing near. “He has buried his son, and recently his wife, and now, in the old house in East Fifteenth Street, while he awaits the summons that will call him to his dearly beloved, he gives up these precious friends of many years into others’ keeping” (315). More than an inanimate collection of texts, the library is an intimate community, a network of kin that offers companionship and solace during the lonely, final days of an author’s life. Not only a strikingly personal manifestation of “the camaraderie of the pen,” moreover, the library is an extension of the poet’s self that illustrates the associative, collective nature of the genteel literary identity. The Authors’ Club, Shipman claims, will treasure Stoddard’s books and manuscripts “not only for their intrinsic value, but for their association during so many years with the present Dean of American Letters in New York” (315). Just as the Richard Stoddard who belonged to the Authors’ Club was both a flesh-and-blood, individual member of that organization and a public figure constructed from the club’s constitutive powers of association, so the Richard Stoddard who gave away part of his library was both the individual, historical possessor of that collection and the intellectual sum of its cooperative “influence.” His willingness to part with the texts, consequently, amounted to his willingness to relinquish at least part of his earthly identity. Stoddard’s selection of the Authors’ club as “the final resting-place” for his library is a “pathetic” gesture, therefore, because it presages the selection of his own gravesite.

The word “pathetic” hints at the dual purpose of “A Poet’s Library,” a dual purpose that calls to mind John Tomsich’s claim that because the “genteel endeavor” was motivated by fear of an increasingly diverse populace, it sought to control public taste not simply through proclamations of expertise, but also by winning the sympathetic favor of the masses (24). The “pathetic” nature of Stoddard’s bequest to the Authors’ Club — a bequest which spells out his interment — lets the poet command public interest while not appearing to be imperious or elitist. Made unthreatening by his domestic solitude and advanced age, the poet again becomes “one of our own,” with the
“our” this time designating the reading public rather than a writers’ club. The poet becomes, in a sense, the pet of The Critic’s consumers.

Via that quintessentially genteel synecdoche whereby the individual author means the entire company of his peers, the “pathetic” display of Richard Stoddard in the embalmed form of his library becomes the laying out of the authorial tradition in which he wrote. Shipman’s essay itemizes a sizable percentage of Stoddard’s library, and even reproduces several autographed letters and manuscript pages in a solemn spread of names and titles. A signed Petrarch manuscript, a blotted page from Oliver Twist, a letter from James Russell Lowell to Edgar Allan Poe, and even half of the sixth page of Sheridan’s “Clio’s Protest” are cited in a reverential delineation of the tradition from which “the present Dean of American Letters in New York” acquired his credentials. The list of autographed manuscripts, ranging from Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears” to Longfellow’s “Haunted Houses,” indicates how erudite the dying Dean must be. At the same time, the list exposes to a curious and aspiring audience the ingredients of such erudition—the recipe for intellectual success, so to speak. Read these authors and you, too, might someday be New York’s literary Dean. Essentially an advertisement for texts donated to a private collection, “A Poet’s Library” instructs readers in the cabalistic procedures of cultural differentiation. More broadly, Shipman’s essay demonstrates the simultaneously forbidding and inviting stance of the entire “genteel endeavor.”

One of the most extended and elaborate configurations of the genteel ethos is Poets’ Homes, a text by “Richard H. Stoddard and Others.” Entitled in full as Poets’ Homes: Pen and Pencil Sketches of American Poets and Their Homes, this 1879 publication presents a domestic blueprint for the differentiating mentality of Stoddard’s circle. As Burton Bledstein has observed, the use “of space and protective boundaries to regulate the social experience of the individual” was quintessentially Victorian, a broad, nineteenth-century response to capitalist transformations.

---

The represented juncture of domestic space and the space of poetic creation, as found in Stoddard’s book, particularly regulates the cultural delivery of that “social experience.” In its detailed descriptions both of the featured poets themselves and the so-called private places these poets inhabit while they work, relax, entertain, and so forth, Poets’ Homes projects onto physical, lived space the psychological boundaries that define the genteel demeanor. The text, in fact, is a demonstration of what Bourdieu calls “differential distance,” an apprehension of physical space as a symbolic arrangement or enactment of social relations. The allegedly private abodes depicted in the book constitute, by virtue of their very depiction, an enculturating social space, and “social space,” Bourdieu tells us, “tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of life-styles and status groups characterized by different life-styles.”

The descriptions of poets’ studies – of the kinds of desks at which they wrote, the pictures on their walls, the rugs on their floors – detail the differences in lifestyle that separate the genteel author from the rest of society, that distinguish him from the educated but not quite erudite ranks of literate readers. The homes in Poets’ Homes, in other words, register in spatial terms the differential, symbolically enforced power of the pen. Like the Authors’ Club, these homes are the “sphere” in the poets’ “sphere of influence.” Or we might say (toying with Stuart Blumin’s point that the parlor, with its Brussels carpet, its sofa, and its piano, radiated a civilizing force in the middle-class home (185)) that the poets’ abodes are to the Victorian edifice of specialized spaces what the parlor is to the entire house.

Indeed, like The Critic’s representation of the Authors’ Club, the homes featured in Stoddard’s book are the locus of an ambiguous hospitality. In the same way the success of Stoddard’s honorary dinner hinged on the public spectacle of exclusivity in the form of the Club’s protocol, so the appeal of the poets’ homes lies, in the form of Stoddard’s book, in the “differential distance” that is both the proximity of visitation and the remoteness of observation.

The reader of *Poets’ Homes* is given a guided tour of the twenty-five residences showcased by Stoddard, and is even privy to the confidences of a narrator who often has firsthand knowledge of the poets. Within the schema of such hospitality, however, the reader is never directly introduced to the poets themselves, never asked to dinner, never invited on a garden stroll. The reader is only permitted to imagine such intimacy through the personal recollections of the narrator. In effect, the reader of *Poets’ Homes* is positioned in the same curious, controlled stance as the reader of *The Echo Club*. The reader is allowed to marvel at the inanimate traces of greatness, to experience the privilege of wandering through the sancta of absent genius. It can be argued, even, that within the narrative framework of Stoddard’s tours, the charm of the empty parlors and libraries depends on the alienated gratification of the reader as voyeur. The power of the “differential distance” – the space in which cultural difference is choreographed with andirons, an ottoman, and a heap of blotted papers – depends on the interest and polite discomfort of the guest.

Stoddard’s domestic tours, from this perspective, are a strategy of positing and denying the interregnum through which poetry is distinguished from the rabble of ordinary words, and the elite from the palavering masses. As such, *Poets’ Homes* enacts one of the most characteristic paradoxes of social space. Referring again to Bourdieu, the space of “differential distance” is frequently gauged through “strategies of condescension.” Such strategies are the actions “by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, …[but that results in a] symbolic denegation of distance (‘she is unaffected,’ ‘he is not highbrow’ or ‘stand-offish,’ etc.) which implies a recognition of distances” (127). Stoddard invites the reader on a tour of poets’ homes, an intimate gesture conveying the message that neither he nor the other authors is too good to play host to an anonymous throng of admirers. The genteel poet is not “highbrow” or “stand-offish,” the reader thinks. As the tour unfolds, though, perhaps even at the moment of invitation, the superiority – the learning, the taste, the decorum – of the genteel poet becomes undeniable. Stoddard, a consummate practitioner of
inequality, uses "the advantages of propinquity and the advantages of distance" both (Bourdieu 127).

The chapter of Poets' Homes devoted to William Dean Howells begins with a brief description of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the novelist and editor of The Atlantic Monthly resides. Cambridge's most striking feature, according to Stoddard, is that it calls itself home to many authors, that it is, in fact, "a literary habitation." "Whichever way you turn," Stoddard tells his reader, "or whatever street you may choose to follow, you are pretty sure to pass the door of a pen-worker before you have gone on many steps..." (119). The literary atmosphere of Cambridge is particularly evident "within the radius of a single square mile," where the homes of many of the most famous authors "are grouped together." This concentration of literary abodes, in the midst of which Howells lives, illustrates for Stoddard "what ought to be an old adage, that authorship likes close company" (119). Thus the tour of Howells's home is prefaced by Stoddard's claim that the place lies in a thick of inspiration, collective imagination, and shared aspirations. The implication seems to be that it is only through the guidance of a narrator/poet that the reader can negotiate the otherwise impenetrable milieu of authorial "closeness." Without Stoddard, the reader would never arrive at the private site of Howells's creative labor, a site surrounded by the protective camaraderie of "poets and prose writers," but would instead wander the streets of Cambridge, a meanderer in the domain of focused minds. The charitable wisdom of the narrator forestalls such meandering, however (as if, within Poets' Homes' boundaries of pretense, such aimlessness were possible), so that the reader is soon surveying not only Howells's house, which is "newly built in the modern style," but that most mysterious of settings, the "orderly" study where the author works. "As you enter the room," Stoddard writes, "the eyes first center on the well planned fireplace, with its polished dog-irons standing out from the hearth and its capital set of mantel shelves, whereon are sundry pieces of old china, enamels, Venetian work, and other knick-knacks of story and interest" (122). The reader's eyes then stray (as if of their own accord) to the bookshelves on two sides of the study, shelves that the guest sees "at a
glance... are pretty nearly filled” (122). As a matter of course, the visitor’s attention then settles on the center of the room, where “the poet’s desk” stands – a desk that is of necessity a poet’s, even though “all” of Howells’s stories and only “many” of his poems “have been penned” on its surface (122). Conveying the centripetal presence of poetry in the world of genteel literature, “the poet’s desk” is the gravitational center in the study of a man who is now remembered as a novelist.

Another Massachusetts town to which the reader is invited is Concord. Here the observer is ushered into the study of one of American literature’s most sacrosanct figures, Ralph Waldo Emerson. “A plain, square room, lined on two sides with simple wooden shelves,” Emerson’s study, Stoddard recalls, witnessed the “conversation and consultation” of “Margaret Fuller and the other bright figures of the Dial,” the “kind encouragement” Emerson gave Thoreau, and the awakening of “handsome, moody, despairing” Hawthorne from his “morbid reveries” (144-147). In the middle of the study stands “a large mahogany table..., covered with books, ...[a] morocco writing pad, ...[and] the pen which has had so great an influence for twenty-five years on the thoughts of two continents” (143). Like Howells’s study, Emerson’s room also has a large fireplace with a mantel holding “sundry pieces” – in this case, “busts and statuettes of men prominent in the great reforms of the age, and a quaint, rough idol brought from the Nile” (143).

The reader never has the pleasure of seeing Emerson at his writing desk, however. The sage is never glimpsed in the act of composition, nor even in the pose of admiring his “busts and statuettes.” Emerson is too remote a personage for that.  

Ironically, the chapter in Poets’ Homes devoted to Richard Stoddard himself also appears to be distinguished by the absence of the poet. Although Stoddard’s presence in the form of the narrator/tour guide has been implied in the book thus far, the posture of joint authorship (the almost certainly fictitious “and others” on the title page) serves to remove the poet from his abode at this point. Just when Stoddard is removed from his home, however, he is reintroduced in the personal library which will eventually be donated to the Authors’ Club. Partly an inventory of that library, the chapter on Stoddard reintroduces the poet, after his role as narrator, as a collective literary consciousness whose legitimacy derives from the name recognition of his favorite authors. Listed in this constitutive account of Stoddard’s personal library – a constituteness that emphasizes the mortal dimension, captured by Carolyn Shipman, of the poet’s generosity in donating his collection – are “the books of Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Campbell, Gray, Pope, Sterne, Churchill, and many more famous English poets....” Included
Not so with Stoddard's friend, Bayard Taylor. In the chapter describing Cedarcroft, Taylor's Pennsylvania estate, Stoddard supplies the imagined presence of his friend from actual recollections and an intimate knowledge of the man's habits. What at first proposes to be a tour of Cedarcroft becomes (with Stoddard's unconvincing dismissal of his own verbal ability) a description of the library and of Taylor himself. "My favorite room when I am there is the library, where I see Bayard Taylor seated at his desk, translating 'Faust' maybe, or writing a book of travel. He is busy, but not so busy as to be entirely absorbed in his work. He can smoke and talk without losing the thread of his thought" (117). The pose Taylor strikes is relaxed and noncommittal, suited to the casual quality of "pen and pencil sketches," perpetuating the almost mythic detachment of the lettered gentleman. The owner of Cedarcroft is busy, but not so busy as to be absorbed by his work like an uncontrolled enthusiast of art, or a laborer swallowed by industry. Master of a large estate, Taylor is also master of himself, suggesting that Stoddard's descriptive talents do not fall short of rendering Cedarcroft after all, but are exerted within a continuum of home, work, and author. The leisurely and informal attitude of the poet is not confined to Taylor, moreover, but is adopted by the narrator as he ventures out of the library and onto the grounds. "I leave [Taylor] writing in the library," Stoddard claims, "and pass out on the piazza, the pillars of which are draped in vines;

down the terrace and past the flower-beds into the green lawn bordered with trees; down the lawn to the pond at the end; back through the belt of trees on the roadside border of Cedarcroft, and up till I strike the drive and follow it to the arched portico of the tower. Then I stroll off to the orchard, the grapery, or where I will, for Cedarcroft

also are various autographs, and manuscripts from "Cowper and Shenstone, and Sheridan and Moore, and Shelley and Sir Walter Scott and Burns and Barry Cornwall, and Leigh Hunt and all the famous American poets of the present century." "The hair of John Milton" is the final personalizing touch in this collection (195).
is but another name for Liberty Hall (117).
Taylor’s air of idleness – even as he writes – infects Stoddard, causing him to “stroll off” in unpredictable directions and enact the unruffled solidarity of gentlemen poets. The irony, of course, is that Stoddard ends up describing Cedarcroft despite his earlier “inability” to do so, and he describes the estate in presenting his own (i.e., Taylor’s) leisurely demeanor – a conjuncture of writers’ identities and residential space that suggests the broad significance of Poets’ Homes.

The air of relaxed creativity appears again in the chapter on Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Destined to become Howells’s successor as editor of The Atlantic, Aldrich would have been recognized by the “literate reader” as an eminent and productive member of the authorial class. This eminence and productivity serve as the backdrop for Stoddard’s portrait of Aldrich, a backdrop presented as a library the reader cannot visit due to the “process of renovation at the time of our visit” (285). The Aldrich the reader sees (again through the personal encounters and recollections of the narrator) is not working at all, but is off fishing and hunting! “Not always is he at work with his pen,” Stoddard comments, presenting an Aldrich who, even more informal than the chatting, smoking Taylor, is “off with hook and line, or perhaps with a shot gun, in search of game.” “When not at home,” the creator of “The Ballad of Babie Bell” (the now forgotten poem that made Aldrich famous overnight) is often found at “the foot of Blue Hill” (285-6).

Yet the backdrop of the off-limits library is essential. Though not always “at work with his pen,” as Stoddard tells us, the very suggestion of that possibility, like the symbolic denial of distance in “He is not stand-offish,” indeed implies that much of Aldrich’s time is spent leaning over his desk. What Stoddard depicts, in fact, in this chapter about the man whose wife saw Elizabeth Stoddard as “a brown leaf left on the tree” is the continuity between the enclosed space of homebound work (a curious twist to domestic labor) and the outdoor spaces of leisure or recreation, spaces that are often traversed with “the boys.” The easy movement of Aldrich (and of Stoddard in Bayard Taylor’s chapter) between the interior of the home as a site of poetic labor
and the outdoors as a place of virile recreation is, we might argue, an anecdotal rendering of the
genteel poet's elastic embrace of work and play, of nascent professionalism and of amateurism,
and, ultimately, of feminine and masculine "spheres."

The distinction between private and public space has been a useful one in the analysis of
American culture. As Judith Fryer observes in her study of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather,
"there is a long-standing tradition [in America] that describes the tension between [private space
and the public place] and that defines the private space as the realm of the imagination, the public
place as the realm of behavior." This distinction between private and public realms has served
as the conceptual foundation for many modern historians' understanding of nineteenth-century
American culture, particularly insofar as it has been associated with feminine and masculine
modes of conduct and experience. Beginning with the publication of Barbara Welter's essay,
"The Cult of True Womanhood," the gendered bifurcation of place has been an essential element
of nineteenth-century studies. In recent times this bifurcation has come under fire as a critical
construct that oversimplifies the lived environments of nineteenth-century Americans, and that
eclipses whole aspects of the period. The doctrine of "separate spheres," it is now frequently
maintained, serves as an inadequate interpretive tool for historians.

34 Judith Fryer, Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (Chapel
36 Among historical essays critiquing the conceptual presupposition that nineteenth-century men and
women occupied "separate spheres" is Linda Kerber's essay, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's
Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." One of the pioneer historians who first popularized the phrase
"separate spheres" among scholars, Kerber acknowledges that the nineteenth century witnessed
"widespread usage" of the term "sphere" as a metaphor for women's and men's places in American culture.
This "widespread usage in the nineteenth century directed the choices made by twentieth-century historians
about what to study and how to tell the stories that they reconstructed" (161). The universality and
accessibility of the phrase eclipsed the reality, however, that "separate spheres [was] primarily a trope,
employed by people in the past to characterize power relations for which they had no other words." As a
consequence, "historians in our own times" adopted the metaphor without examining fully its potential for
distortion and oversimplification, finding it to be instead a convenient "device that might dispel the
confusion of anecdote and impose narrative and analytical order on the anarchy of inherited evidence"
(199). It has only been within the last decade or so, Kerber claims, that historians have begun to see
"separate spheres" for what they are — "a metaphor for complex power relations in social and economic
contexts" (184). This latest shift toward an economically and socially grounded understanding of the
"spheres" metaphor was inaugurated, incidentally, by a 1980 Feminist Studies symposium featuring Gerda
The inadequacy of the concept becomes apparent when we strive to understand *Poets' Homes* as a dynamic layout of the genteel, creative psyche, rather than as a static illustration of residual style and dated demeanors. The separation of spheres tempts us to interpret women's and men's writing in linear, even telic terms. We are invited by this dichotomy to adopt a scenario in which male authors, in particular, progress historically toward a realist, naturalist or modernist defiance of a maternally imparted ethos stressing sentiment, Christian virtue, and domestic detail. From this "spherical" perspective, male authors writing in 1879 (the year *Poets' Homes* was published) should eschew sentiment and domesticity, and exalt the fortitude of the lone man pitted against society and nature. Male poets, if they want to keep up with the times, should set themselves in virile poses against an open landscape, where the sinewy dimensions of solitude are captured against the sweep of earth and sky. Or else they should position themselves in strenuous relief against a cityscape, where individual fulfillment vies with capitalist demands. Certainly they shouldn't depict themselves within the domestic confines of the home, surrounded by feminine ornaments and the potentially overshadowing presence of tomes. Male poets, to be successful within the implied teleology of gendered spaces, must be poets of originality, machismo, and boundlessness.

*Poets' Homes*, from the point of view of such separatism, is inevitably read as an archaic and effete text. The book's emphasis on private settings and its concomitant atmosphere of leisurely creation lodge its featured figures in a vestigial enclave (womb, one is tempted to assert) of poetry and performance. If we pay attention to the conceptual map by which we read not only...
Stoddard’s book, but most genteel writing, however, we can begin to see that the separation of feminine and masculine spaces is the effect of a scholarly predisposition for gendered essentialism, and, more broadly, the effect of a modern analytical tendency to categorize the private and the public, the personal and the professional, and the individual and the collective as opposites, rather than as shifting points on a continuum. The distinction between the home and the office, say, or the home and the factory or public square reflects the bifurcating mentality of the historian as much as (if not more than) the actual circumstances of Victorian life. So, too, do the distinctions between men and women, and autonomy versus consensus and coercion.

Poets’ Homes and, indeed, the genteel tradition itself is best understood if we imitate Stoddard as he wanders around Bayard Taylor’s residence. We should take for granted that the doors between the library and the yard are always open, allowing for easy passage from the highly personal and protected writing desk to the open spaces where one might plausibly observe Thomas Bailey Aldrich, fishing pole in hand, trekking with “the boys.” The separation between the private and the public, the personal and the professional, and the feminine and the masculine is really a pair of French doors, thrown open to a refreshing confluence of identities. Bayard Taylor’s home, in fact, is the metaphor par excellence for the genteel mentality, particularly in that its owner is both absent and (through the firsthand recollections of the narrator) a friendly – if preoccupied – figure. Taylor, representing the ideal genteel author, is loftily inscrutable to the average reader. Yet this posture of superiority is offset by a narrative hospitality that gives the reader a glimpse of the author’s intimate existence. Such is the role that Stoddard’s dear friend plays – that of the phantom poet/host – in his paradoxical summation of polite culture.

brutal new industrial civilization,” Jackson Lears nonetheless accepts the dichotomous construction of American literary history in his equation of genteel culture with a feminized retreat from reality, a dichotomous construction that misses the ambiguity in the genteel poets’ public domesticity. When Jackson Lears asserts that “sentimental literature performed the same function as the domestic ideal [in that] both were part of an overall pattern of evasion in the dominant culture,” he ignores, in fact, the evasive power of the masculine, autonomous ideal as a reaction against the disempowering influence of corporate work structures, an influence that the genteel poets negotiated with their ambiguous embodiment of public/private, masculine/feminine identities. (Lears No Place of Grace, 17)
The very home itself (both Cedarcroft in particular, and the poets' residences generally) conveys perfectly the nature of genteel power. As a site of fascination, the home appears regularly in postbellum books, sometimes as a mundane counterpoint to celebrity, but more often as a mapping of the predilections and habits of the entire middle class, an illustration of bourgeois sensibilities that translates the liminal dynamics of capitalism into the apparently ahistorical realm of the parlor and the garden. Arguably an identifiable if transitory genre in American letters, such "home" writing lays out an important space for class reification on the presumption that the socioeconomic and private realms are disparate, a presumption that is ultimately the fiction that the genre circularly requires and creates. A peek into the dining room allows us to discern a side to its main occupant which is more "genuine" or "down-to-earth" than that revealed by his office at the law firm, even as the value of such personal "genuineness" is an effect of professionalism and its epitome in the law office. A paragraph or two of such meal-time peeking, in the end, determines not merely the authentic tastes of the diner, but the ingestive balance of a bourgeoisie that takes in the preferences of the highfalutin with imitative fervor, and the indelicacies of the masses with the hope of corrective uplift.

Like the middle class as a whole, the genteel writers were poised between emulation and phobic superiority. And, as with the bourgeoisie generally, the middling status of these postbellum, establishmentarian authors was laid out in the descriptions of their homes. Poets' Homes, as a specific example of this architectural and decorative articulation of social being, expresses in its succinct imagery not merely the broad class and economic manifestations of an intermediate identity, but the more particular liminalities of the genteel ethos. Aside from its ambivalence toward European ways of life, captured in competing Anglophilia and fear of immigrant cultures, the genteel group was characterized by its fluctuating stance between

---

38 Among textual examples of the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with the home are: American Victorian Cottage Homes, initially published by Palliser and Company in 1878 and republished by Dover in 1990; Country Houses and Seaside Cottages of the Victorian Era, first published by William T.
personal and professional modes of conduct, its related traversing of the line between private and public conduct, and its embodiment of "feminine" and "masculine" values. Straddling historically the personal etiquette of gentlemanly publishing and an emergent professionalism emphasizing public demand, the genteel circle observed simultaneously the strictures of intimacy and business decorum. A note on Century letterhead from Richard Watson Gilder to Richard Stoddard, for example, could begin with the words, "What a big house you live in! [speaking of homes] and what a fine portrait of yourself in the foreground...." The importance of that "big house" in establishing a refined author's reputation (what we might call his social domesticity), meanwhile, underscores the convergence of male and female spheres in a publicly visible form of labor (composing for publication) that is pursued in the confines of the home. The significance of the "library" or the "den" as the place of poetic work is a spatialization, in fact, of the feminine/masculine melding that occurs on a stylistic level with the genteel use of sentiment in the context of a patriarchal European tradition. Identified at least since Santayana's time with a simplistic image of womanly emotionalism, the genteel practice of literature combined "feminine" values with a male-oriented veneration of British letters.

The true power of the genteel tradition, which is habitually dismissed as effeminate by modern readers trained to privilege virile individualism, is lost when we fail to question the divisions and tensions by which we arrange American literary history. We might even go so far as to say that we have no language within our familiar lexical orbit with which to describe and understand the influence of genteel writing and publishing, they being a tradition that in a sense predates the categorical, judgmental separation of "feminine" and "masculine" literary perspectives – perspectives which in turn serve as a sexualized shorthand for a host of other...

---

39 Richard Watson Gilder to Richard Henry Stoddard, February 5, 1885. New York Public Library, the Richard Watson Gilder papers. The letter concludes with a request on behalf of the Century for Stoddard to submit a few poems which might serve to pay off the magazine, the monthly having assumed the role of Stoddard's creditor.
distinctions. The best we can do perhaps is to see the genteel milieu as a transitional epoch poised between the cultural ideals of refined amateurism and competitive professionalism. The genteel era, according to this limited assessment, was an epoch holding these two ideals of amateurism and professionalism in a synthesis of feminized privacy and masculinized public identity, a synthesis which is most succinctly imaged in the genteel poet's home.

Both a personal space and a readerly dimension of public scrutiny, the poet's home lays out in material terms the coexistence, the inextricability even of men's and women's "spheres," of labor and leisure, formality and intimacy, restraint and sentiment. The continuity of the poet's home as a rubric that encompasses indoor and outdoor places, the emotional interiority of poetic inspiration and the observable outreach of cultural commerce, makes the site a perfect representation of genteel sensibilities. For this reason, presumably, two poets in Stoddard's book are described as in effect homeless. Walt Whitman, whose position within genteel circles was ambiguous at best, is depicted by Stoddard as lacking a home "in the special sense." Whitman's non-gentility, in other words, is encoded in Stoddard's claim that the democratic bard lacks "the usual library or 'den' for composition and work." Whitman "composes everywhere," claims Stoddard, "sometimes in the New York and Brooklyn ferries, sometimes on the top of omnibuses in the roar of Broadway, or amid the most crowded haunts of the city" (52). This picture holds a certain charm, but it subtly and effectively alienates the author of Leaves of Grass from the group of poets whose worthiness Stoddard demonstrates through "the usual library" and "den."

Whitman is positioned outside the circle of genteel influence by being positioned, in another "special sense," out of doors. Similarly, Joaquin Miller, another poet occupying the fringes of nineteenth-century literature's polite, Eastern establishment, is represented as a homeless figure. The chapter of Stoddard's book devoted to Miller begins with the words, "'A poet without a Home,' would not be an inappropriate title for the present article" (60). "Joaquin Miller comes pretty near being, like Goldsmith, a citizen of the world," says Stoddard in concession to the Western poet's worldliness (60). But he lacks a Home with a capital "H." Miller lacks, by virtue
of his rugged persona and his regionalism, that “special sense” of home which is the genteel matrix of “feminine” restraint and sophistication, and “masculine” exhibitionism and aggression.

Curiously, Stoddard employs in an early poem both the image of domestic comfort and the contrary representation of alienation from the home (a variation on homelessness) to convey not the secure, establishmentarian identity of certain writers and the questionable status of others, but the agonizing slippage between respectability and marginality for a young culture broker. Published in 1859, “Without and Within” communicates the anxious progress of a young writer from the drudgery and invisibility of an as yet nascent literary career – depicted as the author’s being outside on an inclement, winter night – to the comfort and assurance of an established literary reputation – conveyed as the narrator’s ensconcement in a warm parlor. Building on the centripetal, metaphorical power of domesticity, the creator of “Without and Within” uses the home not simply to capture the simultaneously masculine/feminine and public/private aspects of a secure, genteel poetic identity, but also, through separation from the home, the longing and assiduity that Stoddard himself experienced as a young laborer-by-day/poet-by-night desiring to enter the ranks of authorial respectability.

On its most apparent level, this poem (which appeared on the front page of Harper’s Weekly) is about the struggle of a bourgeois husband to retain his solid social and economic identity, particularly as they are evidenced by the leisured, domesticated existence of his middle-class wife. The poem on this immediate level is also about the anxieties and resentments generated by the gendered segregation of labor and leisure. Written forty years before the appearance of The Theory of the Leisure Class, Stoddard’s verse is a Veblenesque depiction of the sacrifices and the strain that go into supporting a cultivated, ornamental wife and a tasteful household.

Without and Within
I.
The night is dark, and the winter winds
Go stabbing about with their icy spears;
The sharp hail rattles against the panes,
And melts on my cheeks like tears!
'Tis a terrible night to be out of doors,
But some of us must be, early and late:
We needn't ask who, for don't we know
It has all been settled by Fate?
Not woman, but man. Give woman her flowers,
Her dresses, her jewels, or what she demands:
The work of the world must be done by man,
Or why has he brawny hands?
As I feel my way in the dark and cold,
I think of the chambers warm and bright—
The nests where these delicate birds of ours
Are folding their wings to-night!
Through the luminous windows, above and below,
I catch a glimpse of the life they lead:
Some sew, some sing, others dress for the Ball,
While others (fair students) read.
There's the little lady who bears my name—
She sits at my table now, pouring her tea;
Does she think of me as I hurry home,
Hungry and wet? Not she.

She helps herself to the sugar and cream,
In a thoughtless, nonchalant way.

Her hands are white as the virgin rose

That she wore on her wedding-day!

My stubbed fingers are stained with ink—
The badge of the Ledger, the mark of Trade;

But the money I give her is clean enough,

In spite of the way it is made!

I wear out my life in the counting-room,

Over day-book and cash-book, Bought and Sold:

My brain is dizzy with anxious thought,

My skin is as sallow as gold!

How does she keep the roses of youth
Still fresh in her cheeks? My roses are flown:

It lies in a nutshell – why do I ask?

A woman’s life is her own!

She gives me a kiss when we part for the day,

Then goes to her music, blithe as a bird;

She reads it at sight, and the language too,

Though I know never a word!

She sews – a little; makes collars, and sleeves;

Or embroiders me slippers (always too small!);

Nets silken purses (for me to fill!)—

Often does nothing at all

But dream in her chamber, holding a flower,

Or reading my letters (she’d better read me!!);
Even now, while I am freezing with cold,

She is cozily sipping tea!

If I ever reach home I shall laugh aloud
At the sight of a roaring fire once more:
She must wait, I think, till I thaw myself,

For the usual kiss at the door!

I'll have with my dinner a bottle of port,
To warm up my blood, and soothe my mind:
Then a little music, for even I

Like music – when I have dined!

I'll smoke a pipe in the easy-chair,
And feel her behind me patting my head:
Or, drawing the little one on my knee,

Chat till the hour for bed!

II.

Will he never come? I have watched for him
Till the misty panes are roughened with sleet:
I can see no more: shall I never hear

The welcome sound of his feet?

I think of him in the lonesome night,
Tramping along with a weary tread,
And wish he were here by the cheery fire,

Or I were there in his stead!

I sit by the grate, and hark for his step,
And stare in the fire with a troubled mind;
The glow of the coals is bright in my face,
But my shadow is dark behind!
I think of woman, and think of man,
The tie that binds, and the wrongs that part,
And long to utter in burning words
What I feel to-night in my heart.
No weak complaint of the man I love.
No praise of myself, or my sisterhood;
But – something that women understand –
By men never understood!
Their natures jar in a thousand things;
Little matter, alas, who is right and wrong.
She goes to the wall! “She is weak,” they say:
It is that that makes them strong!

The bulk of this poem is devoted to the separation of husband and wife by the mores surrounding wage-earning work and domesticity. The husband, whose thoughts we hear as he returns from his job one winter evening, voices a surly dissatisfaction with the idleness of “woman.” “Give woman her flowers,/ Her dresses, her jewels, or what she demands:/ The work of the world must be done by man....” In rankling contrast to a man’s life, which is given over to toil, “a woman’s life is her own.” The separation of the spouses appears to be mirrored, moreover, in the division of the poem into two parts, a division that captures formally the emotional breach felt by the husband. The tone and the message in the second part of the poem, though, undermine the segregation of husband and wife with the latter’s disavowal of ornamental self-absorption. Her display of empathy for her husband negates the image of her protected isolation, while the distress produced by her compassion calls into question the alleged ease of her existence. Such empathy is certainly consistent with the ideology of true womanhood, which legitimates the role of the house-bound wife and, therefore, supports the distinction between male and female
spheres. In fact, the empathy that prompts the narrator in part II of the poem to think of her husband "in the lonesome night" is, from this perspective, a justification for wifely confinement, since the power for compassion — a form of emotional support that enables the husband to face the world anew — flourishes when kept from the competitive public sphere. Within the context of Stoddard’s poem, however, the woman’s compassion dissolves the separation of husband and wife, making the verse not so much a Veblenesque delineation of limited social roles, as an expression of what it is like to be simultaneously "without and within" the home, or simultaneously husband and wife.

On a less immediate level, “Without and Within” documents the disparate experiences of the writer who is without the luxury of a Cambridge home or a Cedarcroft, and the writer who writes from within the charmed, comfortable circle of genteel success. In the first part of the poem, the narrator/poet is a laborer in the dingy mines of Literature. He returns home after a grueling day of toil, his “stubbed fingers... stained with ink” and his features branded with “the badge of the Ledger, [the name, incidentally, of the New York newspaper that published such popular and profitable authors as E.D.E.N. Southworth and Fanny Fern] the mark of Trade.” The writer in this part of the poem is a hack, a hired hand whose fingers bear the inky mark of an increasingly impersonal and rationalized cultural commerce. The “badge of the Ledger” worn by this exhausted poet is the sign of his bookkeeping, both in the senses of his recording commercial transactions and of his keeping books (along with letters, manuscripts, and even the hair of John Milton) as the guarantor of his authorial identity. The voice we hear in the first part of the poem is the voice of the young Richard Stoddard as he returns home from a day of iron molding, contemplating what verses he will create that evening, and thinking enviously of the poets who have spent their afternoon at home, composing in their personal libraries and taking to the open fields when inspiration failed them. From this point of view, the individual who stays home all day, going “to her music, blithe as a bird,” is not the speaker’s wife, but the imaginary, successful poet who leads a life of domesticated warbling.
Drawing on Stoddard's veneration for Keats, we might even assert that the individual whose "life is her own" is Keats's nightingale, the archetypal artist who, according to one critic, both embodies the lyricism of "the natural order" (hence the otherness of this musical figure) and provides a "model for the human poet."\textsuperscript{41} Because this nightingale is not simply the unattainable exemplar of lyrical art, furthermore, but the model for human creativity, we can argue that the voice in part II of Stoddard's verse is that of the ideal poet whom the original speaker has learned to become. Like Keats's narrator, who flies on "the viewless wings of Poesy," Stoddard's speaker strives to become the perfect lyricist, the inspired poet he is not when he bears "the mark of Trade." Thus the narrative shift in part II indicates, insofar as it is the interiorized, psychologized voice of the muse, the arrival of the narrator at a respectable and confident (i.e., domestic) role as poet. "Without\textit{ and} Within," rather than "Without\textit{ or} Within," Stoddard's publication represents the progress of the poet from laborious, unrewarded versifying, to credential-bearing, club-confirmed authorship. By the end of section I, the narrator even fantasizes about relaxing in "the easy-chair," an attitude of repose that must have connoted to the Weekly's readers a relaxed yet definitive cultural assurance. "The easy-chair," particularly in the context of a Harper's publication, epitomized genteel literary authority. For the Editor's Easy Chair at Harper's Monthly Magazine (occupied between 1853 and 1892 by George William Curtis) was the imaginary site from which many of the nineteenth-century's most respected cultural pronouncements were issued.

The foregoing analyses of the writings and careers of Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard are meant to shed light on the peculiar understanding of identity the Stoddards possessed as authors writing on the margins of the genteel tradition. The genteel tradition itself, as demonstrated in the

Critic’s coverage of Richard Stoddard’s honorary dinner, functioned on the basis of a cultural subjectivity that was simultaneously distinctive and collaborative, simultaneously exclusive and collective. With its philosophy of discreet learning, inherited from an earlier era of gentlemanly letters, hedged in by the growing popularity of mass publications on the one hand, and by immigration’s specter of illiteracy, on the other hand, the genteel tradition was characterized by a beleaguered sense of its own superiority. The result was a cultural posture of elitism that, in concession to the demands of commercialism, thrived on being a spectacle. The subtle balance between inscrutable talent or accomplishment (sometimes described in the almost mystical terms of “genius”), and insistent visibility (conveyed in the display of honorary fetes and poets’ homes) was a hallmark of genteel culture, resulting from its liminal position between the private, non-publishing past of gentlemanly letters, and the public, highly legible future of mass publishing. Sometimes this delicate balance registered through the ceremonial presentation of names that was both discriminating and inviting. Sometimes the balance appeared in literary home tours that were both hospitable and snootily anonymous. In the case of Elizabeth Stoddard’s work, this genteel balance came through in a novel – The Morgesons – that adopted the sentimentally unifying potential of feminine “duty,” only to impose the distinctions of class on what promised to be a universalizing representation of womanhood.

As writers who always subscribed to the discriminating ethos of genteel culture, even though they were often on the receiving end of its exclusive practices, the Stoddards were curious testaments to the inclusive aspect of the cultural subjectivity I am describing. Rather than disavow the elite world to which they never wholly belonged, the Stoddards generally chose to play by the rules of literary gentility. It is true that Richard Stoddard got into trouble for his unwillingness to “puff” the books of his friends. And it is equally true that Elizabeth Stoddard was notorious for her uncooperative temperament. Even so, the Stoddards never willfully extricated themselves enough from their literary world to establish reputations or identities that were immune to genteel assessments. If doing nothing so bold as joining Walt Whitman at
Pfaff’s, Richard Stoddard presumably could have separated himself from the literary circles by which he so belatedly and so nominally saw himself recognized. Likewise, if doing nothing so extreme as shutting herself indoors and refusing – like Emily Dickinson – to publish what she wrote, Elizabeth Stoddard could have cut her ties with the people by whom she perceived herself so slighted. Why, for instance, didn’t the Stoddards move back to Elizabeth’s native Massachusetts? Why didn’t they choose, like Whitman, to remove themselves from that establishmentarian hub of letters, New York City? Instead of leaving the site of their thankless labor and disillusionment, however, the Stoddards chose to remain on the periphery of genteel culture, maintaining friendships with more successful (though now forgotten) writers, and protecting their nearly extinguished hopes of recognition. In this tenacity, ironically, the Stoddards epitomized the culture to which they never fully belonged. For the only identities they could imagine for themselves were never individualistic enough, never original or unconventional enough to allow for such a break with the genteel circle. Their identities as authors were as collective as they were individual, as determined by the society of their peers as by their chafing sense of wounded egotism. Richard Stoddard was enough of a “club” man, and Elizabeth Stoddard anxious enough to belong to a refined “set,” that they were unable to imagine their personal aspirations apart from the institutions and alliances that defined their failures.

The kind of individualism that the Stoddards lacked was as profoundly at odds with the genteel tradition as was the commercialism that that tradition – ultimately with no success – tried to accommodate. Such individualism, which governs our appreciation of American literature to this day and which helps to explain why we no longer value the genteel tradition, is not simply a matter of personal confidence or style. Instead, such individualism is, like the genteel consciousness I have been describing, a cultural subjectivity distilled through particular historical and economic circumstances. This individualism, as the ideology of individual power, has its roots in the mass culture that triumphed over the genteel world inhabited by the Stoddards. What Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard lacked, and what we have come to think of as a defining
characteristic of real artistry, is a faith in autonomy and the originality of taste that comes, not from the authority of the personal, but from the ideological derivation of the personal through consumerism. The cultural subjectivity the Stoddards failed to embody is a subjectivity with which we empathize today, a self constructed around choice and commodified into a stylized independence.
Understanding Richard Stoddard through his journalistic affiliations, his connection with the Author’s Club, and the less formal yet equally serious social ties that he and Elizabeth cultivated raises the question of how we come to rank some writers as “major,” and other as not. From where does the need arise to assess authors – to assess creative people generally – in terms of individual “greatness?” What is the origin of our critical impulse to scrutinize writers as autonomously active and discrete figures, working among and often against the multitudinous influences of society? Why the urge to classify poets, for example, as bold stylists whose work attests to personal uniqueness, or, conversely, as imitative versifiers whose conventionality implies a damning lack of originality? Of course, the suspicion that creative individualism is a constructed, if not distorting, lens through which to see literary history is not new. The Foucauldian proposition that authorlessness shapes literature – indeed, poststructuralist critiques of personal, creative agency generally – have problematized the critical focus on individuality. Poststructuralist theory has precipitated widespread interest in the collective, historical features of identity, and a reorientation of analysis away from issues of discrete accomplishment to issues of social and economic determination. Even so, Americanist scholarship evidences a consistent attachment to the precept of personal autonomy, of empowered and potentially disruptive individuality.

My own interest in the Stoddards as dubious members of the genteel tradition, and of specific organizations like the Author’s Club, is a result of poststructuralism’s redirection of individualist inquiry toward questions of institutional being and action. New York’s Author’s Club, along with the various other authors’ organizations that appeared in the late nineteenth century, in fact offer the literary historian the perfect occasion to pose questions of identity and art in a new light. To date, relatively little work has been done on the author’s societies of either the nineteenth or
twentieth centuries. The work that has been done, moreover, tends to polarize institutional vitality and individual interests, resulting in organization histories that overlook the collective life of establishments, or that become genealogies of partisanship in their assumption that author's societies were the highbrow (or middlebrow) equivalent of labor unions. Thus Nelson Lichtenstein's important article, "Authorial Professionalism and the Literary Marketplace, 1885-1900," dismisses the author's societies as "ineffectual" (and, by implication, uninteresting) simply because they failed to "defend the writer's interests in the literary marketplace."1

Following the labor union model of the author's society, Lichtenstein approaches this aspect of "authorial professionalism" with the assumption that "writer's interests" -- the a priori rights of a priori individuals -- catalyzed and justified the existence of the society. The raison d'être of the society was not the realignment or redefinition of the individual writer as an articulation of capitalist social and cultural hierarchy, but the defense of the writer as a spokesperson for democratic possibility. The author's society, from this perspective, becomes ineffectual when it fails to preserve the writer's sense of uniqueness and entitlement.

Alan Trachtenberg finds perhaps the ultimate institutional paradigm through which to understand nineteenth-century letters when he argues, in The Incorporation of America, that "the system of corporate life" amounted not only to a transformation of the business world, but to a pervasive cultural alteration that melded individual autonomy and collective enterprise. The "effects of 'monied corporations' on either government or industry" are, for Trachtenberg, ancillary to the more encompassing "effects of the corporate system on culture, on values and

1 Nelson Lichtenstein, "Authorial Professionalism and the Literary Marketplace, 1885-1900," American Studies 19.1 (1978): 35-53. On the subject of such organizations, Lichtenstein writes primarily about the British Society of Authors, established in 1887, and the Author's League of America, founded in 1912 to protect writers' movie and dramatic rights to their work. Richard Fine takes a position similar to Lichtenstein's in his treatment of James M. Cain and the American Authors' Authority. While bringing a depth of analysis to his study that surpasses Lichtenstein's look at authors' organizations, Fine nonetheless assumes the primacy of the individual writers who either lobbied for or against the AAA, rather than of the organization. Fine's emphasis on the contested origins of the AAA, as well as his interest in Cain as that organization's founding figure, attests to the secondary or derivative importance of the Authority as an institution. Richard Fine, James M. Cain and the American Authors' Authority (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).
outlooks”, on the “way of life.” Incorporation, here, refers not strictly to a “technical device... in business enterprise,” or to the legal construction of an operative agency in which personal liability is absorbed into collective responsibility. Instead, incorporation means “a more general... reorganization of perceptions as well as of enterprise and institutions” (3). The “incorporation of America,” writes Trachtenberg, signals “the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control” (3).

As institutions that defined the ambitions of individuals in terms of cultural community, nineteenth-century New York’s literary clubs, soirées, and publishing houses existed as manifestations of this phenomenon of incorporation. The historical existence of these institutions may not be peculiar to the late nineteenth century, but their function and significance altered within the context of the period’s economic and governmental changes. The Author’s Club’s honorary dinners, the informal meetings of the Echo Club and — more importantly — their published reenactment, and even the informal correspondence between genteel editors and poets indicate the emergence of a literary, professional mentality internally governed by the spirit of incorporation. From this perspective, the genteel tradition was an arrangement of cultural relationships where power flowed along increasingly formalized, vertical lines of control, and where individuals perceived their own exertions to be part of a larger definable enterprise — a publicly organized dissemination of art and knowledge, rather than private, amateur networks of expression. On a large scale, the ritualized, directed, and displayed affinities of genteel literary fellowship, which were a reorganization of perceptions for authors and readers alike, articulated in cultural terms the reorganization of the economy from artisanal autonomy to corporate production. Mimicking the interdependence of individual and collective interests expressed in the nineteenth century’s new business paradigm, the balance between individual expression and

---

collective identity conveyed by genteel literary institutions tells of the shifts within industrial
capitalism and the new heft of the corporation.

One of the ways in which the genteel tradition, with its organizational balance of individual
and collective identities, expressed its corporate nature was in a distinctive synthesis of verbal
and textual language. Club fêtes, the conversations that took place during private soirées, the
literary competitions among friends, the informal code of “puffing” – all of these cultural
phenomena point to the verbal nature of the genteel tradition. Indeed, much of the exclusionary
and individually discriminating force of the tradition derives from the force of the spoken word,
the impact of judgments whispered between puffs on a cigar and the influence of praise imparted
in a toast. Yet the genteel tradition comes to us in written form, just as it came to nineteenth-
century readers who were not actual members of the literary elite. The speeches, the personal
remembrances, even the whispered opinions reach us through their publication, thus combining
the conversational, cliquish import of an exclusive dilettantism with the permanence and publicity
of print. The conversational life of literary gentility – its élan vital – is known and preserved
through the magazine accounts of exclusive celebrations, the published tours through poets’
private homes, and the printed recollections of playful, literary competition among friends. The
written word, that is to say, is the public consummation of genteel literature’s verbal inner life,
the commodification of communication that designates the intersection of personal and public
inspiration.

The importance of this written commodification should not be underestimated, for the
integrity of the genteel tradition depended as much on the solidifying, retrieving power of printed
language, as on the exclusionary coziness and vitality of speech. The honorary dinners, the toasts
and conversations would be incomplete without their consummation on paper. For the genteel
tradition, the journalistic accounts of literary celebrations and enactments are as important as the
celebrations and enactments themselves. The telling is as important as the kissing. The invitation
of any personage to a banquet is as dependent on the published guest list as on his warm-blooded
presence, while the letters of regret are only as impressive as—not merely their recitation—but
the published description of the recitation and the reprinting of the letters themselves. The public
announcement, even if it is a distortion of events, is as integral to the cultural ethos of gentility as
the events themselves.

It is for this reason that John Tomsich's observation that the genteel "clubs were always an
adjunct to the world of publishing" (14) must be taken not simply as a statement about a nascent
industry's organizational structure, or the dual roles of particular editors and writers as club
members and publishing heavyweights. Certainly, the observable, historical sense of this cultural
overlap is to be acknowledged, as when Donald Sheehan chooses to conclude his study, This Was
Publishing, with George Haven Putnam's wedding celebration at the Aldine club. Even as late as
the 1890s, when the competitive ethos of advanced capitalism had begun to displace the
publishing world's various "courtesies of the trade," a spirit of fraternity and mutual
encouragement motivated Putnam's fellow publishers to present a gift symbolizing unity and
plenty to the prospective bridegroom. Presented at one of the Aldine Club's monthly dinners, the
gift was a large cup bearing the inscription, "With love of Appleton, with love of Scribner, With
love of Harper, With love of Holt, For love of Putnam"—a gift capturing elegantly the unique
commercial peerage of Gilded Age publishers and its easy transformation into the cohesiveness
of the gentleman's club.4

The observation that the literary clubs were an adjunct to the publishing world should be
read, in its profoundest sense, as an indication of the genteel tradition's internal, cultural logic. A
circle of devotional energies expressed through verbal intimacy and immediacy, and spun for
impersonal, public consumption, the genteel tradition balanced the circumference of clubbish
rapport against the newly radiating center of published information. The genteel tradition
balanced privacy and immediacy against publicity and technological mediation, making the

4 Donald Sheehan, This Was Publishing: A Chronicle of the Book Trade in the Gilded Age (Bloomington:
Indiana University Press, 1952) 245.
“adjunct”-ness of the clubs and the publishing world a sort of symbiotic interdependence. Club

circles and publishing circles did not overlap and attach themselves in any incidental fashion, but

instead integrated speech and print in a simultaneously personal and public (i.e., individual and

collective) manifestation of the corporate culture.

John Tebbel, one of the first publishing historians, maintains that the gentlemanly, clubbish

aspects of the publishing industry persisted well into the twentieth century. “Until the fifties or

sixties of our own time,” Tebbel writes, “literary trade publishing had the characteristics of an

exclusive club…” This clubbish exclusivity, Tebbel maintains, enabled publishers in the middle

of the twentieth century to identify with Scribner, Harper, and Holt when they presented their

congratulatory cup to George Haven Putnam at the Aldine Club, and to applaud the guiding

intervention of Andrew Armstrong and Henry Holt when George Haven and his brothers were too

grief stricken over their father’s death to run the family firm, G. P. Putnam’s Sons.5 Literary

publishers of the nineteenth century “were more interested in creating books than in selling them,

per se,” and saw themselves (in Donald Sheehan’s words) as “business men of letters” rather than

as “merchandisers” (Covers 85). They could afford to be altruistic among their peers, since their

primary motivations were intellectual and aesthetic, rather than mercenary. Quoting an address

given by Henry Houghton at the Atlantic Monthly’s seventieth birthday celebration, Tebbel

makes the point that even slipshod impracticality — a perceived trait of authors — is more

commendable in the publishers’ pantheon of values than the suave and predatory efficiency we

today associate with successful industry. In their mutual impracticality, says Houghton,

“publishing and authorship must necessarily keep pace with each other.” Destined to “travel

under the same yoke,” the author labors in absent-minded poverty while the publisher

optimistically sets about yet another money-losing enterprise (Covers 119). Such dogged

optimism, Tebbel wants us to understand, is the lofty indifference of the litterateur to worldly

5 John Tebbel, Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of American Book Publishing (New York:

motivation and reward – an indifference preserved for generations as a hallmark of the profession. Although observers on New York's East Side can no longer look "out their windows shortly before noon" and see "the entire Scribner contingent on the way to luncheon at the Century Club," the patrician, nonprofessional sensibilities that once characterized that daily migration persisted, according to Tebbel, until a couple decades before his own scholarly investigations into the field (128).

More realistic, it seems, than Tebbel's generalizations about the publishing world's lingering gentlemanly ethos is a gradual intermingling of ideologies, clubbish and competitive. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the complicated coexistence in publishing of something like a system of patronage, with professed motives of idealism and intellectual cohesion, and a system of profit, fulfilled through the fracturing strategies of competition. The clubbish luncheons of the Scribner contingent, in other words, were a sign of the residual patterns of fellowship that continued to flourish in the midst of a developing capitalist enterprise.

The career of James T. Fields offers a good example of these merging views. Fields, along with William Davis Ticknor, ran the Old Comer Bookstore, a small, antebellum operation that was as much a literary club as it was a site of commerce. Hawthorne, Emerson, Stowe, and Longfellow were among the famous authors who enjoyed conversation and companionship in the informal atmosphere of the Bookstore. Fields, himself described by Van Wyck Brooks as "a man of letters in his own right," felt a personal interest in American authors, and invested himself intellectually – as well as financially – in the Bookstore and its visitors (Covers 60-61). This personal involvement made the Old Comer Bookstore a renowned center for the authors of the Northeast and contributed to Fields's reputation as a gentlemanly patron of the literati – a reputation carried out by his sustained, personal dealings with writers published by his firm, Ticknor and Fields. It is a well known fact, however, that the tenor of Fields's career shifted during the postbellum period. Fields's aims became more openly financial and his interactions with authors more governed by commercial interest. Tebbel cites the sale of the Bookstore
during the war years as a transitional moment in Fields’s career, even though the publisher
instituted an “author’s room,” equipped with literary mementos, on the second floor of his new
mansion. Gone, notes Tebbel, was the “warmth” that had fostered such a sense of community at
the Bookstore. The “author’s room” was but an outward, material remnant of the cultural
cohesion that had characterized the Bookstore. Fields’s publishing business was expanding, but
this particular loss of “warmth” Tebbel takes to be a sign of the publisher’s personal decline (61).
More accurate, perhaps, is the view that Fields embodied in the postbellum years of his enterprise
an emerging philosophy of professionalism, with only a residual belief in patronage.

Fields’s infamous run-in with Mary Abigail Dodge (who wrote under the name “Gail
Hamilton”) later in the century is referred to by Tebbel as “a disagreeable climax” to the
publisher’s “troubles” (62). In reality, though, the confrontation over royalty rates was a
particular manifestation of the publishing profession’s paradigm shift from courtesy to
competition. Coultrap-McQuinn accurately depicts the episode as a reflection of changing values
in the publishing world. While the antebellum publishing world had been distinguished by such
values as “personal regard, benevolent paternalism, loyalty, noncommercialism, and advocacy of
Victorian morality,” the postbellum world in which Fields thrived (albeit with varying success)
was distinguished by marketplace values, by commercialism and a regard premised on profit
(xii). The confrontation with Dodge, while it compromised Fields’s persona as a patron of
literature, situated him squarely as a culture broker in an age of competition.

Tebbel is ambivalent about the Harpers owing to the same convergence of fraternal and
commercial values. The early successes of the Harpers Tebbel attributes, at least in part, to the
familial bonds of “this strong tribe” – bonds that depended on very patrician sounding ideals.
“Bound together by familial ties of affection, trust, blood, and [a] sense of continuity,” the house
of Harper reached its peak influence in the 1880s on the strength of cohesive virtues (93).
Flourishing alongside these old-fashioned values of long-term trust and interdependence,
however, was a cutthroat sense of the advantage to be gained in any particular business situation.
and a willingness to defy the etiquette that was often the only obstacle to unmitigated competition. Of all the established nineteenth-century publishers, Coultrap-McQuinn explains, "the Harpers seem to have adhered least to the ideal [of the Gentleman Publisher], although they did accept some of its aims and were often described in its terms." Despite their nominal acceptance of the gentleman ideal, however, "the Harpers' defiance of certain industry standards actually made them the predecessor of the commercial ideal that would take over publishing at the end of the century" (33).

        Foremost among the "certain industry standards" defied by the Harpers was a common practice known as the "courtesy of the trade." Without legal copyright restrictions, either to prevent American publishers' appropriation of British works or to regulate the competing claims of American publishers for specific texts, piracy was a constant temptation. Where the law was inactive, though, etiquette or convention stepped in. With regard to the competing claims of American publishers, at any rate, a "courtesy" prevailed whereby the publisher who purchased the plates for a particular work had only to announce that fact to have (albeit temporarily) exclusive rights to that work. This practice was one of the cornerstones of antebellum publishing, an unwritten rule that served to define the production territories of American publishers until late in the nineteenth century. As early as the 1850s, when the "courtesy of the trade" was in full swing, the Harpers demonstrated their preference for success over civility. Or at least their preference for distinguishing the two. Soon after George Palmer Putnam announced the publication of two of Fredrika Bremer's most successful novels, the Harpers came out with unauthorized editions that seriously threatened to undermine the profitability of the Putnam editions. When Putnam called the Harpers on this violation of a fundamental convention, Fletcher Harper (referred to sarcastically by Putnam's son, George Haven, as "the good Methodist") replied: "Mr. Putnam, courtesy is courtesy and business is business" (Tebbel 40). While it is true, as Tebbel points out, that the "business is business" mentality prevailed in other
areas of industry, the separation of competition and good breeding was still a new one in publishing.

This displacement of courtesy by competition was demonstrated again almost twenty years later when Appleton and Putnam sought to join American publishers in the cause of international copyright legislation. Again the Harpers filled the role of the entrepreneur whose immediate interests proved more compelling than any professional or genteel consensus. William Henry Appleton had been pushing hard, with the help of George Palmer Putnam, for the passage of an international copyright bill that would have the backing of a unified publishing industry. By 1872, when the Publishers’ Association had been revived largely to promote the bill, Appleton and Putnam believed they had obtained the support of every major American publisher. When Putnam went to Washington in November of that year to lobby before the House, however, he was shocked to encounter a lawyer hired by the Harpers to oppose the bill. Without informing Appleton or Putnam, the Harpers apparently decided that their own interests were better served by a legal system sanctioning the piracy of texts, than by an industry conforming to universal standards of compensation. In any event, the appearance of the Harpers’ lawyer compromised the credibility of the Publishers’ Association as a unified organization, and contributed to the delay of copyright legislation for another twenty years (Tebbel 105).

Like the history of postbellum publishing, the celebratory author’s dinner, as an institution of nineteenth-century literary life, documents the evolution of genteel values toward an openly commercial view of authors and their work. As suggested by the Critic’s account of Richard Stoddard’s fête, organized to honor the poet on his seventieth birthday, the author’s dinner captured the ambiguity of genteel literary identity in its combination of individual and collective presence. This genteel identity met the demands of commercial publishing – even as it sought to stave off the perceived indignities of popular consumption – with its media show of collective force, while its organizational basis reflected the professionalism emerging from capitalist
culture. On the other hand, this genteel identity preserved the private and patrician elements of an earlier era, when writing was an elite avocation.

With the slippage of this ambiguous identity toward commercial articulations of authorship, the balance between the personal and the collective was disrupted. The recognized author, as presented in the celebratory dinner, became public property, an impersonal commodity with the manufactured appeal of personality, instead of a semi-public figure embodying the dualities of personal, private creativity and collective visibility. Increasingly, the author became an impersonal commodity, known – ironically – through an exaggerated perception of individuality. This exaggerated individuality, or what I call individualism, is an ideology of identity that emerges from Marx's socioeconomic concept of "alienation," and that acquires the name "reification" in its more pervasively psychologized formulation by Lukacs.⁶ In essence, this phenomenon is the experiential counterpart to the productive and consumeristic views of the world, in which things become objects or items whose meaning is redefined by the utilitarian scope of a market universe. The effect of this redefinition on the human subject mirrors the transformation of the objects themselves, so that people – in this case, authors – become static quantities whose features are generalized according to prevailing notions of value. As Carolyn Porter observes in her study of Emerson, James, Adams and Faulkner, this phenomenon or "reifying process endemic to capitalism produces a new kind of world and a new kind of man."

It generates, on the one hand, a 'new objectivity,' a 'second nature' in which man's own productivity is obscured, so that what he has made appears to him as given, an external and objective reality operating according to its own immutable laws. On the other hand, [the reifying process] generates a

⁶ Georg Lukacs maintains in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" that "just as the capitalist system produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man." _History and Class Consciousness_ (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968) 93.
man who assumes a passive and 'contemplative' stance in the face of that objectified and rationalized reality—a man who seems to himself to stand outside that reality because his own participation in producing it is mystified.7

This "contemplative stance," when it becomes a target of cultural publicity such as we see with the author's dinners, imparts to the producer (i.e., of books) a self-contained passivity that mimics the commodity status of his products. The author becomes significant—insofar as he can be significant—as an object seemingly detached from other objects, including his own texts. He becomes a celebrity, recognized in the compelling distinction of his personality, rather than through the complicated institutional and interpersonal connections that have contributed to his creative life. The author becomes an embodiment of what Michael Warner calls "public subjectivity"—a rhetorically, publicly mediated "self-relation different from that of personal life"—whose presence in literary history is an "abstracted" or distilled version of private, physically anchored existence.8

Individualism, as a term for how this reified consciousness has evolved in American literary history, captures the personality or "contemplative stance" of the human subject as exaggerated against the forces of society, nature, the supernatural, and so forth. Individualism, as the ideology not only of the celebrated author, but of the "great" characters in American literature, translates the reified subject into the pioneering, enterprising, self-made American "abstracted" from the material complexities of history, ethnicity, and economic status. In effect, individualism is "public subjectivity" as it has shaped the field of American literature. As a result of individualism's influence, we are inclined to overlook genteel writer's like the Stoddards, authors

---

8 Warner's essay, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject" (from which these reference to "public subjectivity" are taken), is published in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992). Warner's essay is on pages 377-401, with the above quotes appearing on page 377-378.
who adhered to a literary tradition that defined their failures as much as their successes, and whose sensibilities were fundamentally relational and hierarchical. We are inclined, instead, to focus on authors like Whitman and Dickinson, who appear to uphold the qualities of autonomy, originality, and subversion. All the while, we choose to ignore the fact that these qualities, as virtues, are derived from the social and economic (i.e., interdependent and cooperative) circumstances of capitalism. We choose, in other words, to ignore what we might call the “corporate” proximity of the individual and the collective, or of the ideology of the individualistic and the material reality of its socioeconomic context. We become “incorporated” readers, too caught up in the corporate arrangements of capitalist culture (as relevant today as in the Gilded Age) to see individualism for what it is – the implied, ideological counterpart of the social. Instead, we rest in the received faith that celebrated acts of individual courage and imagination are distinct from the collective circumstances that engender them, and that, in fact, erode the real possibilities for personal power.

As a changing cultural event that gauges the distance between genteel ritual and journalistic spectacle, the author’s dinner depicts the development of the author from a social individual to a socially-constructed individualist. The differences between Stoddard’s honorary dinner, for example, and the celebratory dinners commemorating Mark Twain’s and James Russell Lowell’s seventieth birthdays demonstrate this development, showing how authorship changed from a semi-private pursuit to a possible mode of celebrity in which the writer becomes as much of an isolated object of scrutiny and estimation as his mass produced writing.

Almost a decade before the Stoddard dinner Lowell’s birthday was celebrated in the pages of The Critic when he joined the ranks of poet septuagenarians on February 22, 1889. The Critic’s tribute to the Massachusetts author begins by reminding us that George Washington and James Russell Lowell share the same birthday – a reminder that establishes this literary occasion as an event of national magnitude. February 22, The Critic tells us, “is the natal day, not only of the Father of [this] Country, but of a man who is, in the opinion of many of his more enlightened
fellow countrymen, the foremost citizen of the Republic." Nor is the significance of the occasion restricted to a national scope. The tribute, as composed in the pages of this New York weekly, is a "birthday greeting from both sides of the Atlantic," with words of praise from Tennyson and Coleridge.

Unlike The Critic's later account of the Stoddard fête, the 1889 acknowledgement of Lowell is not a reenactment of the birthday dinner held in Cambridge, but a congratulatory montage of letters supplementing the event. The eleven pages of The Critic devoted to Lowell's birthday do not describe the speeches given at the dinner, or the general atmosphere of the occasion. Nor do they identify the guests in attendance. Instead, these pages are a response to The Critic's call for a public tribute that would extend beyond the ritualistic exclusivity of a private dinner. Thus some of these pages present the regrets and vicarious textual ovations of those unable to attend the dinner, while others present formal transcriptions of the sentiments the reader can imagine were expressed at the Boston celebration. The magazine's recognition of Lowell is a collection of personal endorsements announcing the poet's influence in a public, textual congress of compliments and reminiscences.

The "words of gratulation" gathered together for the February 23 issue of The Critic range from verse descriptions of (one might even venture, contests with) Lowell's gifts as a poet, to commendations of his roles as Harvard professor and foreign diplomat, to personal recollections of him as a boy in Cambridge. Some of the letters focus on his longevity, others on the immortality ensured by his poetry. Still others focus on his composite eminence as "scholar, teacher, editor, critic, lecturer, essayist, orator and poet" (Daniel Coit Gilman's words). Among the best remembered names attached to these letters, in addition to Tennyson and Whittier, are Harriet Beecher Stowe, Theodore Roosevelt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George William Curtis, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Holmes attributes his own "literary renaissance to the influence of Mr. Lowell," while Higginson summons up an image of the youthful Lowell playing among "dandelions and buttercups." Aldrich presents a collection of
Shakespearean quotations meant to convey Lowell's most noble attributes, while Curtis extols Lowell's “manly independence” in “a country [worshiping] the majority.” Each of the individuals invited, in Christopher Cranch's words, “to contribute [a] public greeting to Mr. Lowell on his seventieth birthday” goes about the opportunity a little differently, in other words. What all of the letters published in The Critic do share, however, is a protocol of reminiscence and praise, delivered on a cumulative cachet of recognizable signatures. What they also share is the power to configure Lowell’s life as a compilation of words, preserved in the printed form of a periodical tribute.

Significantly, the number of letters reprinted in The Critic correspond to the years of Lowell's life. Seventy letters - some lengthy, some brief - serve both as expressions of regret and admiration. One for each year of the poet's existence, these letters represent not only the best thoughts and wishes of an international literary community, but the textual identity of an author whose reputation no longer resides in the personal exchanges of the literary club and the soirée, but in the dissemination of print. These letters are, in effect, not simply the expressions of seventy different writers, but a textual embodiment of the honored poet that captures the constitutive, public power of print. A lettered displacement of the historical and biological identity of the poet, Lowell is as he is scripted - first, by his own writing, second, by the writings of his colleagues, and, ultimately, by how both instances of writing are represented in The Critic. The magazine makes the man - a thought that is, in fact, conversely expressed by James Herbert Morse when, in his reflections on Lowell's contributions to The Atlantic Monthly, he says, “The same virility which was in the composition of the man went to make up the body of the magazine.”

To the extent that Lowell is a lettered man (and not just in the sense of being a learned and prolific poet), he is something other than a human being determined by his biological existence or by the accumulation of memories and expectations conveyed in the seventy letters. To the extent that Lowell is scripted in a public tribute that does not simply recount the elaborate festivities of a
dinner the reader will have missed, but that essentially substitutes a collection of written opinions for the aged poet himself— to that extent, Lowell is a man translated out of history into the deceptively ahistorical, cultural economy of reification. The body of the magazine article and the composition of the man become one as the seventy letters fall into place like compositor's type, arranging, articulating, and preserving in high-flown copy a commodified Lowell. More so than Stoddard, whose appearance in The Critic is couched in the reenactment of events at the Hotel Savoy, Lowell emerges before the reader as a figure who has been collectively appropriated from his private identity and reincarnated in the discrete, highly recognizable form of the textual profile. Lowell's birthday tribute, though it occurred historically before the Stoddard fête, points in the direction of the progressive change toward what Porter calls the ""artificially abstract" nature of... man... in modern capitalism" (25). The conflation of the seventy year-old Massachusetts poet with the seventy written expressions of praise evokes the Lukacsian vision of consciousness as a socially derived and promotionally maintained identity that has the static quality of a commodity.

By the time of Mark Twain's seventieth birthday in 1905, the currency of this identity developed (or sank, to use Lukacs's term) into the perpetuation of a trademark. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the successful author (here represented by Twain) materializes into the "artificially abstract" human. The birthday author becomes a condensed and circulating image of accomplishment, for all practical purposes divorced from the realm of struggle and inspiration. Mark Twain's personal trials and triumphs are well known. What I am describing here is something separate from the ill-fated ingenuity that caused Twain to invest great sums of money in a cumbersome typesetting machine, or the deep depression that plagued him after the death of his wife and two daughters. The identity I am describing is a persona that confronts the reader in the form not only of assorted epistolary endorsements, but in the physical, mass-produced image of the author— the epitome of capitalism's reductive promotion of subjectivity as spectacle.
On December 23, 1905, Harper’s Weekly published a literary supplement to its regular weekly issue. A “souvenir” of Twain’s seventieth birthday, the supplement is a “record of a dinner given… at Delmonico’s on the evening of December 5, 1905.” Like the Stoddard account before it, the Twain supplement reenacts the celebratory banquet to which the reader was not invited (but of which he now gets a voyeuristic glimpse) with a rundown of the guests and a reprinting of the many speeches. As with “Honoring Mr. Stoddard,” “Mark Twain’s 70th Birthday” includes an alphabetical list of the guests, beginning with Joseph Altsheler and ending with Jean Webster. Among the most well-known names are George Washington Cable, Charles Chesnutt, Willa Cather, Mary Wilkins Freeman, William Dean Howells, and Julian Hawthorne. While the number of guests roughly parallels the number in attendance at Stoddard’s dinner, the nearly unrivaled celebrity of Mark Twain is indicated in the verbatim preservation of the many speeches, in the length of the Harper’s Weekly tribute (twelve pages), and in the form of the separate supplement itself.

The most striking departure from the Stoddard account, however, is not strictly a matter of detail or length. The greatest difference resides in the consumer-oriented emphasis on textualized personae, a preoccupation that is consistent with the promotional genius behind Twain’s literary and historical stature, and that accounts for the reprinting of the many December 5th speeches and, thus, the length of the Harper’s Weekly supplement. In fact, the phenomenon of the author’s dinner, which I have been describing as an evolving record of capitalism’s effect on subjectivity, reaches an unprecedented level of iconic efficiency and refinement in the Twain “record.” Not only is the birthday author himself “artificially abstracted” into a position of celebrity, but the very guests themselves – the bodies who represent the incorporating power of the culture of reification – become textualized figures of eminence, too. The guests who spoke at the Twain dinner are, in the Harper’s Weekly account, celebrities of a sort as well.

In addition to the “chairman’s” commentary and the “cablegrams” from people who couldn’t attend the event, the supplement presents in their entirety the fourteen speeches delivered at the
dinner, each accompanied by a sketch of the speaker. William Dean Howells, the first speaker after the Chairman Harvey's preliminary remarks, is shown standing before a table, notes in hand, good-naturedly assessing his listener/reader. The firm and serious jaw of Brander Matthews juts forward as he peers into the crowd of colleagues through his glasses. The swooping lines of Kate Douglas Riggs's bare neck and shoulders, her coiffed hair, and her ruffled dress greet the viewer's eye before the lines of the small, square paper she is holding. Richard Watson Gilder gazes into space with a preoccupied air, while George Washington Cable leans almost breathlessly into the table where he speaks. Mark Twain himself, whose speech appears immediately after Howells's remarks, stands before his admirers, his arms akimbo and his chest thrust forward from his tuxedo in blustering wit and energy. The image of Mark Twain - both as a persona in his readers' minds and as a physical representation - is, indeed, an incalculably important aspect of the Harper's Weekly tribute. The cover of the supplement features an almost full-page photo of the author beneath the emblazoned title, Mark Twain's 70th Birthday - evidence that Harper's regarded the figure of Twain as a promotional extension of his writings.

The end of the December 30 issue of Harper's Weekly, meanwhile, features a full-page advertisement for Mark Twain's Complete Works. Published by Harper and Brothers, the Works are presented in a twenty-three volume set. Besides "uncut edges" and "gilt tops," the ad boasts of "photogravure frontispieces" of the author in each volume. So integral to the marketable "greatness" of Twain is this image, in fact, that the ad includes a "free" offer of the "photogravure portrait of Mark Twain" that appears as the frontispiece with the simple mailing of an attached coupon. Mail in the coupon, the ad promises, and Harper and Brothers will send the portrait along with "specimen pages" from the Complete Works and terms for purchasing the set. The appeal of Twain's work, here, rides on the cachet of the author's image. Like a parent instructing a child in the value of money by administering an allowance, the publisher offers the image of Twain as an incentive currency with which to obtain certain goods (i.e., the twenty-three volume set). The image of Twain secures the writings of Twain, as the mass-produced image of the
author becomes something of distinct and equal value to his work – the ultimate in the capitalist production of reified identity. This advertisement for Twain’s Complete Works, following on the heels of the birthday supplement, in fact, confirms the evolution of the author’s dinner from a proudly pre-capitalist ritual of serious, intellectual amateurism, to the commercial display of intellectual work as the detached (i.e., alienated) counterpart to a static, “abstracted” identity.

In the following chapters I examine the literary careers and identities of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, two authors who have achieved canonical status, in part, on the basis of their unconventionality and originality. The quintessential individuals of the nineteenth century, Whitman and Dickinson are giants in American literary history whose stature attests to the influence of individualism on both academic and popular readers. As I strive to demonstrate, these writers’ individualistic reputations are not simply a result of their personal and artistic choices. Instead, their reputations emerge from circumstances that were just as social and perceptual as the marginal gentility of the Stoddards, but that generated an ideology of autonomy rather than clubbish conformity. The fame that Dickinson and Whitman achieved (posthumously and not) was as much a function of the economic and historical circumstances surrounding the publication and reception of their works, as of any personal propensity for subversion.
On May 31, 1889 Walt Whitman — former “rough,” now Good, Gray Poet — turned seventy. The birthday did not receive the kind of unsolicited journalistic recognition that James Russell Lowell’s seventieth birthday received in the pages of the Critic. Nor did it enjoy the social sanctity of a Brahmin dinner. The event, nonetheless, was celebrated by a group of Whitman’s supporters, many of them residents of Camden, New Jersey where the poet spent his last years, some of them Philadelphia businessmen, a few of them — Richard Watson Gilder, Julian Hawthorne, and Hamlin Garland, for instance — eminent literary figures. A committee of local men (H. L. Bonsall, Thomas B. Harned, Geoffrey Buckwalter, Alex G. Cattell, Louis T. Derousse, E. A. Armstrong, Wilbur F. Rose, and Cyrus H. K. Curtis) organized the celebration, obtaining Camden’s Morgan’s Hall for the occasion, putting together a menu that included lamb, filet de boeuf, broiled chicken, and boiled rock fish with cucumber sauce, and sending out invitations to the lawyers, businessmen, and government officials who would consume the fare. The number of black waiters exceeded the number of reporters at the event, while the names of the guests — some of whom assembled before the appointed hour of five o’clock — never appeared in the alphabetical columns that supported the Stoddard birthday dinner and the bon voyage fete for James Lorimer Graham, Jr. The gathering, however, enacted the high ritualism of these other literary dinners, with toasts, speeches, and the reading of letters. And while the ritualism escaped the postured reenactments of reportage so indispensable to the Lowell, Stoddard, Twain, and Graham celebrations, the occasion was nonetheless preserved by Whitman’s friend and follower, Horace Traubel. Indeed, the guiding hand of the poet — that consummate manager of the public image — is evident in the account that serves as our one comprehensive, contemporary description of Whitman’s seventieth birthday dinner. Published
by David McKay, the Philadelphia publisher who published *Leaves of Grass* in 1882, '84, and '88, and who produced the “Deathbed Edition” of *Leaves* in 1891-92, *Camden’s Compliment to Walt Whitman* is a seventy-four page booklet recounting the 1889 birthday celebration. Edited by Traubel, the booklet is a compilation of “Notes, Addresses, Letters, [and] Telegrams” that, like the *Critic* and *Harper’s Weekly* accounts, offers a polite, performative sense of the recognition awarded a writer near the end of his life.¹

Whitman himself did not dine on any of the dishes prepared for the Camden event. The “Feast of Reason” (as the dinner portion of the celebration was designated on the program) was enjoyed by the guests, but the birthday poet was in too poor health to sit through both the seven-course meal and the “after-addresses”. It was said that Whitman would arrive after the ice cream and the French coffee had been consumed. And it was understood that he would stay only “fifteen minutes to half an hour” (Camden 12). There was even some speculation that the honored author would not show at all. The “Flow of Soul” (that portion of the program devoted to speeches, reminiscences, and toasts) might have to proceed without the distinctive hoary-bearded presence of the poet if he was not able to summon the strength to venture into public. As Traubel recalls, “Good humor was plenty, and talk was free. Was Walt Whitman sure to come? Penetrating all else, this was upon questioning lips and passed like a charge from man to man” (11-12). An atmosphere of expectation and uncertainty prevailed among the guests, counteracting the complacency of their sated palates. Thus when Whitman did arrive in Morgan’s Hall (after a policeman’s cry from the door, “He’s coming!”), he walked into a room electric with anticipation.

The facts of Whitman’s age and his precarious health at the time of the Camden gala are beyond dispute. The once vigorous bard had certainly grown frail, and his habits were now increasingly sedentary and reclusive. The reality of the “Good Gray Poet’s” decrepitude does

not fully explain his late arrival at the fête, however. Nor does a simple respite from feebleness explain why the expected fifteen-minute to half-hour cameo turned into a “two-to-three-hour” appearance. Traubel proposes that “the aspect of the assemblage inspired and invigorated” Whitman. “While it was true in the best sense that the occasion owed everything to [Whitman],” Traubel continues, “it was also true, in another and minor sense, that he was indebted to it for at least a part of his present almost exhilaration” (12). Factoring in the unreliability of a septuagenarian physique, Traubel also rightly — if remotely — grasps the way Whitman depended on his audience. Whitman was brought to life by the sight of so many admirers. The applause, in effect, gave him a new lease on the evening. Traubel underestimates the extent of Whitman’s “debt” to his audience, though. Not in a minor but in a substantive sense did the poet come to life through the scrutiny of his admirers. Indeed, the sustaining audience ought not be conceived as merely the physical “assemblage” in Morgan’s Hall, but as the poet’s entire readership. More than any other American writer (with the possible exception of Mark Twain), Whitman thrived as a literary spectacle. At stake were not mere exhilaration or adrenaline, but a publicly constituted identity that needed to be sedulously maintained.

Whitman’s late arrival on the heels of speculation about whether he would arrive at all was, arguably, as much an expression of this sedulously maintained identity as it was a consequence of “real,” physiological circumstances. Throughout his literary career Whitman staged his appearance in such a way that he is simultaneously present and absent to his audience. The distinctive imprint of his identity resides in his simultaneously offered and withheld presence, an ambiguity of existence that registers in the iconographic anonymity of an almost typological frontispiece, in the general displacing proliferation of photographic images, in the self-centered, rhetorical suspension of the first person, and in the disguised reflexivity of self-reviews — as well as in the elaborate suspense of not knowing whether the honored poet was going to attend his

**Telegrams** (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1889).
own birthday dinner. The ubiquity of Whitman in the expectation of his arrival at Morgan's Hall epitomizes the democratic bard's genius for the elusive *en masse*. The author of *Leaves of Grass* was obsessively capable of parsing himself into sweeping readability, of dispersing himself into a universal recognition that was at the same time too typical or representative to be revealing.

What better way to enact such a penchant than by arranging one's own dubious appearance at a commemorative gala? The event organized by Camden's leading gentlemen presumed a degree of literary and social presence that was confirmed by the rampant speculations "upon questioning lips" about whether Whitman would actually show. Yet such presence was rendered doubtful at the same time in its formulation as question and rumor. Until his actual arrival at the dinner party, Whitman was everywhere and nowhere. He was on every lip and nowhere to be seen. At such an hour Whitman was a genius of self-promotion, exerting the psychological grip of the deferred arrival and the mediated identity.

Indeed, Whitman wasn't just promoting himself; he was also acting as his own personality broker, or as a self-salesman. Whitman's self-circulation and promotion, moreover, even (or especially) through the terms of absence, identifies him with the money that is valuable insofar as it stands in for something else (i.e., gold). Like the Twain photogravure advertised in *Harper's Weekly*, the image of Whitman — indeed, his persona generally — operates as a kind of currency, a coinage that conveys both cultural value and verbal invention. In this sense Whitman is a representative poet not only in his role as a democratic bard, but as a figure whose creative work of coining words is ensconced in the consensus and standardization of the economic. In this sense Whitman is representative of an entire, evolving system of exchange, which is built on a logic of displacement (paper replaces gold, while capital stands in for the core value of any good), as the poet's trademark, paradoxical stance of absent presence displaces his "real" identity with a visual advertisement for that identity.
The influence of the honored poet is evident in Camden's Compliment even before we read Traubel's account of the evening. Following the title page and the table of contents is an "Autobiographic Note" signed "W. W." Taken from "an old 'remembrance copy'," the "Note" is a concise overview of Whitman's life written four months after the celebratory dinner and attached to the compilation of "notes, addresses, letters, [and] telegrams." Penned as a sort of afterthought to the honorary event, yet included in Camden's Compliment as a sort of preface, this "Autobiographic Note" inflects the commemorative construction of the "Good, Gray Poet" with its own version of experience and accomplishment. The "Autobiographic Note," in fact, anticipates and reinforces the strategic self-restraint enacted in Whitman's late and even dubious arrival at Morgan's Hall. The curious impact of the withheld presence lingering "upon questioning lips" is foregrounded in the assertive yet oddly scant self-presentation of the poet in his page-long memoir. The signature, "W. W.," itself abbreviates the paradox of the poet's inscrutable familiarity. "W. W." serves as an informal, almost intimate designation for Walt Whitman. The identity implied by the two letters is, in its cozy encryption, a secure identity, as confidently recognized as the identity of lovers who carve their initials into a tree. For the reader of Camden's Compliment, "W. W." turns the "Autobiographic Note" into a kind of personal note where the personal is chatty and reciprocal, casually eliding details where a more formal communication would spell matters out, and presuming a mutual confidence of perception. On the other hand, "W. W." signifies the removal of Walt Whitman. The initials point to a withdrawal on the level of nomenclature, a nominal withdrawal that designates a more complicated retreat of being. The absence of the poet's full name announces the impending choreography of absence that Traubel describes as Whitman's unreliable health. "W. W." is like the question on everyone's lips, the persistence of which declares what's missing.

This paradox of identity encoded in Whitman's initials is sustained throughout the text of the "Autobiographic Note" itself. The events recounted in the "Note" reveal the rudiments of
Whitman's life over seventy years. Beginning with the date and location of his birth, the poet briefly lists where he has lived and what he has experienced. He refers to the deaths of his parents and his sister; he mentions that he "went down to the field of War in Virginia" in 1862; he refers to his clerkship in Washington; and he describes the "paralysis" and the "attacks" that have troubled him since 1873. Most of these recollections are written in a type of shorthand that works against the revelatory aspects of the "Note." For most of the sentences omit the word "I" in what amounts to a conspicuous, stylistic exclusion of the first person. The "Autobiographic Note" is, logically enough, about its writer. And yet it exerts a grammatical economy that rations away the explicit sense of a revealed identity. The paucity of "I"s imparts the intimate tone of a journal, but it also undermines the reader's sense of connection with a subject. Thus the recurrent dropping of the "I" plays out the mixed identity of "W. W.," narrating the absent presence enacted by Whitman in Morgan's Hall.

The page opposite the "Autobiographic Note" presents a "verbatim reprint" of the brief "address" Whitman gave after the French coffee and pound cake were consumed. Delivered after Samuel Grey's "Welcome," this "address" is really an anti-address that conveys the paradoxical identity I have been describing. Emblazoned by the italicized heading, "At the Complimentary Dinner, Camden, New Jersey, May 31, 1889," this short announcement begins and ends with a disclaimer that deflates all oratorical expectation. Whitman tells his audience, in a maneuver that typifies his simultaneous elusiveness and directness, that he does not wish to make a speech at all, but only to gaze at his supporters.

My friends, though announc'd to give an address, there is no such intention. Following the impulse of the spirit (for I am at least half of quarter stock), I have obeyed the command to come and look at you, for a minute, and show myself, face to face; which is probably the best I can do. But I have felt no command to make a speech;
and shall not therefore attempt any. All I have felt the imperative conviction to say I have already printed in my books of poems or prose; to which I refer any who may be curious. And so, hail and farewell. Deeply acknowledging this deep compliment, with my best respects and love to you personally — to Camden — to New Jersey, and to all represented here — you must excuse me from any word further.

The very first sentence of this anti-speech omits the first person in a grammatical expression of avoidance. Instead of professing that he does not intend to give an address, Whitman shifts the decision into the passive voice: “there is no such intention.” Where agency exists, it is a nebulous “impulse of the spirit” that commands him to look at his admirers, rather than engage them with revelatory reminiscence. Whitman feels “no command to make a speech,” an instance of impassivity that makes the poet no more visible or compelling than the tables and chairs provided for the occasion. In excusing himself “from any word further,” Whitman in effect erases himself from the event of which he is the center. While the seventy-year-old bard indulges in this pre-postmodern exercise in absent centrality, however, he also establishes the setting for an immediate interaction with “Camden... New Jersey, and... all represented here....” By claiming that he has “obeyed the command to come and look at you... and show myself, face to face,” Whitman asserts a visual rapport that offsets the invisibility and silence of his “excuse... from any word further.” The septuagenarian’s face-to-face confrontation with his audience establishes an alternative communication that mediates the grammar of avoidance and passivity, allowing for a physical and poetic presence born of scrutiny’s dialogue. Where Whitman announces himself absent, he also declares himself present in a mutely confrontational sense, so that the felt command to “look” and “show” reintroduces him through the back door, even as he pronounces his exit through the front.
The placement of Whitman's anti-address on page five of *Camden's Compliment*, rather than on page 22 where it would appear in a purely chronological re-creation of the evening, is itself symbolic of the poet's in-your-face withdrawal. Positioned before the main body of the seventy-four page commemorative booklet, "At the Complimentary Dinner..." tells the reader that Whitman's complicated and idiosyncratic gestures of absent presence come before any narrative construction of the poet or his place in literary history. The lay-out of the anti-address informs the reader that Whitman's paradoxical stance of loquacious silence or visible inscrutability is itself a paradigm for the text, a key to comprehending the celebratory event and its panegyrics. As an un-speech, the "verbatim reprint" on page five is the ur-speech against which the evening's series of twelve tributes are to be measured and understood.

Delivered by Samuel H. Grey, Thomas B. Hamed, Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, Francis Howard Williams, John Herbert Clifford, Charles G. Garrison, E. A. Armstrong, Richard Watson Gilder, Julian Hawthorne, Hamlin Garland, Henry L. Bonsall, and Lincoln L. Eyre, these twelve laudatory speeches ring against the exemplary reticence of their aged subject. In this sense, the "verbatim" paragraph models a departure from the ritualized eloquence that characterized events like the Camden dinner. While the twelve speeches presented in the latter half of *Camden's Compliment* are examples of the polite, prolix descriptions pro forma at literary, seventieth-birthday dinners, Whitman's anti-address acknowledges the equally pro forma place of the honored author's revelatory, thankful speech, only to fill that place with a surprising silence. The aged poet acknowledges the propriety of a certain verbosity, so that he can turn around and offer his admirers a taciturn revision of genteel form. By setting up, then silently flouting the conventions of honorary self-display, Whitman not only enacts his distinctive ambiguity of identity, but also situates himself rhetorically and bibliographically within a tradition that he then rejects. "At the Complimentary Dinner..." captures not merely the complicated identity that Whitman labored to project, but also the ambivalent connection he sustained with the genteel
literary establishment and its expectations. Evidence that Whitman considered his anti-address an important statement rests, moreover, not merely in its conspicuous placement in Camden's Compliment. For as Traubel remembers, Whitman had his so-called speech "printed on slips" which he distributed "liberally for the reporters" (13). If the display of reticence to which the "speech" amounts was significant enough in the poet's mind to merit publicity, it is a safe inference that its "excused" silences are as telling as its articulations.

Whitman's curious ambiguity of being was most visibly concentrated, for the diners in Morgan's Hall, in the image that greeted them on the evening's menu. While wondering whether the guest of honor would show, the men ate their lamb and chicken in the photographic, surrogate presence of the poet. For "on the menu card," Traubel recalls, "a phototype portrait of Whitman stood felicitously alone, without name or word to any effect" (11). The honored bard established the dynamics of his elusive yet immediate presence even before the speculations about his arrival began circulating among the assembled guests, for he had the menus printed with his iconographic, "phototype" form, knowing that his image would stand in at every table for the flesh-and-blood poet who had yet to appear. Throughout the "feast of reason," Whitman's absence was offset by his stark, almost omnipresent picture, even as that absence was underscored by the flatly consolatory, two dimensions of the image. In a calculated way, Whitman pointed to his withheld self through an almost mass-produced version of himself. Interestingly, even this produced self embodied his trademark ambiguity of existence. For while the standing, "felicitously alone" Whitman must have leaped from the menu, he nonetheless remained unforthcoming insofar as no "name or word to any effect" accompanied his image. Like the poet who told his audience that he must excuse himself from "any word further," the menu phototype teased the diners with a rationally appetite-arousing message of accessibility, only to elude the rational consumption that requires language. Whitman avoided the fate of the poet-pet-morsel by refusing to engage his diners in words. His refusal of both "name or word to
any effect," in fact, spared him the peculiar, public roasting implied in the almost parodic
excesses of the literary birthday dinner.2

Whitman’s grasp of iconography’s power to convey the paradoxical identity on which he
constructed his literary career was apparent more than thirty years earlier with the printing of the
frontispiece to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This famous frontispiece, which is a steel
engraving, by Samuel Hollyer, of a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison, demonstrates a continuity
between the “felicitously alone,” seventy-year-old figure on the “feast of reason” menu, and the
thirty-six year-old man who introduced the world to an unprecedented form of poetry. Taken
together, the menu figure and the Hollyer engraving show an unwavering genius for the image’s
compact, sometimes paradoxical articulations, particularly as they reveal a public, cultural
identity. The Hollyer engraving, familiar to many of Whitman’s readers, depicts a confident and
rugged man, almost challenging in his pose. “Hat on, shirt open, head cocked, arm akimbo...,
[Whitman] stands against one of the most democratic of backgrounds, a vast blank page,” in the
peculiar anomie of a “street figure” (the poet’s term for the 1855 frontispiece) removed from the
street.3 As Ed Folsom writes, Whitman “offers us an image of self-assurance, informality,
physicality, manners, and dress unbefitting the anticipated environment of poetic pages” (147).
The image is undoubtedly more befitting a Brooklyn thoroughfare, than the conventional poet’s
home. And yet the absence of such a cityscape is itself as striking a feature of the frontispiece as
the unorthodoxly casual presentation of the author. In considering that “there is no visible

---

2 A famous example of such parodic excess is, of course, the Whittier birthday dinner held in 1877. Owing
to Mark Twain’s contribution to the event, the evening did more than imply a public roasting. Twain’s
speech, intended as an amusing, playful attack on the New England literary establishment, explicitly
targeted Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as objects of
ridicule. The gathering was held in honor of John Greenleaf Whittier’s seventieth birthday, but Twain chose
to parody these three other poets as paragons of literary gentility. The unintended victim of the attack,
however, turned out to be Twain himself as the speech’s humor backfired. The humorist became the object
of roasting in what Twain later considered a personal and professional debacle, and what his friend,
William Dean Howells, subsequently described as a “cruel catastrophe.” A detailed account of the event
background" to the image, and that "the portrait remains anonymous, unnamed," Folsom sees an opportunity "to read this figure symbolically," to insert "a social context that makes sense of the figure," rather than to preserve the image in its blank indeterminateness. While Folsom regards this symbolic reading as the answer to Whitman's invitation "to question traditional assumptions about what a poet can be, where a poet can come from, and how a poet can be portrayed" (145), it is important at the same time not to fill the empty space surrounding the image with too much of the historically possible and particular.

A full understanding of the Hollyer engraving, like a complete understanding of the menu figure, requires a symbolic reading of what's missing as, simply and significantly, the missing. The very fact of absence -- the absence of a city street (or, conversely, of a genteel looking library or parlor), the absence of a name (whether poet's or portraitist's) -- says as much about the figure as its pose, its clothes, its gaze. The figure's embeddedness in such absence, like the menu figure's embeddedness in the absence of seventy-year-old flesh and blood, invites a symbolic reading of the contrast as a deliberate construction of the poet's self. The frontispiece's blank background and its lack of identification figure into the impression that the exposed neck and tilted hat make, contributing to the heft of the poet's presence as an enigmatic restraint. The author of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, in other words, is depicted not only in his jaunty form, which has an approachable demeanor, but in the inaccessibility conveyed by the blankness of the page. The frontispiece may invite the insertion of "a social context." But, more fundamentally, it invites the recognition of a choreographed identity as dependent on the emptiness of the stage as on its occupation by a salient self.

This ambiguous presentation of self does not end, in the context of *Leaves of Grass*, with the frontispiece alone. As many literary historians have pointed out, the first edition of the book was published without the author's name on the title page or the spine. Walt Whitman's name is

---

missing where it would conventionally appear. It has often been pointed out, however, that Whitman identifies himself by name in the text itself, in section twenty-four of "Song of Myself." Here the poet describes himself in the first line of the section as "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." This line, in fact, numbers among three instances of identification in the 1855 Leaves of Grass, according to Joel Myerson. The other two are the book's copyright notice, which is in Whitman's name, and the book's frontispiece. In Myerson's estimation, the frontispiece substitutes as a kind of autograph or byline, an identifying marker that serves as an eccentric refutation of the book's anonymity.

The frontispiece and the "kosmic" declaration of identity are, I would agree, on a par with one another. As the frontispiece is much more than a type of signature, though, so the "kosmic" Whitman is more than a verse variation on the byline. "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" should, like the frontispiece, be read in the midst of its surrounding reserve. While the casual figure of the author is surrounded by the blank page, the "kosmic" declaration is embedded in poetic language that reveals nothing specific or factual about Whitman. The singing voice in "Song of Myself" modulates not within a historical register, but within the imaginative compass of poetry's invention. The "kosmic" declaration, therefore, achieves the stark clarity of autobiography like the "felicitously alone" menu figure emerging from absence, and the confident, prominent frontispiece image emerging from anonymity. Like these figures, too, the poem's autobiographical announcement should be understood in conjunction with the poem's non-self-disclosing statements. These symbolic non-disclosures say as much about Manhattan's son as section twenty-four, precisely because Manhattan's son is as much what he refuses to declare himself, as what he unhesitatingly asserts. His identity is revealed fully only in its composite nature as the creatively evading and the surprisingly confessional.

1994) 145.
Section twenty-four's surprising confession of identity, in fact, fits the description of Whitman in *Camden's Compliment* when Traubel recounts the transformation of the guest of honor in the course of the evening. Gradually, the seventy-year-old poet's "expression of weariness" was replaced by a manner of "absorbed ease." This ease was not the self-forgetfulness or natural distraction of someone entertained by his surroundings. This ease was rather the casualness of the frontispiece image, a projected pose of informality absorbed by what surrounds it. Traubel attributes this ease to Whitman's ability to throw "his own presence out into a striking objectivity" (13). As the dinner progressed, Whitman was absorbed not by a blank page, but by a ritualism that potentially framed him as a guest of honor no different from the seventy-year old Lowell, Stoddard, or Twain. Whitman's easy objectivity, however, seems to have undermined the ritual's threat of sameness and reduction, enabling him (in Traubel's words) to assume "the part of a child," rather than the standard role of the venerable septuagenarian (13). Likewise, the "kosmic" Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself" is absorbed by what always threatens to become reductive and standardizing -- the literary form of poetry that is freighted with tradition and genteel convention. The "kosmic" assertion of identity is embedded in poetic language, but it is thrown out into a striking objectivity that helps to undermine the potentially homogenizing power of Whitman's verse. What member of the genteel circle, after all, would have dared to write himself so explicitly and so brazenly into the body of one of his poems? "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" is the easy, childish pose -- as contrived as any rigid, formal stance -- that dispels the possibility of imitation.

All of these examples of ambiguity I have been describing -- in "Song of Myself," in the Hollyer engraving, in the menu figure, in Whitman's so-called speech, and in his complicated participation in his seventieth-birthday dinner -- point to what Ed Folsom calls an "organizing metonymy" at work in *Leaves of Grass* and, I would argue, in Whitman's endeavors generally. Folsom speaks of this organizing metonymy with specific reference to the 1855 frontispiece.
This image, Folsom maintains, is “Whitman’s first gesture at creating the organizing metonymy of *Leaves of Grass*: the book as man, the pages and the ink as identical to the poet himself” (147). The lack of information about the author beyond the image itself “advertises” that image’s “constructedness,” claims Folsom, in a way that links the author with his constructed text (147). The figure who confronts the reader at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*, in other words, is as invented and as textual as his poems by virtue of his anonymous and decontextualized pose. No biographical circumstances tug at the elbow of that man with his arm akimbo. Instead he is given over to the interpretive powers of the reader who can digest the man and his book at the same time. This metonymy, in fact, operates beyond the immediate, material presentation of *Leaves of Grass*. The entire range of ambiguity I have been discussing is, indeed, a manifestation of this metonymy in which the visible poet is the embodiment of his work. The orchestration of restraint, the insistence on a certain invisibility, sets the stage for the visible poet who is as invented as his poetry.

Whitman’s “organizing metonymy” of man and book, of pages, ink, and poet, is a sustained identity that depends on the poet’s knack for what Traubel calls a “striking objectivity.” The metonymic subject is Whitman’s invented self who poses for the daguerreotype and sits before an audience of diners, a persona that depends on perpetual acts of projection or “throwing out.” The organizing, metonymic self, therefore, also depends on a certain reserve, on a deliberate withholding of the self that does not fit the public molds of “rough” or “democratic bard” or “Good Gray Poet.” While Whitman is setting up the vertical links between man and text (deliberate connections that Folsom rightly recognizes as Whitman’s operative, trademark principle), he is purposefully holding back a part of himself that resists the connection with the book, that fights against the objective embodiment of pen and ink. This restraint is neither subtle nor surreptitious, moreover. On the contrary, this restraint is fetishized in obverse proportion to the degree that Whitman promotes himself as inextricable from his poetry. The incongruity that
works as the dark underside of metonymy, the inaccessibility that baffles as the antithesis of the
Whitman who reads like a book, is as tangible and compelling as the promoted poet.
“Organizing metonymy,” in other words, implies not only that someone unseen is doing the
organizing, that the incarnation of the poet in poetry is performed by someone whose motives are
not as static or scrutable as a text, but that the implied subject also commands a degree of
recognition that falls beyond the purview of publicity. Whitman, in effect, demands an audience
for this cagey identity by standing before his supporters in Morgan’s Hall and telling them that
he must excuse himself from further words. Such an act points to the unrepresented,
nonmetonymic man — the Barnumesque manipulator who evades public understanding — as an
aspect of Whitman’s historical presence deserving recognition. Falling outside the deliberate
contours of the man/book persona, the manipulative Whitman is the conspicuous “lack” that
physical absences, blank paper, and postured anonymity sustain, a “lack” as riveting and
undeniable as the jaunty figure with the open collar.

The very “address” in which Whitman tells his Camden audience that they must “excuse [him]
from any word further” demonstrates how much this “excusing” or self-withholding is caught up
in the conflation of a public persona with textuality, or the metonymy that identifies the author
with his work. As the poet withholds himself from his audience, he also directs his audience to
read what he has published, as if such texts can act as a surrogate for the poet who will not speak.
“All I have felt the imperative conviction to say,” Whitman observes after announcing he will not
give a speech, “I have already printed in my books of poems or prose; to which I refer any who
may be curious” (5). Instead of offering the kind of revelatory reflections guests might expect at
a seventieth-birthday celebration, Whitman offers his books of poems and prose in an implied
metonymy of text and author that can satisfy those who are curious about the septuagenarian.
This offer, furthermore, depends on the self-restraint that precedes it, not simply in the anti-
oratorical sequence of Whitman’s announcement that he will not speak and his referral of his
listeners to his work, but in the broader sequences of an administered identity. Throughout his career Whitman stood back — remained silent and invisible — in order to manipulate his public, literary self. And the manipulation was most consummately when he equated his works with himself, when he metonymized his poetry and his presence. The legible being that Whitman offers in his works is a distinct identity predicated on a less readable being. The Whitman who can be understood — completely, it is professed — through his books of poems and prose is a contrived, projected figure, obliquely cast by someone who biologically and historically exceeded his work. This projected figure — what R. Jackson Wilson calls a “figure of speech” — embodies the full force of Whitman’s energetic and persuasive tendencies toward self-promotion. Thus it is easy to believe, now as on May 31, 1889, that the published voice is the authentic voice, that the man is in the poetry. Only a developed eye for Whitman’s pose of accessibility reveals his underlying elusiveness.

The crafted inextricability of the poet and his work is evident in the circular that heralded the Camden dinner, for the words “Whitman’s Personality and Productions” appear in bold print halfway down the page, announcing the man and his creations as the occasion for celebration. Personality and productions go hand in hand, not merely as a catchy alliterative phrase, but as a pronouncement of how Whitman wished to be perceived. The circular boldly states what Whitman spent decades establishing — the inseparability of his poetry and his identity — in the intensive, unrelenting construction of his public role. In this respect, the circular offers a kind of coda to the anonymous reviews of Leaves of Grass penned by Whitman early in his career. For these reviews, in which the author exchanges the poet’s hat for the anonymous critic’s, disclose the analytical and promotional groundwork for the inseparability of the creator and his work.

Whitman’s September 5, 1855 review, printed in the United States Review, begins with an apostrophe to the “American bard” whose arrival (“at last”) is signaled by the first edition of

---

5R. Jackson Wilson, Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin
Leaves. The reader of the review, “Walt Whitman and His Poems,” is told that this “American bard” is “one of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking, and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded....” The first paragraph of the review, which offers this physical description of the bard, moves swiftly into a call for “an athletic and defiant literature,” setting up an immediate connection between the author’s body and American literature generally, not just Leaves. A few paragraphs later the anonymous reviewer confirms this connection when he points out that the poet puts himself into the verse. “Walt Whitman at first proceeds to put his own body and soul into the new versification: ‘I celebrate myself./ And what I assume you shall assume./ For every atom belonging to me, as/ good belongs to you’” (11).

Three weeks after the appearance of the September 5 review, Whitman published another anonymous review in the Brooklyn Daily Times. This review, tellingly named “Walt Whitman, A Brooklyn Boy,” focuses first on the man, then on Leaves, thereby emphasizing the text as a carnal extension of its author. According to Whitman, the anonymous reviewer, Leaves of Grass is Whitman the poet’s “attempt... to cast into literature... his own flesh and form, undraped, regardless of... modesty and law, and ignorant or silently scornful, as at first appears, of all except his own presence and experience...” (21). Because the poems are an embodiment of their little known author, the reader must begin with an introduction to the “Brooklyn boy.” Once the reader has an idea who this “rowdyish, contemplative, sensual” individual is, he can begin to understand what he is reading. Indeed, the Daily Times reviewer makes it a matter of aesthetic and interpretive principle that poetry first requires an understanding of the poet. “To give judgment on real poems, one needs an account of the poet himself” (21). Writers of poems that


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
aren't "real" typically "celebrate great events, personages, romances, wars, loves, passions, [and] the victories and power of their country...." By contrast, "this poet celebrates himself" (21). The example of this Brooklyn bard, in other words, is that poetry worth comprehending cannot be dissociated from its living origin, is rooted in the flesh-and-blood presence of the poet. The lesson to the reader is that authenticity is gauged in the immediate and tangible accessibility of the author. Truth resides where the reader can feel the creator breathing over his shoulder. The lesson to other poets, meanwhile, is to know yourself before you begin to write. Determine whether you are rowdy or subdued, contemplative or restless, before you undertake what is at its best a celebration of yourself. "First be yourself what you would show in your poem — such seems to be this man's example and inferred rebuke to the school of poets" (21).

These write-ups in the United States Review and the Brooklyn Daily Times articulate a promotional stance that was to persist for years. Their claim that poetry is properly a celebration of the poet's self offers a paradigm for Whitman's career that exerted continuity in the face of his lifelong impulse to edit, revise, and reposition, a continuity that eventually linked the "Brooklyn boy" with the "Good Gray Poet," and the 1855 edition of Leaves with the David McKay "Deathbed Edition." Five years after the appearance of these debut reviews, an essay appeared in the New York Saturday Press entitled, "Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass." As with "Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn Boy," the title is revelatory. "Walt Whitman" and "Leaves of Grass" say it all, not just in themselves but in their parataxis. The poet and the work exist together, without so much as a conjunction to mediate their shared existence. Their relationship is one of immanence. Not only is the poet the key to understanding the text, but now — five years after the anonymous Whitman wrote that literature is authenticated by the unpretending presence of the author — the text proves the integrity of the poet. The writer of "Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass" (possibly

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Whitman, possibly his editor-friend, Henry Clapp, possibly both men) begins the review with the bold assertion: “We announce a great Philosopher – perhaps a great Poet – in every way an original man.” As in the “Brooklyn Boy” review, the premier object of attention is the author himself. This announcement of a great Philosopher/Poet is then followed by the claim that the “proof of [Whitman’s] greatness is in his book,” a claim that sounds ordinary and logical enough except that the “proof” is not so much a matter of demonstrative literary style or accomplishment, as of the embodiment or creative incarnation of language. The impressive originality of the author – Whitman’s own work-like quality – infuses his book so that Walt Whitman and Leaves of Grass occupy one continuum. What the reader finds in Whitman’s book, therefore, is as physical and vital as what the diners, gathered at Morgan’s Hall almost thirty years later, saw when they looked up from their fancy cakes and almonds. “A human heart is here in these pages – large, wild, comprehensive – beating with all throbs of passion – enjoying all of bliss – suffering all of sorrow that is possible to humanity. ‘This is not a book,’ it says; ‘whoever touches this, touches a man’” (79).

Whether Henry Clapp wrote the Saturday Press review or not, it is certain that Whitman did not construct his textual persona alone. At least one personal friend of the poet labored to perpetuate the inalienable connection between Whitman and Leaves. John Burroughs, among the front ranks of Whitman biographers, worked as hard as the poet to establish the material immanence of the democratic bard in his writing. Unable to attend the Camden dinner because of his duties as a farmer, Burroughs sent a letter to Whitman that – like the regrets of other absent invitees – is represented in Camden’s Compliment.9 Burroughs’s letter states more than

9 It remains uncertain whether Burroughs’s letter was read aloud in ceremonial fashion after the dinner. Horace Traubel writes that “a portion of the letters received in season were read, and many of them were printed in the local papers, and some few even entered into general circulation” (7). Which letters were read, which printed, and which circulated Traubel doesn’t say, however. Given Burroughs’s commanding

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
his desire to be present and the expected laudatory descriptions of a long literary career. His letter, rather, links the man with the poetry in a manner worthy of Whitman himself. The letter may not have been a commissioned piece of rhetoric, but its strategy and style of praise is suggestive of Whitman’s method of self-promotion. **“Does he look like a man of valleys and shadows?”** Burroughs asks about Whitman. **“Does he not rather look like a man of the broad high table-lands, where his spirit has always travelled; or of the shore, where the primordial ocean has breathed upon him and moulded him?”** A clear appeal to the Camden admirers that requires their attention more than their consensus about Whitman’s appearance, Burroughs supplies a response of his own. **“At any rate, the spirit which he has put into his poems is akin to these things, and goes with the largest types and the most healthful and robust activity”** (55). Whether or not the diners gathered at Whitman’s birthday celebration think he looks like a man of the “table-lands” or the ocean, Burroughs states, the poet is of a vigorous “type” consistent with the poetry of *Leaves*. The vitality of both man and book are connected in an almost anatomical typology of art. Burroughs continues, “I have no hesitation in saying that ‘Leaves of Grass’ is charged with the quality of a live man – not of his mind, merely, but of his body also, his *presence* – as no other modern poem is. This does not make it acceptable to the popular taste, but makes it a real and a living production…” (55-6). Whitman must have been gratified indeed to read his friend’s letter, for Burroughs’s description goes right to the heart of the literary image that the poet labored to create.

Nor would Burroughs have been indifferent to the effect of his letter. John Burroughs was keenly conscious of how Whitman positioned himself before his audience, for as the poet’s friend observes in his 1902 study,

---

10 Burroughs’s first book about Whitman was, in fact, a commissioned biography. The poet not only solicited Burroughs to write the book, but collaborated closely with the biographer through the various stages of its composition.
Whitman had a curious habit of standing apart, as it were, and looking upon himself and his career as of some other person. He was interested in his own cause, and took a hand in the discussion.

From first to last he had the habit of regarding himself objectively.11

In penning his letter for the crowd in Morgan's Hall, Burroughs must have known how he was confirming the poet's "curious habit" by focusing on a fundamental "object" of Whitman's self-scrutiny - i.e., his inseparability from his work. Writing about the frontispiece to the 1855 edition of *Leaves*, Burroughs maintains that although Whitman "assumes an attitude and is in a sense a poseur," the character in "the famous vestless and coatless portrait" must be balanced against the "marvelous self-knowledge" of the man who arranged the portrait. It is to this man that Burroughs writes in his letter of regret - if the letter can really be called that - even while he appeals to the Camden audience. It is to the man who constantly assessed himself and positioned himself within the fabric of his words that Burroughs nods. The poet's friend stops short, though, of saying that the man behind the literary pose is more authentic or compelling than the figure in the frontispiece or the robust "type" described in the letter. Burroughs's loyalty is such that he remains true to the persona, abiding by the invisibility of any gaps or discrepancies between Whitman and his work. If Whitman is a poseur, Burroughs maintains, he is "a poseur in the sense, and to the extent, that any man is a poseur who tries to live up to a certain ideal and to realize it in his outward daily life." Whitman's object of himself, so to speak, is only the outward fulfillment of an inner aspiration. The larger-than-life quality of the poseur, in fact, is attributable to the magnification and projection inherent in any grand process of outward fulfillment. Whitman's "traits and qualities stand out in heroic proportions" in the same way that - and here Burroughs relies on the promotional or the ideological to sanction the personal - Whitman's work is "himself magnified and projected... upon the canvas of a great age and

country" (94-5). The official bottom line for Burroughs is that “the book and the man [are] one” (4).

The “habit” of objective self-scrutiny Burroughs writes about is precisely what Ed Folsom describes in the context of Whitman’s persistent interest in photography. “From the time Whitman as a young man first saw photographs up until the time he died,” Folsom writes, “he was overwhelmed by the power of the photographed face” (135). This awe bordered on obsession as Whitman had his own face photographed over and over again. While some of these photos were intended merely as personal keepsakes, many of them were instruments in Whitman’s campaign of self-definition and promotion. Of the one hundred and thirty extant photos of Whitman, many were reproduced “to form the public face out of which emerged the voice in Leaves of Grass” (128). The succession of these images arguably constitutes a narrative of identity parallel to the succession of texts that make up the various revised editions of Leaves. As Whitman gradually articulated the self of his song, so he displayed in successive stages the face with which he confronted the world as a poet. Whitman’s “photographic project,” Folsom maintains, captures the spirit of his “best poetry” in its ability to depict an expansive and absorptive, almost universal self, squarely cast within the solidifying terms of a typological fixity. “As with his best poetry..., [Whitman’s] photographic project seems at once an attempt to define the self by sharing it with the world, but also by casting it into a represented image so that he could contemplate it, dwell on it, look outward into his own eyes” (128). What Traubel describes as Whitman’s ability to “throw himself out into a striking objectivity,” and what Burroughs sees as Whitman’s “habit of regarding himself objectively,” Folsom recognizes as one aspect of a twofold identity, captured in both poetry and photography. The conclusion Folsom draws is that the entire range of photographs – along with the verse, he implies – “forms at once the most intimate and most public record of any nineteenth-century writer.” In examining these photographs, we can’t help but “wonder whether we are seeing one of the great narcissistic acts.
of the century... or one of the most public acts, ...an attempt to become the representative American" (128). The wondering ceases, however, when the viewer or reader realizes that both "acts" are simultaneously possible within the creative scope of the photographs and the poems.

What the reader must remember is that both the narcissistic intimacy and the representative publicity Folsom describes – along with their apparent contradictory proximity – fall within the purview of Whitman’s persona. The one-on-one familiarity that the narcissistic Whitman invites is just as much a constructed image as the universal embrace the poet offers when he identifies himself as a "kosmos." Real familiarity with the individual and historical poet, to the extent that it is possible, begins with the recognition that Whitman was obsessively controlling when it came to photography. Like all "control freaks," he lived with an ambivalent sense of the possibilities and perils attendant on the loss of control. "I meet new Walt Whitmans every day," the poet once quipped. "There are a dozen of me afloat. I don’t know which Walt Whitman I am" (qtd. in Folsom, 161). As Folsom points out, "the sheer number of images again and again bothered [Whitman]; he seemed to have lost touch with the selves they represented, almost as if some of the self-images were of strangers" (161). "I have been photographed to confusion," the poet complained around the time of the Camden birthday dinner. "I’ve been taken and taken beyond count, ...taken from every side – even from my blind side" (qtd. in Folsom, 161). Whitman intended the ubiquity of his image as a form of self-empowerment. The profusion of photographs was meant as a dissemination of the intimate/public paradox of identity, a visual narrative of presence cast among his audience like a wide net. By the end of his life, however, Whitman felt encumbered by the surplus of his two-dimensional selves. Although "he carefully selected the photos that would be circulated and published, ...when he looked at all the photos – including the ones that did not fit the program – he felt less secure in his unity of purpose” (Folsom 165). The elderly Whitman, harried among the clutter of photographs in his Camden home, gives us a glimpse of the manipulative invention and the vulnerable imagination behind
the poet's persona. Whitman wanted to believe in the integrity of his image, but his "reactions to his photographs reveal that he maintained his doubts about the ensemble, the wholeness, the unity...." Whitman wished to be the master of absorption and balance, ingesting all contrary realities into a capacious yet self-defined awareness. But while his poetic catalogs succeeded as "an infinite and contradictory variety that piled up a wild randomness that created a unity," the catalog of photographs did not. By the end of his life, Whitman's "photos often spoke to him instead of fragmentation, disunion, and conflicted emotions" (Folsom 164).

The Whitman who was so deeply troubled by these messages of fragmentation, disunion, and conflicted emotions - the Whitman who sought desperately to project a multitudinous yet unified identity - is the man behind the figure. He is the individual behind the persona, so rarely glimpsed by readers because of the encompassing and sedulously crafted public image rooted in Leaves of Grass. A full understanding of Whitman and his work requires that we look beyond the persona to the contriving, insecure man surrounded by photographs - however much he would have preferred that our gazes settle on the photographs themselves. Kenneth Price observes that "the 'rough' persona created by Whitman, as daring as it was memorable, has impeded critical understanding of his poetry."12 The tough, individualistic image Whitman generated, Price argues, eclipses the contextual and traditional significance of Leaves with its mythological insistence on the originality of the author and his work.

As Price explains in the "Prologue" to Whitman and Tradition.

Although there has been much discussion of Whitman the 'rough'
(just as the poet wanted), I explore here his connections with
literary culture. Whitman actively discouraged such an approach...
But there is good reason to ask disqualified questions.... The
sheer energy of Whitman's denials of connectedness with literary

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
high culture... suggests that more attention should be paid to his
defensive strategy. Only by placing the poet in the literary context
he so often tried to expunge can we comprehend the nature of his
adversarial role (3-4).

The literary context in which Price re-situates Whitman is many-sided, and includes the
"operative English heritage" out of which the poet wrote, the visionary influence of Emerson,
and the interpretive framework created by the late-century Harvard poets, George Cabot Lodge
and William Vaughn Moody.

Price's point that Whitman's persona – that of the individualistic "rough" – impedes
recognition of the literary contexts from which it appeared applies, as well, to the economic
context out of which Leaves emerged. As the poet's independent persona forecloses discussion
of the literary traditions and reader responses on which that persona depends, so it also
forecloses consideration of the productive circumstances that engendered the various editions of
Leaves. Looking at the solitary, cocky figure in the 1855 frontispiece, it doesn't immediately
occur to the reader to ask what pecuniary forces surrounded Whitman's creativity. Judging from
the appearance of the Hollyer engraving – indeed, from the "striking objectivity" in which
Whitman "threw" himself with expert frequency – the poet himself was a work of art, an object
for aesthetic contemplation, the complete and absorbing power of which suspends questions
about that object's creation. Indistinguishable from his work, the "objective" Whitman and his
poetry occupy a historical, economic vacuum, suspicious scrutiny of which is foreclosed by the
raw, abundant feel of reality in Leaves, and by the overpowering self-sufficiency of the persona.
As Price says, the poet wanted discussion to revolve around the "rough," rather than around the
literary traditions (or, I would add, the market origins) that frame the "rough" and his hard-hewn
work. The discussions that Whitman's persona forecloses, however, are the very discussions that

12 Kenneth M. Price, Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century (New Haven: Yale University Press,
promise to lead to a better understanding of America’s democratic bard than the bard himself intended.

R. Jackson Wilson maintains that ever since the poet crafted his persona, “we have read Whitman more or less on his own terms, accepting his contention that the motives that produced his poetry had nothing to do with the fact that he lived in a society that was above all capitalist...” (281). We have succumbed to the charisma of “the figure of the poet” enough to forget that Whitman belonged to “a society in which poets, no less than other people, had become habituated to the production of goods for exchange in the marketplace” (281-82). Analyzing the famous 1855 frontispiece, Wilson calls attention to the fact that the image is arranged on a large blank page, a layout “obviously meant to heighten an effect of solitude and separation, as though this figure of a man were self-imposed on elemental space” (277). The solitude and separation arising from the spatial situation of the image implies a profound detachment from the materialistic concerns of commerce and profit. The poet and his work, the layout implies, have been delivered into the world pristine and powerful, beyond the nagging obligations of the market. This image of the poet is what Wilson calls “the figure of ‘I, Walt’.” And “the figure of ‘I, Walt,’ the figure of the engraving, was capable of anything and everything but writing for money” (279).

Behind this “figure of ‘I, Walt’” is what Wilson describes as “the real poet, the man who created the figure of the poet.” This “real poet,” whom we can imagine studying the Hollyer engraving before its inclusion in the 1855 Leaves, and whom we can also envision in later years surrounded by piles of unorganized photographs, “was also a seller, and his readers were not just an audience and certainly not a constituency, but a body of consumers” (281). The man behind the figure, as delineated by Wilson, is the very Whitman I have been describing as withheld. He is the man who deliberately “threw” himself out into a “striking objectivity” and watched its
effect. He is the one who planted the menu cards on the tables in Morgan's Hall, and who made
sure the elusive "address" he gave on the occasion of his seventieth birthday appeared in
Camden's Compliment before the textual re-creation of the event. He is the poet who arranged
the photographs that we have of him today, and who eventually worried about the slippery
surplus of images. As Wilson identifies him, this "Whitman was the manufacturer and retailer of
his own goods. He not only wrote Leaves of Grass, he designed the book and its cover, set some
of the type, and sold the product by mail order for a number of years before he gave it to a
bookseller to market for him" (279). This real poet, construed from the ideological influence of
the figure, is in a sense the anti-Whitman. The real poet and the figure of the poet occupy
disparate worlds, mediated only by the productive and consuming underpinnings of an
unavoidable economy.

Whereas Wilson sees the poet and his figure as embodying the opposite responses to that
economy ("Walter Whitman was as much a creature of the literary marketplace as his 'I, Walt'
was a renunciation of it"), I perceive an overlap (280). The real poet is the anti-presence of the
mythical bard. And yet the mythical figure registers the evasiveness and indirect power of the
real poet. "I, Walt" exhibits the concealed influence of Walter Whitman in all the curious
demonstrations of public self-restraint I have been outlining. "I, Walt" displays the withheld
consciousness of Walter Whitman when he stands at the podium and tells a celebratory gathering
of diners that he has no intention of giving an address. The figure expresses the inexpressible
moments of its configuration in saying that he has nothing to say. Likewise, the presentations of
the 1855 frontispiece and the phototype menu card convey the arranged detachment of the figure
from any material context. The blank page surrounding the Hollyer engraving, and the menu
card portrait of Whitman standing "felicitously alone, without name or word to any effect,"
depict how the figure of the poet is deliberately and creatively isolated from a context that is
inevitably capitalist. Whitman created a profound association between his work and himself that
not only conceals the capitalist dimensions of the poet (as manufacturer and retailer), but also the market origins of the work (as goods). The Whitman readers encounter, the figure not withheld from his audience, is indistinguishable from the “goods” in Wilson’s formulation because of a rhetorical stratagem that makes the “goods” look human. The “manufacturer and retailer” is thereby effaced as the poet becomes a function of his poetry, a subject predefined by a poetic enterprise that denies its merchandising mission and thus becomes a source of “authentic” being.

This process of concealment bespeaks the origins of Leaves of Grass and Walt Whitman’s persona in an increasingly rationalized and impersonal economy, rather than just the sheer status of the poetry and the poet as “works.” It isn’t so much the evidence of industry that is swept under the rhetorical rug (although “Song of Myself” beings with a vision of leaning and loafing), as the evidence of a system of industry that separates and isolates its components. This process of effacement is an attempt to erase the signs of an economy that, during Whitman’s most productive years, was lifting the power of productivity from the hands of the individual laborer and distributing it in a systematic diminution of agency. Whitman struggled to conceal not so much the sweat of his brow, as the frequently browbeaten visage of a poet caught among the uncontrollable and dehumanizing forces of a developing capitalist economy. For this reason the character of the artisan is a familiar one in Whitman’s universe, embodying as it does the pre-capitalist capabilities of the working man.

Whitman introduces himself in his signature poem, “Song of Myself,” as “lean[ing] and loaf[ing] at [his] ease observing a spear of grass,” yet he did not hesitate to present himself to friends and acquaintances as an industrious artisan laboring away at the many steps of his book’s production. Whitman was gratified by the recognition that he was involved in the appearance of Leaves at nearly every stage of its production, although he would have shunned Wilson’s description of him as “the manufacturer and retailer of his own goods” because of the rationalization and specialization it implies. As Joel Myerson puts it, “Whitman fully embraced
the process by which his handwritten words were cast into metal and gift wrapped in paper or
cloth for presentation to the world.” Indeed, it is Myerson’s contention that “no American
writer was as fully involved in the process of seeing a book into print as was Walt Whitman” (20).

He physically assisted in the setting of type and personally oversaw multiple proofings, chose the font styles and type sizes, decided what kind of paper and page size would be used, designed the bindings, wrote advertising copy for as well as wrote reviews of his works, and sold the books himself (21).

Such involvement was not merely the antics of a fussy author. According to Myerson, “the production of a book was, to Whitman, a reproduction of self that required extended personal involvement” (21). I would amend this observation by adding that the production of Leaves of Grass was, to Whitman, a reproduction of self that required the kind of extended personal involvement necessary to forestall the publishing industry’s disempowering, reifying presentations of books and their authors. Whitman helped to set the type and designed the bindings of his book in an effort to sustain an ideal of artisan involvement, of holistic labor vanishing with the publishing business’s transition from genteel production to complex, competitive professionalism. Whitman once told Horace Traubel, “we ought to get rid of the literary middleman. The author should be in more direct and vital touch with his reader. The formal publisher should be abolished… In the ideal situation the author would have his own type and set the type of his book” (qtd. in Myerson, 21). Formal publishers, here, intervene between the writer and his book, perpetuating the elaborate divisions of labor that signify an advancing capitalism and a declining culture of craft. What Whitman sought to convey by getting involved in every stage of his book’s production was the possibility of an alternative

---

scenario, an alternative process of creating and distributing literature that was free from reductive interventions. The poet who was also enthusiastically his own printer, copywriter, and reviewer was not simply an eccentric artist obsessing over a pet creation. (As Myerson points out, Whitman's penchant for self-publishing extended beyond *Leaves* to his other printed works, the majority of which Whitman published himself (21).) Instead, the poet who took pride in rolling up his sleeves and setting his own type deliberately offered himself up — along with his book — as a corrective to the depersonalizing, mass-production tendencies of the age.

The figure of the poet/printer, in fact, marks the high point of Whitman's career in self-publishing. By "self-publishing" I mean not only the literary career facilitated by Whitman's effort to produce, distribute, and promote *Leaves of Grass*, but the career built on the construction and dissemination — the publishing — of a certain self. Whitman's self-publishing career is precisely the elaborate and ambivalent presentation of identity I have been describing, with the self that is doing the publishing (the manufacturer and retailer) hiding behind the self that is being published (the public "goods" of the democratic bard embodied in his book). The figure of the poet/printer is the epitome of this self-publishing enterprise because it brings together two aspects of Whitman’s persona — the egalitarian individualist as author and as tradesman — that mutually strive to loosen the hold that capitalism has on identity. The figure of the poet strives against the determinacies of the subject in a capitalist society by adopting various objective poses of irreverence, cockiness, childishness, and — most effectively — chameleonic inclusiveness. The figure of the printer, more specifically, strives against the determinacies of the worker in a capitalist system by offering an image of labor that is artisanal and fully engaged, rather than mechanized and specialized. To the extent, moreover, that Whitman the poet and Whitman the printer are figures (that is, "thrown out" objectifications of Whitman's ability to imagine himself), the poet/printer persona indicates where Whitman's insecurities, frustrations, and willful blindness were most concentrated in his attempts to make and sell himself. The
poet/printer persona brings together in the range of its concealment a particular mix of problematic responses that Whitman the manufacturer and retailer had to his economic situation. Despite his very unambivalent and forceful assertion to Traubel that formal publishers should be abolished, Whitman worked with such “middlemen” at certain intervals in the evolution of *Leaves of Grass*. The nature of this interaction and its timing says more about Whitman and his circumstances than the rhetorical disavowal of publishers alone.

In an 1857 letter to Philadelphia patron and friend, Sarah Tyndale, Whitman confessed his dissatisfaction with Fowler and Wells, the publisher that helped him launch the first two editions of *Leaves*. Although the specific responsibility of the firm lay in the printing of the book, Fowler and Wells did also advertise that *Leaves* was available for purchase in their establishment – a mere stab at the promotional responsibilities undertaken by most publishers. Whitman felt that Fowler and Wells (best remembered as the publisher of phrenological books and journals) didn’t do enough to market his book, that they even suppressed it because of the dubious attention it was receiving from the public. “Fowler and Wells are bad persons for me,” Whitman confided. “They retard my book very much…. They want the thing off their hands.” In spite of his disappointment with Fowler and Wells, Whitman, undaunted by the public’s tentative acceptance of (bordering on indifference to) his poetry, was making plans for a third edition of his book even as he confided his frustrations to Tyndale. “In the forthcoming Vol. I shall have… a hundred poems,” the poet announced excitedly. “I think [the new Vol.] has an aspect of completeness, and makes its case clearer [than the first two editions].” While Whitman’s enthusiasm for his project remained steady, his confidence in the ability of commercial publishers generally remained intact enough for him to plan on transferring the typesetting plates from Fowler and Wells to another firm. In the same breath with which he expressed his frustration with one publisher, Whitman wondered how he might “make an arrangement with [another] publisher…"
to take the plates from F. and W. and make the additions needed, and so bring out the third edition” (qtd. in Greenspan, 175).

Enthusiastic plans aside, the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* did not appear until 1860, three years after the letter to Sarah Tyndale. Economic circumstances beyond Whitman’s control contributed to the lackluster future that already seemed to loom ahead of *Leaves*. The Panic of 1857 toppled the American economy, and the publishing industry in particular, into a crisis of uncertainty. While major publishing houses, such as Harper and Brothers, George Putnam’s Sons, and Fowler and Wells, struggled to keep their business heads above water, individual authors resigned their works to an unreceptive market. With popular authors suffering the effects of the recession, it is understandable that a writer such as Whitman, whose reputation was dubious even in the best of economic times, would be immobilized in spite of his unflagging energy and imagination. As Greenspan states, even if Whitman hadn’t been so disillusioned by the hands-off attitude of Fowler and Wells by 1857, he wouldn’t have been able to rely on the Boston publisher for an imminent third edition anyway. For Fowler and Wells temporarily halted its operations as a result of the Panic (176). Together, Whitman’s “reputation and the poor prospects for publication generally were enough to eliminate any slim chance he might still have had for commercial publication” (Greenspan 176). The only option in 1857 – aside from not issuing a third edition at all – was self-publication. But after serious consideration and a hard look at his personal finances, Whitman defaulted to his least desirable option – that of not issuing

---

15 The December 1857 issue of *National Magazine* declared that the Panic year “will be memorable in all future time for commercial disasters, the derangement of trade, the failure of banking institutions, and the suspensions of merchants and traders of all classes.” Magazine editors were particularly conscious of the economic downturn as one periodical after another ceased publication. Casualties of the crisis included *Graham’s Magazine*, the first *Putnam’s*, and *Emerson’s* which briefly replaced *Putnam’s*. Surprisingly, two of the most important periodicals of the nineteenth century started in – and survived – 1857. *Harper’s Weekly* and the *Atlantic Monthly* were launched in the months preceding the autumn downturn, a fact that enabled them to survive even as more established magazines went under. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850-1865*, vol 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938) 5. The *National Magazine* quotation is taken from page 144 of Mott.
the contemplated package of one hundred poems. In such personal straits that he was unable to repay a two hundred dollar loan from James Parton (husband of Fanny Fern), Whitman was in no position to obtain the plates from Fowler and Wells and embark on his own publishing enterprise. Even the enthusiastic support of Tyndale, manifested in a contribution toward the purchase of plates, didn't catalyze the process. Only in 1860 did the third edition appear, issued by the Boston commercial publisher, Thayer and Eldridge. By then, *Leaves* was a substantially different work from the one Whitman contemplated in 1857.

This period between the second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass* -- that is, between 1856 and 1860 -- Greenspan refers to as "the long gap" in Whitman's career, a gap that contains one of the enduring puzzles of the poet's life (175-76). Apparently, Whitman disengaged himself from his poetry between the middle of 1857 and 1859, producing little that was new and reassessing the philosophy undergirding the first and second editions. Proceeding on scant information, Whitman biographers typically identify 1859-60 as the period in which the poet underwent a personal transformation, a change that brought Whitman out of his creative lull with a more vigorous assertion of identity. Greenspan maintains, though, that signs of the transformation are visible in the poetry as early as 1857, before Whitman stopped writing mid-year. "A closer look at the poems themselves reveals subtle changes in [Whitman's] thinking, changes which already point toward the more dramatic transformation of personality that Whitman biographers... usually date to 1859-60" (177). As evidence of these changes, Greenspan cites an early 1857 poem in which Whitman writes: "Rest not till you rivet and publish yourself of your own Personality" (176). Apparently an allusion to the predicament Whitman found himself in with his proposed third edition, this line from "To a Pupil" reads as an early declaration of literary success and of the almost larger-than-life public identity with which the poet emerged in 1860. The closest thing, in Greenspan's estimation, to a "'real' Whitman," this "published personality" appears with a third edition of *Leaves of Grass* that is "far superior
to the one he had planned to bring out several years before and one showing fascinating redirections in self-conception and in sense of audience" (188). As Greenspan lays out, too, this "published personality" comes into its full power (in spite of its early signs) only at the end of a period of self-doubt, a period defined by personal and national financial uncertainty, by creative and professional self-scrutiny, and by an ideological shift in confidence from the democratic, individual self to impersonal hierarchies (then apparently back to the "real" democratic individual) as the guarantor of social freedom.

At first glance, the fact that the period in which Whitman began thinking seriously about self-publishing was heralded by the poetic imperative to "rest not till you... publish yourself of your own Personality" (an imperative directed as much at Whitman himself, as at his readers or "the pupil") indicates a confidence in the autonomous resources of the self. Indeed, the imperative suggests that one's personal identity can supply the entire wherewithal for such publishing, as the self (implicitly inextricable from its work) emerges from its "own Personality." The economic and biographical circumstances surrounding Whitman's move toward self-publishing, however, indicate the profound limitations of the autonomous "Personality." The events of Whitman's life between 1857 and 1860 point to the restrictions placed on individual identity and expression by a competitive market, restrictions that led to a crisis of self at the very moment when self-publication became a pressing concern. The reservoir of identity from which Whitman imagined himself drawing his creative and promotional strength proved unsustaining at precisely the time when the financial condition of the Northeast and of the poet himself depleted the material and psychological sense of personal investment. For all Whitman's interest in self-publishing, the "long gap" ended not with a self-published third edition of Leaves, but with an edition published by a Boston commercial publisher. Although Whitman would not return to another commercial firm until two decades after Thayer and Eldridge published his book, the poet's decision to use the Boston publisher for the 1860 edition attests to the crisis of self that
Whitman experienced during the "gap" years, a crisis that muddied his understanding of his self as both a literary force and an independent, entrepreneurial agent. The turn to Thayer and Eldridge signals Whitman’s willingness during the "long gap" to accept commercial definitions of identity, work, and their symbiotic value, so crucial to the development of a corporate society, at the cost of the personal definitions motivating his project of self-publication.

The faith in an autonomous self so shaken by 1860 – what we might designate as the faith in the "Me myself" – was very caught up with Whitman’s faith in the nation. For the confidence in the "Me myself" rested on the egalitarian merit of the individual in a democracy. As Greenspan observes, however, Whitman’s "ability to coordinate the poetry of the self with the poetry of the nation was showing signs of strain" as early in his career as 1857 (179). Even though Whitman had been contemplating going on a lecture tour or becoming what he called a "wander-teacher" for some time, his immediate financial straits forced him to confront the unlikely promise of such a plan. The unconfined and encompassing allure of the "wander-teacher's" life appealed to Whitman through his belief that education and culture are communicated laterally and equally among the members of a democratic society. Yet because "neither the chimera of a national poetry nor that of national oratory was able to sustain Whitman forever," because the pressure to make a private living displaced the dream of touring and contributing to the national life, Whitman chose to exchange his poet’s hat for the editor’s hat that he hadn’t worn in six years (Greenspan 184). Literally speaking, Whitman continued wearing the wide-brimmed hat typical of the workingman – a hat like the one featured in the 1855 frontispiece. But while after the winter of 1857 Whitman began marching "daily into the office in high boots, open shirt, and wide-brimmed hat, the uniform of the workingman, his radical views were becoming more fully sprinkled with conservative stances on various social, political, and cultural matters" (Greenspan 185). The return to newspaper editing witnessed a transformation in the egalitarian "Me myself," a transformation gauged in Whitman’s decision not to “publish himself of his own Personality,”
but to take what he saw as the literary backseat of the journalist who is curiously, socially powerless.

During the winter of 1857 Whitman resumed his full-time involvement in journalism. Financial problems – attributable in part to the unimpressive sales of Leaves of Grass, illustrated by the humiliating seizure of personal property as restitution for the Parton loan, and exacerbated by the Panic – forced Whitman to take a position as editor of the Brooklyn Daily Times. Whitman had ties to the paper, which was published in the Williamsburg district of Brooklyn, at least as far back as 1855 when he published one of his self-reviews in the daily. Through these ties, strengthened by shared political views, Whitman was offered the editorial post when the previous editor resigned to pursue a career as a playwright. Thus began a two-and-a-half-year stint – the longest of any of Whitman’s journalistic posts – as editor of the Daily Times. This was a stint necessitated by financial hardship, and yet one that was initially marked by economic optimism. In July of 1857 the new editor of the Daily Times dismissed reports of an impending panic, and instead forecast an imminent “prosperity.” By autumn of that year, though, Whitman changed his forecast and acknowledged that the immediate economic future was bleak. The financial exigency that had compelled him to take the position of editor was as real on a broad national scale as on a personal level.

With the last vestiges of economic optimism there vanished Whitman’s faith in the radical potential of the individual. Although common wisdom maintains that the individual’s political and social power of subversion and radical independence thrives in the midst of economic upheaval (as suggested by the resurgence of American interest in Socialism and Communism during the 1930s), Whitman’s own loss of confidence in the democratic individual during and after the Panic indicates an alternative reality, one where economic upheaval presses upon the individual from all sides and makes him feel the constricted dependence of his “autonomy” on the freedoms that prosperity brings. The crush of poverty weighs upon the individual sense of
possibility, flattening visions of rebellion and reform with the material, structural limits of our lives. In Whitman’s case, the crush came from two directions – that of personal “failure,” and that of widespread “Panic.” Of two logical responses – the denial of the individual, and the exaggerated fixation on the individual in effigy (the psychology of reification I discuss in my Inter-Chapter) – Whitman’s initial reaction was that of denial.

During his tenure as editor of the Brooklyn Daily Times, Whitman’s social and political views shifted from the confident, democratic egalitarianism of the 1855 Leaves to a censorious distrust of the masses. What he had once praised as the robust rowdyism of a healthy, active populace was now denigrated as a source of urban upheaval. A “rum-swilling, rampant set of roughs and rowdies” was to blame for the city’s disorder (qtd. in Greenspan, 185). Where once he had rejected capital punishment as a solution to such disorder, he now advocated it as a means of stability. No longer paramount was the life of the individual; rather, the collective welfare of the community – with its various arrangements of authority and submission – was of the first importance. Slavery was still a compelling issue for Whitman. But the Daily Times editor was unable to keep pace with the progressive editorial policy of the Atlantic Monthly, for instance, when he refused to insist on blacks’ inclusion in the territories. Female suffrage the Daily Times editor did not bother to defend. As Greenspan says of Whitman during these newspaper years,

> There was not only a general tendency toward more conservative views but also a subtle but important transformation in the tone and substance of Whitman’s attitudes, one figured most significantly by what I think of as an incipient distancing of himself from his previous identification with the people (185).

Whitman, it seems, began to separate himself from the people not out of some monolithic perception of the masses as a mass, but out of a loss of faith in the individual precipitated by his
own inability to sustain an individual poetic voice amid the panicked clamor of his contemporaries' voices.

That the transition from the poetic to the editorial voice was disempowering is implied by Whitman's deliberate separation of the two. Acting, it seems, on a psychological dynamic of disempowerment akin to the one that motivates abuse victims to compartmentalize their lives, Whitman kept his identity as the author of *Leaves of Grass* separate from his identity as the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily*.

As far as the readers of the paper were concerned, the editor of the *Times* and the author of the volume of poems which had been reviewed in its pages just several months before his accession to the editorship could have been two entirely separate personalities. Whereas Whitman had from time to time republished his poems in previous editorships, he was not to make a single reference to his poetry or to himself as being a poet during his two-and-a-half-year editorial 'sit'... with the *Times* (Greenspan 185).

The separation of the two "personalities," especially in the context of separation from the populace, points to disillusionment and self-defense, to a strategy of self-preservation motivated by adversity. While we would hesitate to call the editorship of a respectable newspaper a form of abuse, it is not such a difficult logical step to recognize that any monopolization of literary and intellectual resources by the press of penury is a form of disempowerment.

Whitman did, indeed, find himself in a press of poverty. The popular press as he came to view it in the late 1850s was impoverished in its ability to educate and uplift its mass readership. With the integrity of the democratic individual disappeared the integrity of the democratic press. The democratizing, enlightening potential that Whitman once saw in the press gave way to unprincipled sensation-mongering. Newspapers that wished to secure and keep a wide
readership had to appeal to the lowest common denominator of interest – that of scandal and misfortune – rather than to the appetite for improvement. In an editorial from the August 20, 1857 issue of the Daily Times, Whitman writes, “The general public... will not take any paper which does not ‘spread itself’ on horrible tragedies, great crimes, and the grosser offences against society and decorum.” The only power that the press has – beyond the power to entertain – is confined to a segment of the population that least needs education or improvement. As Whitman maintains in an editorial printed in the August 26, 1857 issue of the daily, the press retains power “among those classes who least need its teachings.”

Those who are themselves really intelligent, know how to respect, as a general thing, the utterances of the newspaper press, but there is a large and numerous class, aye, the most numerous, especially in the great cities, who are utterly impervious to anything that the press may say, simply because they are beyond, or rather below, the influence of the papers they do not or cannot read (qtd. in Greenspan).

A complete turnaround from his earlier faith in the man on the street, the view of the press Whitman expresses in these editorials points to a profound disillusionment with the average reader and, ultimately, the average citizen. The “word En-Masse” proves to be the word of ignorance, of narrow expectations and small gratifications, rather than of communication and expansion. “En-Masse” is the word of the rabble, rather than of the people. Certainly, Greenspan is right in saying that the readers of the Brooklyn Daily Times would never have guessed that the newspaper’s editor and the author of Leaves of Grass were one and the same person!

In a sense, the editor and the poet were not the same person. In a psychological sense that depends largely on self-consciousness, and in an economic sense that depends on the self’s
materialistic determinations of consciousness, the editor and the poet weren't the same individual. Like the democratic individual envisioned through *Leaves of Grass*, the poet had the power to act with consequences, to create desired change. Unable to create change, by contrast, the editor is himself reduced to change—mere pocket change—that makes an idle noise.

Whereas the poet Whitman envisioned himself to be in the first two editions of *Leaves* possesses a powerful consciousness as expansive and indispensable as the "kosmos," the editor he became in 1857 had noticeably limited powers of articulation and definition. The poet has the ability to shape ideas—even when he appears merely to be cataloging objects—because of the agency that his democratic vision presumes. The editor of a newspaper that allegedly few readers are equipped to appreciate or understand, though, lacks such ability, for with the vanished democratic potential of the audience disappears readers' responsiveness and writers' individual effectiveness. Nor is this transformation confined to editors alone, for journalists generally have little chance to write beyond the reach of their readers' expectations and biases. "The journalist does not and cannot create or form the public taste," Whitman editorialized in August of 1857; "all he can do is to cater for it and comply with it." As far as the sensational quality of news coverage is concerned, "it is all nonsense to blame the editors... they must either cater to the general taste, or forfeit an extended circulation, or retire from competition with others less scrupulous." The press as a whole responds to the demands of its readership (quite a different scenario from the one in which an unknown poet thrusts his vision upon a mildly—if at all—receptive audience). "It is quite a mistake to charge the press with having 'poisoned' the public taste. Such [sensational] reports would never have been written in the first place, if there had not been a demand for them" (qtd. in Greenspan 186).

All of this is to illustrate that the "long gap" in Whitman's literary career, occurring between the second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1856-1860), was a biographical gap in which the poet experienced a crisis of identity brought on by troubled personal finances and a volatile
economy. The active, confident identity suggested by the frontispiece figure with his arms akimbo, and by the sweeping declaration of Walt Whitman as a "kosmos," was eroded by the financial pressures that finally compelled the poet to take the job as editor of the Brooklyn Daily Times. The doubtful self-consciousness that came to replace the salient individuality of the poet's early years was Whitman's sense of his intellectual and creative potential as suddenly circumscribed by impersonal forces of supply and demand. The lack of demand for his book of poetry, balanced against the demands of debtors, forced him to re-supply the field of journalism with his considerable editorial abilities. An important outcome of this return to journalism was Whitman's realization that the field of journalism itself is governed by the demands of its audience, that the stories produced are a direct response to the consumer appetite of the readers. What Whitman found himself supplying -- publishing of his own personality, so to speak -- had less to do with his own intellectual impulses, than with the unintellectual expectations of an unsophisticated audience. What Whitman published as editor of the Daily Times had less to do with his personality than he would have liked to admit, as gradually the freedom and originality of that personality was lost to repetitive market demand. The effacing, wearing force of such demand seems to have rendered the individual impotent in Whitman's thinking (the individual as figured through the journalist), while the masses became increasingly powerful in his mind. His own intellectual incorporation into a system of supply and demand, that is to say, diminished his experience of creative individuality until he was forced to concede that the real site of power in such a system is by necessity collective and impersonal. Whitman the poet was eclipsed by Whitman the editor as the power of the individual was eclipsed by the influence of the masses.

By the time Whitman left his post as editor of the Daily Times in June of 1859, he had resumed serious work on his poetry. The circumstances of his departure from the Times are uncertain, but is clear that he was ready to make the transition back to a literary career when an offer came from Thayer and Eldridge to publish the third edition of Leaves of Grass. The plans
for a self-published third edition of the book, about which Whitman had corresponded with Sarah Tyndale, were supplanted by the Boston publisher’s interest in the New York poet. Along with the plans for a self-published edition, the overt sense of “Personality” which, in an earlier phase of his literary career, seems to have served Whitman as a resource for publishing was also put on hold. As I hope to have shown, this “Personality” – as a public assertion of individual power and egalitarian entitlement – was displaced by a journalistic identity of disempowerment and reaction, of subjection to impersonal demands. Now, with Whitman’s return to poetry, this faith in individual identity and its resources stayed in abeyance as the commercial publisher picked up where the self-publishing project left off.

Whitman was not the sole master of his book when the third edition appeared in 1860 – not in the way he predicted when he envisioned himself as creator, printer, publisher, and retailer. Whitman wasn’t even master of himself, in the sense of being master of his “Personality.” In fact, the unsolicited offer from Thayer and Eldridge seems to have elicited a response from Whitman on the basis of his “Personality’s” incorporation into the world of commerce, of supply and demand. Whitman could only have been moderately receptive to the overtures of a commercial publisher just a couple of years earlier, judging by the disappointment he expressed about Fowler and Wells’s handling of Leaves. Or at least it is reasonable to think he would have responded to a commercial publisher’s interest in his book with considerable distrust. Looking at the figure the poet allowed Thayer and Eldridge to distribute of himself, though, it appears that Whitman responded to the Boston publisher on the basis of his transformation from an intellectual renegade into a conservative spokesman for collective sensibilities. Whitman seems to have responded to Thayer and Eldridge in his role as editor – that is, as someone with an establishmentarian skepticism about the capabilities of the individual. Resigned to the sway of a mass readership, the editor mutated back into a poet with a residual conservatism that registers in the frontispiece used for the 1860 edition. Gone is the jaunty figure in the wide-brimmed hat.
Instead, the third edition presents a much different Whitman from the casual and self-confident man who greeted readers of the first and second editions. The frontispiece published by Thayer and Eldridge is a steel engraving made from a painting by Charles Hine. The image, a romanticized depiction of the author comparable to an airbrushed photograph today, depicts Whitman as a genteel man of letters. The viewer does not see Whitman's body, as in the 1855 daguerreotype. Rather, the implicit message of carnality and rugged industry is replaced by the focus on the poet's head and shoulders – a focus that suggests intellectual leisure. The Hine Whitman is hatless, and his hair is groomed to perfection. Beneath his trimmed, delicately curling beard is not the open shirt of a laborer, but the immaculate collar of a gentleman. The viewer's eye comes to rest not on the poet's hand on his hip, but on a fashionable bow tied around the poet's neck. Overall, the challenging comportment of the 1855 figure is replaced in the 1860 representation by a general air of conservative refinement. Tellingly, these differences between the daguerreotype and the engraving convey the change in Whitman's identity between 1855 and 1860, a change brought about largely by economic circumstances. The fact that Whitman chose to go with a commercial publisher after he almost turned the project of self-publication into a kind of personal religion attests to a transformation of identity that is concretely communicated in the shift from unconventional daguerreotype to conventional engraving. Thayer and Eldridge soon went out of business after publishing the third edition of Leaves – themselves victims of economic adversity. And although it would be another twenty years before Whitman went with another commercial publisher, the change signaled by Thayer and Eldridge's publication of Leaves of Grass exerted a lasting effect on Whitman and his work.

The change signaled by Thayer and Eldridge's publication of his book points to Whitman's incorporation into a system of commerce that burgeoned after the Civil War, yet the implements of which were intact during the antebellum period – a system whose exacting limitations Whitman felt in his own pinched financial circumstances and in the larger troubles of the Panic.
as well as in his own small efficacy as a journalist trying to maintain a market. The poet's
decision to go with a commercial publisher for the third edition of Leaves, and with the Hine
rather than the Hollyer engraving, indicate that by the time Whitman finished his tenure as editor
of the Daily Times, he though of himself in the embedded terms of an institutional consciousness
- a consciousness that is determined by the impersonal influences of the economy, and that
registers individuality as a demographic surplus (i.e., as the unruly masses) while denying its
capacity for originality or reifying it into an inelastic symbol of originality. Indeed, the loss of
renegade individuality implied by Whitman's conservative depiction in the Hine engraving
reaches its apex with the appearance of the fourth edition of his book after the war. For the
1866-67 edition was the first to lack an image of Whitman altogether. The edition was self-published, but the declaration of autonomy that self-publication was to have conveyed seems oddly unfulfilled without some representation of the poet. The lack of an engraving, given
Whitman's fixation on his own figure, works against the assertion of identity in such a way that
the fourth edition reveals a crisis of self, rather than a recovery of self from the corporate grip of
commercial publishing. I believe the Whitman who emerged without a figure in 1866-67 was a
Whitman reeling from the experiences of the past decade. He was a poet struggling to preserve
an ethos of freedom that he had constructed on the rhetorical grounds of personal power, even as
he witnessed capitalism's growing ability to efface genuine individual agency with the
ideological surrogate of consumerism. The initial outcome of this struggle was the internal
conflict represented by a self-published fourth edition of Leaves without a frontispiece. The
eventual and more lasting outcome of this struggle — the outcome with which we grapple as our
received idea of who Whitman was — was the hardening of the poet's identity into a false self, a
"thrown out" objectification of the false consciousness that attends commercial thinking, a
commodification of being epitomized in Whitman's skillful management of his public image
even as he presided over an elusive "genuine" self.
In spite of Greenspan’s suggestion that Whitman emerged from the “long gap” in his poetic career with a more authentic grasp of who he was (a suggestion qualified by the quotation marks around “real,” in the phrase “the ‘real’ Whitman”), it is more likely that Whitman emerged from those years with a heightened understanding that he would have to construct and market a “Personality” separate from his personal identity in order to succeed as a published poet. In the wake of his embittered belief that the journalist is incapable of shaping public opinion, Whitman experienced not only the personal disempowerment one would expect from such professional disillusionment, but the self-alienation more largely and more sociologically endemic to the market environment. In effect, Whitman took the inevitable self-estrangement attending all efforts to be cultural in the terms laid out by capital, and turned it into cultural capital. He resolved to recover the old influence of the author over his audience by appealing to readers in the form dictated by them as consumers. More than ever, Whitman approached his readers as a commodity, a mass produced, widely recognizable object that would prompt the public’s acquisitive reflex. Specifically, he approached his readers through the coinage of his circulating image, offering up his familiar face as the means with which to purchase a literary culture available for general consumption. In this sense, the poet embraced the reifying effects of capitalism and turned them to his promotional advantage.

Thus we should not mistake the popularized figure of the poet – the “thrown out” objectification of his “Personality” – as the authentic Whitman. Nor should we conceive of this figure, more ubiquitous after the “long gap” in his career, as simply false, while the man behind the figure – the “manufacturer and retailer of his own goods” – must simply be real. The authentic Whitman, instead, must be articulated through an analytical syntax that can encompass both the figure and the man. The “real” Whitman must reside somewhere between the two extremes of the universally recognized face, and the distraught features of the man baffled by an overabundance of photographs. In fact, it is this equipoise of “real” being that comes across in
the tension between the figure who appears in the 1855 frontispiece of *Leaves*, and the blank page that surrounds the figure. It is this balance of real-ness that came across in Whitman’s oracular announcement in Morgan’s Hall that he had no speech to give, and, indeed, in the very fact of his questionable arrival at his own seventieth-birthday celebration. Whitman’s various arrangements of self-offering and self-withholding (a dynamic that is conveyed in the ambiguity of the phrase, “self-publishing,” when the “self” is understood to be both the publisher and the published) are, in truth, the very grammar of genuine presence in a language of art and being exchanged as market transaction.

The image of the elderly Whitman sitting in his cluttered Camden bedroom, baffled by the overwhelming number of photographs of himself, captures the peculiar, fundamentally authentic tension between the “manufacturer/retailer” and his “goods,” or the publisher and the published. As stated earlier in this chapter, Whitman claimed to “have been photographed to confusion.” He once quipped, “I meet new Walt Whitmans every day. There are a dozen of me afloat. I don’t know which Walt Whitman I am” (Folsom 161). It seems that the revealing balance between the publisher and the published figure, distributed largely through the photograph, was set off balance by the sheer excess of “floating” Whitmans — a kind of glut that detracted from Whitman’s market value. As Folsom describes the situation, “the sheer number of images again and again bothered [Whitman]; he seemed to have lost touch with the selves they represented, almost as if some of the self-images were of strangers” (161). On the one hand, Whitman wanted to cull a unified identity from the many images available. Thus it was the inherent difficulty of such a task that bothered him. Whitman “carefully selected the photos that would be circulated and published, but when he looked at all the photos — including the ones that did not fit the program – he felt less secure in his unity of purpose” (Folsom 165). Yet on the other hand, Whitman knew that the dynamic, cumulative effect of the photographs was as important as the unified identity to which they contributed. “...he was struck by the process of change, of growth
and decline that [the] photographs traced" as he sought to extract a focused narrative from the images (Folsom 161). In any event, the many photographs of Whitman – from the poet standing with his arm akimbo, to the poet sitting in one of his later studio shots – reveal an evolution of identity, an evolution that is surprisingly consistent in its lifelong movement toward "Personality."

Early in his career, Whitman viewed photography as a trade that preserved both social and individual differences. As an artisanal craft, photography preserved a social enclave of skilled, individualistic labor against the encroachments of impersonal industry. The pioneer photographers who staked out their new field were "nonconformists... of diverse interest who learned their craft well and went into business for themselves" (153). They were independent workers who absorbed the successes and the failures of their own enterprise. Photographers later in the century, on the other hand, were frequently commercial photographers. Studio based, they were less mobile than their predecessors, while a growing sense of professionalism made their portraits more formal than the portraits of the photographer-artisans. These later photographers "tended to be the more established big business operators," working in metropolitan settings with a grasp of procedure that applied to everything from the photography to corporate conduct. At the outset of his literary, self-promotional career, Whitman looked "to the highly skilled craft of photography with its colorful group of artisan-operators as a remaining source of differentiated identity..., a trade... whose major purpose was precisely to offer Americans images of their differentiated identity" (Folsom 153). Coinciding with this view of photography as a skilled craft was Whitman's confidence in the resourcefulness and autonomy of the individual. To the extent that Whitman believed in individual differentiation, he believed in a trade (often called sun-picturing) that sought to represent difference, rather than impose unity. With the decline of "Whitman's strong democratic vision of a nation of individualistic, self-supporting artisans," however, the poet's view of photography altered into a perception of entrepreneurial
specialization and creative disenfranchisement (Folsom 153). As Oliver Wendell Holmes pointed out in 1863, “few of those who seek a photographer’s establishment to have their portraits taken know at all into what a vast branch of commerce this business of sun-picturing has grown” (qtd. in Folsom, 154).

One of Whitman’s favorite photographers (or, more precisely, daguerreotypists) was John Plumbe, a pioneer in the field who traveled tirelessly. An ardent supporter of the transcontinental railroad, Plumbe wrote about his travels and made maps in addition to recording what he saw with cameras. For a while Plumbe did become a commercial success, even setting up a chain store. He went bankrupt and committed suicide before the Civil War, though, having risked everything on a westward quest for gold. Plumbe met with a bleak end, but he always represented in Whitman’s mind the unflagging spirit of entrepreneurial independence.

Another photographer Whitman admired was Gabriel Harrison. Cut of the same independent cloth as Plumbe, Harrison resisted photography’s move toward professionalization and specialization. He fought against the establishment of the American Daguerre Association, which sought to impose elite standards of taste and exclusive guidelines for representation. Harrison, like Whitman, believed that taste itself should be representative of the populace, and that representation should include all tastes. Said by Whitman to be as “wild and unpruned as nature itself,” Harrison remained a hero in the poet’s mind because of his faith in the democratic potential of photography.

A third hero of the artisan world was Alexander Gardner. A Scotsman who came to the United States to participate in an experimental frontier community, Gardner was a rugged looking man with restless tendencies. Although he worked in Matthew Brady’s New York studio for a while, and even managed Brady’s Washington studio for a time, Gardner unhesitatingly closed up shop and headed west with the Union Pacific railroad when the opportunity presented itself. Given the choice, he preferred to travel with a horse-drawn darkroom than sit in an urban
studio, waiting for business to walk in the door. Gardner had what it took to be a good studio photographer. His portraits of Whitman are, as Folsom points out, informal but flattering likenesses that emphasize the poet's strength of body and character (155). Whitman knew that Gardner was more of a free-spirited artist than a businessman – a fact that came across in the photographer's ability to capture the poet's rough charisma. For this reason, Whitman respected Gardner more deeply than he respected Brady or the other successful commercial photographers he patronized after the war.

Matthew Brady was, it is true, admired by Whitman – as he was admired by many Americans. Brady's brave dedication to photography was demonstrated by his presence at Bull Run, where he was nearly killed with the soldiers he was photographing and where he wandered in the woods, lost for days after the battle. In spite of this bravery and dedication, however, Brady came to symbolize the profit-seeking spirit of post-war capitalism. He sought to expand his studio business on profits gained from his Civil War photos, an enterprise that eventually led to poverty, depression, and death. Brady was, in Folsom's words, "an emblematic victim of the post-Civil War urge to capitalize, incorporate, and expand" (155). Not surprisingly, Brady's conservative sense of his profession – of photography as a business profession, rather than as a craft – comes through in the formality and conservatism of his portraits of Whitman.

The poet's lesser admiration for Brady and other postbellum commercial photographers – lesser than for such free spirits as Gardner, Harrison, and Plumbe – was not a simple matter of disillusionment. If Whitman were entirely put off by Brady's corporate impulses, he would not have visited the photographer's studios. Nor would he have visited the studios of other successful commercial photographers throughout his postbellum career. In fact, Whitman patronized the studios of Jeremiah Gurney, George G. Rockwood, Napoleon Sarony, and Frederick Gutekunst – men who "were more like corporate bosses than skilled artisans, ruling over vast empires of machines and employees, producing commercial products that they
marketed skillfully, [and] creating a mass demand for images” (Folsom 156). Certainly, Whitman visited these photographers with some recognition of how the material conditions and prosperity of their profession pointed to changes in American society – changes including the corporate de-emphasis on the individual worker (“vast empires of… employees”) and the compensatory ideological exaggeration of the individual as a two-dimensional or reified invention (evidenced in the carte-de-visite craze and in the more general “mass demand” for personal images). Whitman’s patronage, in actuality, points to his involvement in these changes, rather than his mere reaction to them. The poet was not simply nostalgic for the antebellum freedom of Gardner and the like, nor was he simply censorious of the commercial evolution of photography. Instead, Whitman took advantage of postbellum photographers’ skills as a way of fulfilling his own personal transformation from staunch individualist to incorporated spokesman for objectified individualism. The transformation that occurred during the “long gap” in Whitman’s literary career made him a “Person” in the sense that he possessed an objectified, public “Personality” equal to his uncomfortable dependence on an impersonalizing economic system. And such a “Person” begged to be photographed, thrived in fact on the sweeping possibilities of representation in a technologically advancing world. Whitman’s ambivalent fascination with postbellum commercial photographers, it follows, attests to how much his career and his public image were in synch with the economic and ideological transformations of the period. Indeed, these photographers were practitioners of the very reifying promotion of which Whitman was a master and a casualty.

The photograph of the poet that accompanies Camden’s Compliment to Walt Whitman tells how the poet’s self-publishing career turned out. By the time Whitman returned to a commercial publisher for the seventh edition of Leaves of Grass in 1881 (a mere eight years before David McKay published Camden’s Compliment), his self-publishing career resulted in a publication of self so compacted into iconographic recognizability and so molded into ideological solidity that
his persona carried more weight than he – as an ailing seventy-year-old man – did. In a way, the surrogate Whitman on the phototype menu cards possessed more heft than the elderly guest of honor who arrived late at his seventieth birthday dinner. It is fitting, therefore, that the photograph accompanying the title page to Camden's Compliment is a picture not of Whitman himself, but of a clay bust of Whitman sculpted by Sidney H. Morse in 1887. The representation of Whitman as a bust reveals how the poet ended his career with a tangible and abiding presence. And yet that presence, as conveyed in the metaphorical language of pictures, was artificial in the material sense that the frontispiece is not only a photographic image, but a photographic image of a clay figure. That presence, in fact, was artificial in materialism's sense that it was a constructed, public persona embodying the reactionary dimensions of identity in a commercial culture. The stone figure confronting the reader of Camden's Compliment is silent testimony to the Medusa effect of the commercial muse. Whitman has lasted the generations since his death. But the Whitman who has survived is in many ways a petrified, celebrity image, a cultural touchstone for the ethos of individualism we inhabit as his readers.

Indeed, Whitman seems more immortal than ever because we interpret him from the far end of an ideological continuum he helped to manufacture, a continuum most recently described in terms of "identity politics." The stony, staring image of Morse's clay bust is not only the perfect embodiment of the reification I have been describing. The stony eyes of the frontispiece see us in a discursive reciprocity of reading that engages our own consciousness of incorporation. While the challenging gaze of the 1855 frontispiece allows us to react against our own disempowerment within a capitalist system by telling a tale of individual subversion, the sculpted stare into which that challenging gaze devolved fixes us as object in our own right, ripe for interpretation.
While readers of Whitman enjoy an array of images as well as texts, readers of Emily Dickinson must content themselves with a single photographic image. A daguerreotype taken in 1847 or 1848, this one image shows Dickinson as a primly conventional seventeen-year-old, her elbow propped beside a book, her fingers clutching a small bouquet of flowers, her wide-set eyes directed at but not entirely focused on the camera. A student at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, this seventeen-year-old Dickinson displays a staged and tentative self-possession that is a far cry from the casual, open-collared confidence of Whitman's 1855 frontispiece. As R. Jackson Wilson notes, the Dickinson image is typical of nineteenth-century school photos, and conveys both the steady decorum of its subject and the ease of her material circumstances. This conventional image, characterized by polite reserve, would have been instantly significant and readable to Dickinson's contemporaries. At least it would have been more easily readable than the disarmingly colloquial pose of the 1855 Whitman. Yet this one daguerreotype makes Emily Dickinson all the more inscrutable today. For while the details of the picture no longer register with viewers as recognizable, meaningful signifiers, the fact that we possess this one photograph places the burden of Dickinson's visual identity on a single image, the legibility of which was never intended as a gloss on her poetic presence. It is no surprise then that this one photographic image disappoints many readers, and that it collapses beneath the ready weight of interpretation.¹

¹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff reacts to this photograph with disappointment in her biography of the poet. The daguerreotype "shows an awkward, skinny girl holding her body stiffly," Wolff writes. "In repose, the face is plain, and it reveals little hint of the animation and wit that the family members all attested to, little of Dickinson's intelligence and power of mind, little of her mischievous, irreverent humor…. The extant photograph has the quality of a memento; it satisfies a certain curiosity for many readers; however, few feel it has captured the real Emily Dickinson." Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson (New York: Alfred A.
The contrast with Whitman, here, is apparent. The democratic bard created and distributed images of himself almost as steadily as he wrote and revised his poetry. For Whitman, the delivery of a visual reputation was just as important as the verbal crafting of presence. He often felt that his pictures eluded his control in a way that his verse did not, but he knew how important these pictures were for his public identity and sought to make them a visible extension of his literary self. By contrast, Dickinson seems to have cared little for the communicative potential of photographs. She told Thomas Wentworth Higginson, when she began corresponding with that eminent man of letters and eventual editor of her poetry, that no photograph of her existed. Whether she did so because she felt that the Seminary daguerreotype was a disappointing likeness, because Higginson’s request for a picture touched on her fundamental shyness, or because (as Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests) she wanted Higginson to accept her on the basis of her words alone (256), it is evident that Dickinson did not think of her physical representation as an important fulfillment of her identity as a poet.

Certainly, Dickinson did nothing to promote herself through tangible images. In this regard she was the opposite of Whitman, who was often a regular patron at photographers’ studios. Her unwillingness to show even her single daguerreotype demonstrates how little she shared Whitman’s ethos of self-projection and promotion. While her New York contemporary multiplied his figure into so much two-dimensional progeny, Dickinson lived a life of social celibacy in which she kept strict control over her image. Consistent with her famous poetic phrase, “the Soul selects its own Society,” Dickinson selected the audience not only for her work, but for her most casual words with a scrupulosity antithetical to Whitman’s visual and textual promiscuity. To the degree, in fact, that Whitman was a master marketer of his own body (with the body, here, referring to the body of Whitman’s work as well as to his physical form), Dickinson was a monastic master of her identity. Her disinterest in obtaining and sharing

photographic images of herself measured her abstention from the commerce that made Whitman a photographic patriarch.

This lack of pictures, observed within the context of Dickinson’s now legendary seclusion, illustrates a distrust of publicity that is conveyed in the Amherst writer’s poetry. Several of her poems address the evanescence and superficiality of fame. In poem #1702, Dickinson writes, “Fame is a fickle food/ Upon a shifting plate/ Whose table once a/ Guest but not/ The second time is set.” While such repast may be appetizing at first, in the end “Men eat of it and die.”

Elsewhere Dickinson states that “Fame is a bee./ It has a song—/ It has a sting—/ Ah, too, it has a wing”(#1788). In poem #1445, Dickinson personifies great repute as a lover who chases after the hard-to-get. “To earn it by disdaining it/ Is Fame’s consummate Fee—/ He loves what spurns him—/ Look behind – He is pursuing thee.” Fame’s “occupant must die,” Dickinson writes in #1507, “Or out of sight of estimate/ Ascend incessantly—/ Or be that most insolvent thing/ A Lightning in the Germ—.” Emphasizing the accolades that reward intellectual effort, the poet writes that “Fame is the tint that Scholars leave/ Upon their Setting Names—/ The Iris not of Occident/ That disappears as comes—” (#968). Here Dickinson links recognition with the sinking presence of the setting sun. Associated with the western horizon, fame’s illumination is by definition an afterglow. Vanishing as it arrives, this afterglow is not of the Occident because its range is too narrowly personal to be Western in any collective, traditional sense. In what is perhaps her coyest rejection of public recognition, Dickinson writes:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog! (#260)

In this playful scenario, even the presence of nobodies is worth advertising. The “Bog” of the public world – that dank and echoing habitat of Whitman – can make something of nothing, and somebody of nobody. The admiration of this world, which is all that the democratic bard could have attained with his lifelong efforts at self-promotion, is just a fetid puff of vanishing steam in the iris twilight.

In a poem familiar to many readers, Dickinson addresses this issue of fame through the specific metaphor of publication. An indiscriminate display of creative intelligence, publication is a “foul... thing” that puts a price tag on the human spirit.

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man—
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing
Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – Unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –
Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Than – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – Sell
The Royal Air –
In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price
(#788)

If a writer must sell his work, Dickinson states, then he should “sell” it to the Creator – a bit of advice that can be construed literally as a religious injunction, and obliquely as a directive for the writer (i.e., creator) to be his own ultimate audience. If a writer must market his work, Dickinson appears to be saying, he should do so for the empathetic eye of a kind and kindred presence, rather than for the cold, measuring scrutiny of the consumer. The commodifying logic of possession informs poem #788, but only to make such logic pointedly absurd. For why – assuming that He would want to participate in any commercial transaction – would the Creator wish to buy that which he created in the first place? In fact, the world of commercial valuation in
which publication thrives collapses with the phrase, "Sell/ The Royal Air —."

As common sense indicates, the intangible air defies any attempt to package and possess it. That the air is "Royal" makes a possessive claim even more improbable. "Royal Air," furthermore, is a homonym for "Royal Heir," a detail that gives the phrase an important double meaning. While the "Royal Air" is, on the one hand, the intangible manifestation of the divine (the antithesis of "Its Corporeal illustration") and its public articulation, the "Royal Heir" is the "Garret"-dwelling writer who receives or inherits her "Snow" from the Creator. In this scheme, the writer is not by definition a manufacturer or broker of words, but an inheritor within an established, systemic heritage in which entitlement makes marketed appeal – the array of Whitman's poses, for instance – moot.

The belief of many writers who do publish that it is possible to maintain an absolute separation of public, literary repute and personal identity falls within Dickinson's purview, too, as she identifies "the Parcel" with "the Merchant." Whitman for much of his career liked to think that he could manipulate his public image while withholding an essential part of himself from his readership. This belief, in fact, is a key ideological underpinning for the cultural commercialism that denies its reifying effects. In contrast to Whitman, Dickinson is not only saying that the act of selling "the Parcel," which is both "the Mind of Man" and its creations, makes the publishing writer a "Merchant/ Of the Heavenly Grace," but that, more directly, "In the Parcel – Be the Merchant." On the parceled level of the single line, which is a stylistic metaphor for the level at which commercialism is experienced, Dickinson is stating that the published writer lives in the printed package. This identification of the "Parcel" and "Merchant," which in the context of publication is another way of addressing the commodification of the writer, goes hand-in-hand with the parceled reality that commercialism provides, a reality that is a grand discontinuity of rationalized acts. For the commodification of the writer takes place in a world where work is parceled off from the worker and divided into discrete, quantifiable units of production as a preliminary for the internal, ideological separation of the worker (i.e., writer) from his own (published) self. The commodification of the writer occurs in a world where the fundamental
paradigm is one of separation. That the material, productive circumstances of such separation or parceling are the groundwork for the mental division that enables a writer to believe he retains a pure, autonomous creative center outside of the market Dickinson conveys in the last lines of her poem. The "Disgrace of Price" to which the "Human Spirit" can be reduced is the dis-grace of separation. It is the dis-grace of disengagement from "Heavenly Grace," which serves in the poem as an ethereal index of unity and wholeness. The separation of the "Parcel/Merchant" from "Of the Heavenly Grace" prepares the "Spirit," in typographical terms, for the "Disgrace of Price," just as the material divisions and disseminations of work prepare the "Mind" for the auction block.

The implied, proper inviolability of the "Human Spirit" at the end of Dickinson's poem, moreover, is a crystallization of the ideology that reflects a parceled world. A complement to the invested "Snow" that Dickinson appears to reject, this faith in the purity and isolation of a non-salable human spirit is an icicle of sorts. A distillation of "the White," such faith is an alternative investment of "Snow" that hangs among a glistening, untouchable row of pristine (dime-a-dozen) moments of self-"awareness." This faith in the non-salable spirit is one in a row of transparent pens with which an author may never write. And with it Dickinson marks the limit of her own willingness to publish, not because she necessarily subscribed to the unmarketability of the "Spirit," but because she recognized its non-salability in connection with its parceled state.

The combined effect of these poems, with the lack of photographic images, states pretty plainly that Dickinson felt a deep repugnance toward publicity. The looming fact of her refusal to publish only reinforces the testaments to this repugnance. For all that the one unsatisfying picture and the posthumously published verse so skeptical of fame discourage a prying scrutiny, however, readers of Dickinson often hope to find evidence of the poet's true identity in her two-dimensional remains. Many readers tend to assume that the unsullied purity of Dickinson's "Snow" can be glimpsed through a crevice in her rock wall of silence. It even seems that because the daguerreotype satisfies only a superficial curiosity with its exceptional yet conventional "Snow."
existence, readers look to the other two-dimensional remains – the poems – with heightened expectations of candor. The steady reserve of the daguerreotype apparently fuels – even as it frustrates – the desire to know Dickinson. Add to this the *noli-me-tangere* effect of Dickinson’s decision to publish only a few poems during her lifetime, and the poems that never met with the public until the 1890s or later suddenly acquire an indisputable power of revelation in the minds of many readers. Dickinson’s poems acquire the confessional status of an artistic yet artless display of her identity, surpassing in their curiously sophisticated naiveté whatever *Leaves of Grass* might say about Whitman – or whatever any pronouncement before an “admiring Bog” might say about its speaker. As Wilson explains, Dickinson’s writing has been read as a kind of confessional testimony…. The fact that she did not publish her poems, but left them in handwritten packets, neatly folded and sewn, has given her testimony great weight. Her decision not to publish has helped to give her work a privileged status, not as art, only, but as evidence about her life” (224).

Wolff confirms this “privileged status” when she states that “the real Emily Dickinson resides in the poetry” (163). Although Wolff expresses astonishment over “how many of [Dickinson’s] audience feel that somehow they know her personally,” she herself states that “Life has been supplanted by art” when it comes to Emily Dickinson. Whatever we can know of the poet’s life, Wolff argues, must be ascertained through her writing – an argument that contributes to the collective perception of the “felt presence” that so many readers intuit. As Wolff points out, Dickinson presented her poetry to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in lieu of a photograph when the two began corresponding – an act that Wolff interprets as evidence that Dickinson resided in her art even while physiologically alive.

Probably Emily Dickinson herself felt that the [one extant] picture failed to capture any essential element of self, for when Higginson explicitly requested a photograph of her, she sidled into prevarication and told him that none had ever been taken. She wanted him to know her through her writing – the poetry and letters – and in the end he was forced to accept her on her own terms (163).
As Wolff sees it, Dickinson must have regarded her writing as an accurate depiction of who she was – more accurate certainly than any existing photograph or painting, and perhaps even more accurate than the conversational revelations that civility would allow. In answer to Higginson’s request for a picture, Dickinson wrote, “Could you believe me – without?” – a response that Wolff interprets as “Read the words... for that is the only ‘self’ I wish you to know” (256). The “self” in Wolff’s interpretation is in quotation marks, not because it is posthumously contrived by Dickinson’s audience, but because it was the identity the poet herself put forth, an identity inextricable from words. The implication in all of this is that the “felt presence” that readers experience today is the intact, continuous presence that Dickinson created in her own lifetime through her dexterous choices of words.

Yet this presence so deliberately constructed through words was not necessarily “the real Emily Dickinson,” no matter how free of the publishing writer’s imagined audiences. Dickinson was as capable of posing in her poems and letters as anyone intending to “auction” his “Mind.” In her correspondence with Higginson, the poet presented herself as a potential “scholar” and “student,” presumably in response to the mentoring tone of Higginson’s Atlantic Monthly essay, “Letter to a Young Contributor.” Despite her professed willingness to apprentice herself to Higginson, though, Dickinson proved coy and uncooperative. She wavered between docility and preening superiority, alleging a lack of literary experience in language rich with ambiguity (Wolff 256-8). Rejecting his request for a picture, Dickinson supplied the verbal equivalent of an overexposed photograph. She was “small, like the Wren, and [her] Hair [was] bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and [her] eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves” (qtd. in Wilson, 223). Certain features – the hair and eyes – stand out in their blurred yet stark incongruity with other features, and with the conventional, euphemistic metaphors for Victorian women’s bodies. Most puzzling of all for Higginson was Dickinson’s reluctance to publish. The poet appeared to have initiated

---

3 It is generally assumed that Dickinson initiated the correspondence with Higginson after reading his “Letter to a Young Contributor,” which appeared in the April, 1862 issue of the Atlantic Monthly.
their correspondence in an effort to learn whether her work was publishable. In her first letter to Higginson, the poet asked him if her “Verse” was “alive.” Being too close to her own work to judge its merits, Dickinson appears to have asked this question – and to have positioned herself generally as a pupil in need of guidance – in response to Higginson’s stance as a mentoring editor in his “Letter.” She sought his advice apparently as someone hoping to establish a literary reputation, yet she responded to his ambivalent estimation of her verse with the claim that the published author’s fame was to her “as Firmament to Fin” (Wolff 188, 254-6). She rejected outright the judgments of any public “Tribunal,” even though she appears to have been seeking such judgments in soliciting Higginson’s preliminary verdict. In effect, “the real Dickinson” is hard to locate in the correspondence with Higginson. As Mabel Loomis Todd once claimed, Dickinson’s brother, Austin, always believed that his sister adopted a persona in her letters to Higginson. According to Todd, Austin smiled when anyone referred to “the ‘innocent and confiding’ nature” of the correspondence. Knowing his sister “thoroughly, through and through,” Todd writes, Austin knew “Emily definitely posed in those letters” (qtd. in Wolff 258).

Dickinson’s “posing” in her correspondence with Higginson suggests that the Amherst poet, although a writer who shunned literary recognition, was as capable as Whitman of manipulating her identity for her audience. Just because Dickinson rejected the indiscriminate publicity of intellectual and artistic “auction” doesn’t mean that she wasn’t capable of the dissembling “self”-promotion that the “auction” or the literary marketplace elicited from Whitman. This intensely private poet was as capable as Whitman, Twain, and other commercial purveyors of their own literary repute of projecting an identity for consumption that was far from unaffected. It is often assumed that writers who are unpublished lack, if not artistry, then artfulness in the presentation of their ideas and emotions. As Wilson explains, this assumption is misguided.

The notion that Emily Dickinson’s writing... is a testimonial record of her experience, a kind of unmediated jaculation of the mind, is very dubious. Artists are no more able than ordinary people to make transcripts of their lives. No novel or story is autobiographical in a simple and direct way.... [T]he actual words on the pages... are
never merely dictated by experience. They are the result of artistry and effort, and of choices that can be either deliberate or made for reasons that the writer may be at most half-conscious of.... [This is] just as true of unpublished writing as of work that is done expressly for the public and the marketplace. No piece of writing—not even letters or diaries—is a plane mirror of the writer's mind or personality (226).

Dickinson may not have posed before a camera the way Whitman did. But she knew how to compose herself with the studied purpose of a veteran sitter for photographs and paintings. The composing, moreover, occurred not only in the form of letters (or poems). As with Whitman, whose literary image exceeded his writing through photographs, Dickinson's crafted identity exceeded her written words. The "posing" that she did in her letters to Higginson was completed by her behavior when Higginson visited Amherst in 1870. Speaking in a whisper and responding to his questions with an evasive simplicity, Dickinson acted the part of a child when the well-known man of letters called on her at her home. "Pattering in and whispering like a child-woman," Wolff observes, Dickinson continued "in person" an "act" that began with a "gnomic" and "oblique" correspondence.

As we have seen, only one dimension of Whitman’s public identity was revelatory. To quote John Burroughs again, Whitman was as much of a "poseur" as he was a confessor and chronicler of his experiences. The role of "poseur" enabled Whitman to engage in various forms of self-withholding, all of which were protective measures against the devouring potential of public consumption. Whitman published himself, had himself photographed, and generally promoted himself with tireless enthusiasm. Yet he simultaneously found ways to withhold himself from his audience. In this manner Whitman circumvented—at least on a provisional level—the conventionalizing and alienating influences of literary publicity. The same can be argued of Emily Dickinson, even though she never took the exhaustive steps toward literary prominence that Whitman took. Her initiation of a correspondence with Higginson, especially on the heels of his "Letter to a Young Contributor," was a modest foray into the public realm. Although the
communication was private and was for Dickinson a preliminary, tentative move toward being
published, the correspondence carried enough of the "Bog's" potential for disdain as for
admiration to put Dickinson in an obliquely defensive mode. Dickinson responded to
Higginson's lukewarm reception by becoming a "poseur" in her own right, concealing herself in
an arrogant innocence even as she invited scrutiny.

The response from Higginson was not Dickinson's only experience of audience
incomprehension. Even though Dickinson is generally thought of as a posthumously published
writer, she did publish several of her 1,789 poems during her lifetime. Six were published in the
Springfield Republican. Two of these six were also published in New York, along with four
other poems that did not appear in the Republican. Five of the six that appeared in the
Massachusetts newspaper were given titles that Dickinson herself did not select, a circumstance
that was repeated when Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd edited the title-less poems for
publication after Dickinson's death in 1886. Along with the distortions that the poems' titles
imposed, Dickinson grappled with editorial interference of a more serious sort. According to
Martha Nell Smith, Dickinson observed editorial changes in just about all of the poems printed in
the Republican (11). Most troubling was the way the editors of the Republican changed the
punctuation in "The Snake." The poem in the weekly edition of the newspaper has a question
mark after the third line, while the poem in the daily version of the paper has a comma in the
same place. No punctuation was meant to appear at the end of the third line, so that the final
phrase of the third line ("did you not") can be read both as a rhetorical phrase in its own right, and

4 The six poems that appeared in the Springfield Republican are: "Sic transit gloria mundi" (#2 in
Franklin's The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition), printed with the title, "A Valentine;"
"Nobody Knows This Little Rose" (#11); "I taste a liquor never brewed - " (#207), published as "The May-
Wine;" "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -" (#124), entitled "The Sleeping;" "Blazing in Gold and
quenching in Purple" (#321), named "Sunset;" and "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (#1096), printed as
"The Snake." Of these poems, "Nobody Knows This Little Rose" and "Blazing in Gold and quenching in
Purple" were also published in New York. Other poems published in New York in 1864 are: "Flowers -
Well - if anybody" (#95); "These are the days when Birds come back -" (#122); "Some keep the Sabbath
going to Church (#236); and "Success is counted sweetest" (#112).
as a segue into the fourth line.\(^5\) As Smith puts it, "both the question mark and the comma determine interpretations for the reader that Dickinson did not wish to impose" (223). So disturbed by these alterations was Dickinson that she sent a clipping of the published poem to Higginson in 1866, two months after its appearance, as evidence of why she usually "did not print." In her letter to Higginson, Dickinson states that "my Snake... was robbed of me" – a claim that renders the editors’ liberty a crime. Indeed, the added punctuation was not only a crime, but a form of conquest. In Smith’s words, Dickinson was "[s]o distressed by the changes that she employs a language of conquest [in her letter to Higginson] to describe an apparently minor tampering of the editors.” The alteration “by no means improved the reader’s lot but was one that ‘defeated’ [Dickinson’s] intention that the third and fourth lines be read together, as a unit” (11). The Springfield Republican’s act of editorial “robbery” and conquest might seem relatively minor even to other poets, but to Dickinson it represented much of why she preferred not to publish.

The poet’s disappointment with the editors of her few published poems, along with her rejection of fame and her coy unwillingness to circulate pictures of herself even among a few correspondents, contributes to the belief in a “real Emily Dickinson” whose integrity defied publicity. The view that Dickinson was deeply violated by the editorial changes to her poetry contributes to this sense that the poet’s authentic, artistic being rested in her private identity. The part of her that she withheld from public scrutiny – which is to say most of her writing and much of her presence – is construed as somehow purer than the part of her that was subjected to the conventionalizing, even uncomprehending interpretations of her audience. This view of the poet, in fact, is a feature of much current Dickinson scholarship. Fueling the continuing, robust interest in Dickinson is the assumption that her true identity was separate from its public constructions, posthumous and not. In spite of Wilson’s observation that “no piece of writing... is a plane

\(^5\) The first stanza of the poem (#1096) reads: “A narrow Fellow in the Grass/ Occasionally rides – /You may have met Him – did you not/ His notice sudden is –”
mirror of the writer's mind or personality,” this assumption often leads to the idea that
Dickinson’s “real” self can be recovered through her unpublished writings – an extension of her
un-public self. Not only the fact of her choosing to publish little, but her private circumstances of
composition and the physical qualities of her writing become expressions of Dickinson’s
authentic genius.

This belief in an authentic identity that precedes or is at odds with the public, published poet
appears, in recent scholarship, as a recuperative interest in Dickinson’s fascicles. These fascicles
or manuscript booklets were carefully assembled and preserved by Dickinson, and were
discovered by the poet’s sister, Lavinia, only after Dickinson’s death. Gathered into forty groups,
the fascicles presented eight hundred or so of Dickinson’s poems in what Dorothy Huff Oberhaus
calls “a private kind of self-publication.”6 As Oberhaus recounts, the fascicles were dismantled
when Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson set about editing and publishing
their contents in the late 1880s and 1890s. Only since Ralph W. Franklin painstakingly
reconstructed the fascicles, by tracing the patterns of ink and the imperfections of paper, have
scholars been able to approach Dickinson through the medium of her “self-published” texts.7
Franklin’s reconstruction of the fascicles opened the floodgates to a scholarly wave of interest in
the poems as they were penned and compiled by Dickinson. More significantly, Franklin’s
researches precipitated a scholarly fascination with Dickinson’s “private self-publication” as an
alternative paradigm by which to understand the poet and her work. As Oberhaus puts it,
“Franklin introduced a new era in Dickinson scholarship and an important new question to be
confronted by her readers: what, if any, organizing principle or principles did the poet have in
mind when she created” the fascicles (2)? According to Oberhaus, the “organizing principles”
imposed by Todd and Higginson when they edited the fascicles for publication do not reflect the

6 Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method and Meaning (University Park, PA: The
Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 1
poet's "arrangement" of her material (2). Ultimately, for other scholars, the artificial structure imposed by Todd and Higginson points to a process of distortion and presumes an authenticity — both of text and of poet — that preceded Lavina's discovery of the fascicles. Designated by the phrase "self-publication," this authenticity is imagined as the evasive yet recoverable historical presence of Emily Dickinson, a presence recovered in large part through the reconstruction of the fascicles. The "real Emily Dickinson" emerges from between the smudged lines of the manuscripts as an *a priori* embodiment of creative truth.

In *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*, Martha Nell Smith sets about "restructuring customary methods of reading [Dickinson's] writings that separate [her] poems from the letters and packets in which they were enclosed" (2). Like Oberhaus, Smith considers the editorial dismantling of the fascicles to have been a serious textual distortion. "Since Dickinson's poems have been isolated, numbered, and separated from their placement by the poet since the beginning of their representations in printed volumes, the stories these units [or fascicles] tell have been mutilated and obscured" (Smith 87). Among the historical effects of this "mutilation" has been the appearance of "dominant models of reading, editing, and interpreting" Dickinson's works that suppress the situational resonance of the poems (Smith 2). To overcome these distorting models, readers should think of the poems in their originally inclusive and indeterminate senses, as works compiled into booklets, enclosed in letters, and left with unresolved word variations.

---


8 In tracing the evolution of Dickinson's poetry from its fascicle state to its published form, Franklin refers to the "creative editing" of Higginson and Todd. According to Franklin, Higginson and Todd were equally responsible for the conventionalizing changes that attended the poems' appearance in print. It is a popular misconception that Higginson wielded the heavier editorializing pen, but as Franklin asserts "Todd apparently chang[ed] a good many [of Dickinson's] words to gain smoothness." Although Higginson is known to be the one who assigned titles to the poems that were published in the 1890s, "it should be clear that the editorial liberties in the first series [the 1890 edition] cannot be ascribed to Higginson alone." Although the editors relented a bit in their "creativity" for the second edition that appeared in 1891, alterations were made — "the responsibility for [which] was shared by both Mrs. Todd and Colonel Higginson." Ralph William Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) 23-29.
Nothing less than a "repattem[ing of] Dickinson study" would result if readers kept in mind the circumstances under which Dickinson penned her poems (Smith 2).

Hoping to initiate such a re-patterning, Smith focuses on Dickinson as a "self-published" poet. Emphasizing the importance of the correspondence and the fascicles, Smith claims that "Dickinson 'published' herself in her letters and in [her] forty manuscript books" (2). While Oberhaus characterizes Dickinson's preparation of unprinted verse as "a private kind of self-publication," though, Smith emphasizes the social or relational nature of the publication. "Private," Smith points out, should not be mistaken for "unread." The letters - the initial media through which Dickinson "devised her own method of publication" - are as important in Smith's definition of "self-publication" as the hand-sewn fascicles. Dickinson's consciousness of her audience, however specific or immediate, was just as important as her need for discretion. If Dickinson hadn't included so many poems in her letters to friends and family, Smith argues, it would be easier to think of the poet as engaged in a purely private form of expression (73). The correspondence, combined with evidence that even the fascicles circulated among Dickinson's acquaintances, renders the private paradigm inadequate, however. 9 What Dickinson resisted was not so much publication, conceived as the social dissemination of information and art, but the "print-determined perspectives" (75) or "the fetters of the printed form" (63) that limited the poet's inventive, formal options. To Smith's mind, Dickinson's poems were published works well before her death - published in the sense that they were "personally addressed 'books' present[ing] a radical alternative" to the constraints of univocal print (87). The fascicles and letters may not have been, in Dickinson's lifetime, the "social and... institutional event" that

9 Smith quotes a letter from Helen Hunt Jackson in support of the possibility that Dickinson shared her fascicles with a select audience. "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it," Jackson wrote to the poet in October of 1875. Whether the "little manuscript volume" was given to Jackson directly by the poet, or whether it reached Jackson through friends, is unclear. In any event, the letter suggests that Dickinson must have been aware of a readership (beyond the audience that read her eleven poems published in newspapers), however much she professed to disdain the "Bog." (Qtd. on p. 73)
“literary (re)production” generally becomes, but they were offerings, nonetheless, in a cultural circuit of exchange (64).

Similarly, Sharon Cameron maintains that “Dickinson published her poems in manuscript rather than in print” because “the conventions of print, reflecting the traditions of established poetry, violated the characteristics of Dickinson’s poetry” (53). As Cameron recognizes, Dickinson’s idiosyncratic use of grammar, syntax, and punctuation, along with her unusual style and her refusal to attach titles to her poems, made the prospect of print publication a threat to her artistic integrity. Reflecting on the actual, limited experience the poet did have with print, Cameron reminds us that “[t]he handful of poems published in Dickinson’s lifetime had their essential features altered.” Confronted with the “constraints and violations” that these alterations posed as an inevitable feature of print publication, Dickinson must have realized that there was “no way [she] could have printed her poetry in its uniqueness” (53). Indeed, the posthumous conversion of the fascicles into printable collections bore out many of the poet’s misgivings. For Higginson and Todd, as Cameron explains, “made… substantive textual changes” that included the elimination of “all variants” – meaning that these late-century editors excised the possible word replacements Dickinson penciled in the margins of her manuscripts (40). Such a narrowing of Dickinson’s (and the reader’s) verbal horizon was the epitome of what the poet feared.10

Although Cameron describes Dickinson’s fascicles as a form of “private publication,” she – like Smith – sees the social dimension of these texts. In particular, Cameron discusses the manuscript

---

10 Mabel Loomis Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, innocently describes the exclusion of word alternatives as a negligible aspect of her mother’s labor as editor. Bingham writes, “The fact should be emphasized that in copying my mother did not alter anything Emily had written. The copies differ from the originals only in the elimination of alternatives.” Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors’ Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945) 335. To Bingham’s mind – as presumably to Todd’s – the elimination of Dickinson’s word alternatives did not constitute an alteration to the manuscripts. How, one wonders, would Dickinson have come to terms in her own lifetime with editors who didn’t even see such erasures as distorting? With respect to titles, Todd claims to have been more respectful of Dickinson’s wishes than Higginson was. While preparing the poems for publication, Todd explains, “Higginson and I discussed at intervals naming the poems. But upon this we were never wholly agreed. He looked at the problem from the point of view of the reading public as well as of the publishers, while I was exceedingly loath to assessing titles to any of them which might not be specified by the poem itself.” Mabel Loomis Todd, “Emily Dickinson’s Literary Debut,” Harper’s Monthly March 1930: 467.
poems in the context of the literary tradition that preceded the rise of commercial publishing. Referring to works that Herbert, Shakespeare, and Sidney never intended to publish, Cameron connects Dickinson’s decision to avoid print with the decisions of these and other earlier writers to circulate their texts (or, in the case of Shakespeare, have them performed) without the dubious benefits of print (50). The practice of considering print an option rather than an inevitability continued into the nineteenth century, Cameron states, as numerous Victorian authors sought to preserve or circulate certain compositions without trying to publish them commercially.

Wordsworth, Byron, and Coleridge had their own struggles and misgivings about commercial production when it came to The Prelude, Don Juan, and Christabel (51). In the United States, various authors writing in the nineteenth century and earlier hesitated to publish. Edward Taylor, Anne Bradstreet, Henry Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and even Henry James wrestled with the exposure and the constraints of print (52). Dickinson’s dissemination of her poetry in letters and her preservation of her verses in fascicles did not simply represent the poet’s eccentric ambivalence about literary visibility, but derived in part from a tradition of abstention that reflects the slow displacement of genteel, amateur sensibilities by commercial and professional ambition. Cameron proposes that Dickinson may have been influenced, too, by her contemporary, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Emerson claimed in an 1840 Dial essay that a “revolution in literature” was giving prominence “to the portfolio over the book.” Authors, in Emerson’s view, should compile portfolios or albums of poetry, as opposed to having all verse commercially printed (Cameron 8). It is plausible, Cameron claims, that Dickinson was responding to Emerson when she stitched together her fascicles. Whatever the admixture of contemporary influence, historical precedent, and personal idiosyncrasy, however, Cameron maintains that Dickinson’s method of “private publication” was an enterprise with social as well as individual roots.

This scholarly focus on Dickinson’s manuscripts as a private form of self-publication establishes the poet in relation to other people, and the poems in relation to other poems. However unexpectedly, the word “private” in connection with this sort of publishing opens a
window onto Dickinson's correspondences – meaning not just her letter writing, but the correspondences of certain poems to other poems, and certain words to marginal, alternative words. Rather than a solipsistic enterprise, Dickinson's "poems, letters, letter-poems, methods of production, and designs for distribution are all part of her dialogue with the world" (Smith 92). If Dickinson did send a "letter to the World/ that never wrote to [Her]," then she must have developed this dialogue in her unwillingness to be isolated and ignored. As Smith explains, "reconceptualizing notions of 'publication' to include Dickinson's circulation of her poems to her correspondents places her in an active, cultured network, and calls into serious question the prevailing image of the isolated, withdrawn poet" (92). If not entirely public, such publication is "private" in the way that highly coded social identities can be private.

This critical perspective, which emerges from feminist scholarship's emphasis on the political and social dimensions of personal identity, expands the definition of publication as a way of recovering a *human* Emily Dickinson. The privacy of the "isolated, withdrawn poet" – the "prevailing image" of the lone poet who never received a letter from "the World" – is less true to life than the image of the socially connected and engaging poet. The "withdrawn poet," in fact, has the inauthentic ring of the stereotype. According to Smith, the "virgin recluse poet" is not the true character of Emily Dickinson, but her "stock character" – a character cultivated by (among other readers)-Thomas Wentworth Higginson (64). Higginson's inability to see the Amherst writer as an experienced woman prevented him, on an immediate level, from understanding the erotic subtexts of her poetry. More lastingly, Higginson's urge to classify Dickinson as a "virgin recluse poet" defined her – with the peculiar power of posthumous categorizations – as essentially passive. Removed from her "active, cultured network," Dickinson has little if any agency. She is a petrified poet, as bleached as Morse's clay bust of Whitman. What Smith, Cameron, and other feminist scholars hope to do by referring to the fascicles and expanding the definition of publication is restore the dynamic interactions of a poet who had a decided will of her own.
Such scholarship that redefines Dickinson as “self-published” presumes that an author’s agency is an important part of the publishing process. The argument that Dickinson used a private, informal network to distribute her writings is modeled on the belief that artistic control is a necessary element of publication. Privatization, here, merely brings into focus the poetic autonomy that gets lost with posthumous editing. It is conceivable, from this point of view, that if Dickinson had published extensively during her lifetime — that if she had been able to reconcile her artistic preferences with the limitations of print — she would have exercised enough control over her manuscripts and over her public image for the stock figure of the “virgin recluse poet” not to have taken hold of readers’ imaginations. The sheltered passivity of the recluse is, from this perspective, the measure of the poet’s unwillingness to participate fully and visibly in the publication of her work.

As we have seen, however, the limited experience Dickinson did have with publishing was not one of artistic control. Dickinson was grieved by the way her poems that appeared in print were altered without her knowledge. The selectivity and control that Dickinson exerted in her personal life, moreover, would not necessarily have dispelled her two-dimensional image as an inexperienced recluse if she had published most of her poems during her lifetime. Her public image as a writer could have eluded her grasp as slyly as did the grammar of her printed poems. Walt Whitman’s experiences as an aggressive and engaged promoter of his own work attests to how slippery an author’s figure can become. Even such direct involvement in the publishing process as Whitman’s cannot guarantee that an author’s image will remain well-rounded and human. The process of commercial publishing has the potential not only to carry a text beyond the author’s influence, but to reduce that author to a two-dimensional, iconographic presence — a circulating quantity of invention that is flatly represented as a “Good Gray Poet” or a “virgin recluse poet.” The commercial literary culture in which Whitman’s poems appeared after his editorial stint in Brooklyn, and in which Dickinson’s poems were edited and produced in the 1880s and 90s, had the power to inscribe a writer with its alphabet of marketability and
professionalism, regardless of what illusions the writer might have about restraint and personal, complex solidity. In such a commercial environment, the fact of whether an author’s work is published posthumously or not is only relatively significant. For it isn’t so much the physical absence of the poet – in this case, Dickinson – that makes her transformation into a stock figure possible, but the displacing influence of commercial rhetoric and promotional simplicity.

Dickinson’s popular appearance in the 1890s as a mysterious and passive recluse had as much to do with the fact that her poems were published – at a time when American authors and editors were wrestling with an ethos of professionalism in the context of a competitive publishing industry – as with the fact that she chose not to publish during her lifetime.

Recent scholarship that identifies Dickinson as “self-published” and that locates her deliberate autonomy in a private network of culture can become, ironically, a method of retreat for feminist readers who define themselves as socially rooted. The argument that Dickinson’s self-publication was a semi-private, enabling endeavor facilitates a retreat from the issue of how we have received the poet’s work. It may be that Dickinson did inhabit an “active, cultured network,” but an emphasis on this network alone allows Dickinson scholars to avoid the commercial context of the poet as a posthumously brokered figure. The personal and discreetly pure network becomes, in effect, an almost mythical moment of pre-printed virtue – a creative Golden Age – in the Dickinson timeline. Certainly, we can imagine who Emily Dickinson was (and reconstruct what her poetry was) before her fascicles were discovered. But such a vision has to be balanced against the recognition that we have received our understanding of Dickinson through editorial and publicizing efforts that were – and are – constitutive strategies of commercial production. Dickinson’s poetry and our sense of who she was has been handed to us as much by the conventionalizing, brokering efforts of her 1890s editors and publisher, and by late nineteenth-century journalism, as by the guarded, stolid care with which Dickinson stitched her poetry into booklets and mailed her verses to friends. Any scholarly attempt to emphasize Dickinson’s small-scale network of production over the large-scale, commercial promotion of her work
shortly after her death can only be, in the end, nostalgic. A full understanding of Dickinson, therefore, must include a fair grasp of who Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd were, of how they presented the poems to Dickinson’s nineteenth-century publisher, Roberts Brothers, and of how they participated in publicity efforts for the 1890s editions of Dickinson’s poems and letters.

Mabel Loomis Todd was asked to see the manuscript poems into print shortly after Lavinia Dickinson discovered her dead sister’s fascicles and letters. By Todd’s account, Lavinia imagined that the poems could be sent off to a printer with little delay. Better acquainted with publishers’ methods than Lavinia (Todd had several essays published before moving to Amherst, and would by the end of her life write or edit a dozen books and roughly two hundred articles), Todd explained that at least a year would pass before the poems were published.\(^1\) For one, the poet’s handwriting was almost illegible. The fascicles, as well as the loose poems discovered in boxes and envelopes, would have to be copied into decipherable manuscripts before any publisher would take the time to look at them. Recalling her initial impression of the manuscript poems, Todd writes that “from a printer’s point of view they looked hopeless. The handwriting appeared to consist of styles of three periods, absolutely different from one another—although none were particularly difficult to decipher; they were usually written on both sides of the paper, and the number of suggested changes was baffling” (“Debut” 464). Privately, Todd estimated after examining the manuscripts more closely, that it would take her two or three years just to complete the transcribing. Even if she devoted more than four hours every morning to the copying (which was the most time the already busy Todd was prepared to give to the poems when Lavinia first approached her), Todd feared that the poems’ unconventionality would undermine the neatest of

\(^{1}\) An engaging, somewhat chatty overview of Todd’s many talents and accomplishments can be found in Polly Longsworth, *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1985).
presentations. It was conceivable that no publisher would accept the poems, no matter how legible or organized they appeared ("Debut" 464).

To offer some relief, and to hasten the poems' publication, Lavinia suggested that Todd contact Higginson (now known not only as a man of letters, but as the first Union army officer to organize a black regiment during the Civil War). Lavinia told Todd of the "quaint friendship" Dickinson initiated when she wrote to Higginson in 1862, asking the editor for his opinion of her work ("Debut" 465). It was likely, in Lavinia's opinion, that Higginson would be willing to help launch Dickinson's posthumous career by assisting with the organizing and copying. When Todd approached Higginson, however, he was less than enthusiastic. After only a few minutes of perusing the manuscripts, Higginson shook his head and announced that he didn't have the time it would take to sort through and transcribe the nearly illegible poems. Only if Todd copied out all of the poems first, then selected a handful she deemed suitable for publication, would Higginson lend his time and expertise. What Todd's personal if unspoken reaction to this arrangement was we can only imagine. Alluding to it in an 1895 lecture at Worcester's Memorial Hall, Todd stated, "Mr. Higginson was adverse to touching [the poems], and said he considered it inadvisable to attempt publication."12 The account Todd gives in Harper's Monthly of her conversation with Higginson is abbreviated and unemotional, and concludes with the observation, "So he indicated to me my herculean task, and I began alone" ("Debut" 465).

This exchange at the beginning of Emily Dickinson's posthumous career tells us not only about the condition of the fascicles or about the poet's indifference to the conventional presentations of verse. Nor does this exchange simply tell us about the different levels of intolerance for seemingly thankless work that Todd and Higginson possessed. Higginson's shake of the head and Todd's solitary determination indicate the different literary roles these two people occupied

12 This lecture appears in the collection of 1890s reviews and notices edited by Willis J. Buckingham. The lecture was reprinted in the Worcester Spy 24 January 1895. Subsequent references to reviews and notices gathered in this collection will appear as Reception. Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History, ed. Willis J. Buckingham (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989) 410.
in the late nineteenth century. Their initial reactions to the manuscripts point to how differently they were situated in the world of letters, with one person willing to labor for years with little or no help and scant reward, and the other person willing to lend his knowledge and name if it didn't cost too much time and effort. Higginson's shake of the head was the gesture of a man who had a heightened sense of his time and abilities as valuable. He was a professional man of letters who understood his intellectual energies and endorsement as something on which others might trade, as a currency whose power he must not undermine by setting its value too low. Todd, by contrast, was a woman of letters whose abilities grew less out of a professional ethos and its market definitions, and more out of a wide-ranging amateurism that encompassed painting, music, and the sciences, as well as literature. She tackled Dickinson's manuscripts not only as someone who knew the poet and her family, or as someone who admired the idiosyncrasies of Dickinson's style, but as someone who loved the arts (the true definition of the amateur artist) and the edified life.

This key difference between the person who labored most devotedly and intensively on the fascicles, and the person who appeared before the world as the "senior" editor of the published poems, points to more than the different circumstances of Todd's and Higginson's lives, moreover. This difference points to how Dickinson came to be perceived as such an eccentric and mysterious recluse—a reputation that was partly based on fact, but that quickly acquired the exaggerated and simplistic force of the stereotype. Indirectly, this difference between Higginson's professionalism and Todd's amateurism also helps us to understand recent scholarly interpretations of Dickinson as "self-published." For although "self-publication" situates the poet within a private community of correspondence, it also presumes a creative independence and agency (precisely because the genteel notions of anonymous authorship and private publication were less and less the norm) that depends on the idea of Dickinson as exceptional. The "virgin recluse poet" has its origin, in other words, not just in Dickinson's cagey personality and in her
principled struggles with the developing publishing industry, but in the public tensions (professional and non) that shaped the interests of her first two editors.

Higginson begins the preface to the 1890 Poems by Emily Dickinson by identifying the poet as someone who wrote without any thought of publication. Dickinson’s work, Higginson states from the outset, was merely the private expression of the poet’s “own mind.” In this respect, Dickinson might be considered a follower of Emerson and his album or portfolio poetry. The first sentence in the preface states that Dickinson’s poems “belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called ‘the Poetry of the Portfolio’” — a claim that links this unusual poet with an immediate forebear and, ultimately, a tradition. While Sharon Cameron, in the twentieth century, connects Dickinson’s verse with Emerson’s portfolio poetry to argue for the social roots of the fascicles, Higginson quickly uses the link with Emerson to establish Dickinson’s exceptional, asocial character. Instead of making the Amherst writer familiar to readers through her connection with the famous Transcendentalist and his advocacy of album poetry, Higginson renders Dickinson mysterious and anomalous. Presenting her “free” and “unconventional” style not merely as the private expression of her “own mind,” but as the very embodiment of a mind that was strangely inaccessible, Higginson writes: “In the case of the present author, there was absolutely no choice in the matter; she must write thus, or not at all.” It wasn’t as if Dickinson made a deliberate artistic decision to write in this “free” manner, whether for the sake of a tradition or for her own idiosyncratic fulfillment. Instead, Higginson maintains, Dickinson was compelled by her very nature to write in her untutored and ungainly fashion.

A recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep, and many more years during which her walks were strictly limited to her father’s grounds, she concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very friends; and it was with great difficulty that she was persuaded to print, during her lifetime, three or four poems (Reception13).
In Higginson’s view, the spending of years in reclusive retirement was “literal” not just in a rhetorical sense. Dickinson’s odd and inscrutable ways, which were the result of her reclusive nature, were literalized in her poems. Her unusual life was verbalized, not in the conversations that most people have with family, friends, and neighbors, but in the poems she could not be persuaded to print. Thus in the very act of introducing Dickinson to the world, Higginson presents her poetry as proof of her incomprehensibility. Style here is an unexamined extension of self – in this case, a wildly nonconformist self – that can’t be mentored or altered. If Higginson, therefore, were to agree that Dickinson was self-published (a view that is incongruous with the way that Higginson denies Dickinson’s creative deliberation and discretion), he would claim that the publishing process was a natural or unsocialized, relatively unreflecting one.

A governing – perhaps the governing – belief in Higginson’s career was that authorship was properly and profoundly social. Although Higginson conceded the historical place of “the Poetry of the Portfolio,” and although he attached his editorial name to a poet he regarded as perversely solitary, he understood writing as a social undertaking whose fulfillment is the public act of publishing. Thus in his 1890 preface Higginson refers to Dickinson’s poetry as “verse [that] inevitably forfeit[s] whatever advantage lies in the discipline of public criticism and the enforced conformity to accepted ways.” Because of her unwillingness to publish more than a handful of poems during her lifetime, Dickinson wrote verse, in Higginson’s estimation, that lacked the structure and cohesiveness of poetry subjected to the rigors of public expectations and taste. Make no mistake, “whatever advantage” and “enforced conformity” are not dubious or grudging nods in the direction of public criticism. Rather, Higginson is acknowledging with the sober intelligence of an experienced editor, critic, and poet the difficult yet indispensable rewards of a visible (i.e., realized) life in letters. As Higginson tells aspiring writers in “Letter to a Young Contributor,” “you are writing for the average eye, and must submit to its verdict.” For initiation into the world of letters – which is inescapably public – depends on a writer’s deference to impersonal, conforming judgment. “Do not trouble yourself about the light on your statue,”
Higginson advises; "it is the light of the public square which must test [the] value" of your work (402).

By introducing the Amherst poet as a writer who never benefited from public criticism, Higginson is doing more than defining Dickinson for her new readers. Higginson is defining himself as a business-minded man of letters engaged in a public enterprise, and he is defining writing as an activity properly determined by audience as much as by personal conviction, an activity shaped by the market it sustains. Conformity to established tastes and the creative discipline it fosters were important to Higginson, the editorial arbiter of literary merit whose Atlantic Monthly essay on how to get published lured Dickinson into a sporadic correspondence. For Higginson conceived of writing as a profession – whether potential or realized – that depends on the enthusiasm of a consuming readership. Literature, from this point of view, is not some artistic or spiritual ideal to be fulfilled in eccentric, private ways, but a vocation that demands proper training, that follows tested guidelines for success, and that is always sensitive to the preferences of its readers. Authorship, from this point of view, is serious business, and the individual conducting such business, whether as poet or editor, is expected to observe a productive protocol of consistency and conformity. That which can be gained "through the habit of freedom and the unconventional utterance of daring thoughts" – if it is to have a place – belongs in the realm of the nonprofessional, where "the Poetry of the Portfolio" flourishes (Reception 13).

As portfolio poetry was the exceptional indulgence in an increasingly competitive, professional world of letters, so, for Higginson, Dickinson was the free and unconventional exception that proved the rule of individual and cultural normality. As Higginson understood her, Dickinson was so personally deviant – "a recluse by temperament and habit" – that conformity to the "public's verdict" was never a possibility. She could only write unconventional poetry that lacked the discipline of censure and praise because her eccentric personality prevented her from being conventional in any facet of her life. She was an aberrational type perversely and
insurmountably excluded from the normal circuit of interactions and exchanges that define the literary life. For Higginson, Dickinson was the foil that confirmed his own prominence as a professional and that verified the merits of a career in letters. She was the occasional fast-food lunch for the gourmand.

A look at “Letter to a Young Contributor” reveals how Higginson’s standards of public discipline and conformity emerged from his understanding of letters, and from his self-conscious stature as a professional critic and editor. Although written twenty-eight years before his preface to the first edition of Dickinson’s poems, “Letter to a Young Contributor” illustrates principles to which Higginson still adhered in 1890 – principles that inspired him to write his essay for the Atlantic Monthly, and that prompted him to shake his head so discouragingly when Mabel Loomis Todd first approached him. Most critics presume that Dickinson read Higginson’s “Letter” in the April 1862 issue of the Atlantic, and that it was this essay that triggered their correspondence. Most readers acknowledge, too, that the Dickinson-Higginson correspondence was characterized by enigmatic coyness on the part of the poet. Dickinson was alternately forthcoming and evasive, solicitous and condescending in her interaction with Higginson. As Wolff and others have observed, much of this evasion and condescension centered on the question of whether Dickinson should publish (Wolff 254-59). Certainly, this coyness says a lot about Dickinson’s personality and her artistic expectations, but it also says a great deal about the beliefs Higginson set forth in his “Letter” – beliefs that later shaped Dickinson’s presentation to the world in her posthumous form. For it was Higginson’s steady insistence on the public and the conventional that provoked Dickinson’s coyness, and that impelled the editor to introduce the poet years later as a withdrawn eccentric who willingly forfeited the advantages of accessibility.

13 The immediate catalyst for “Letter to a Young Contributor” was a request by the Atlantic’s editor, James T. Fields, that Higginson write an essay responding to readers’ many requests for literary guidance. While Higginson did not hold an official editorial position on the Atlantic, he served as an invaluable and influential assistant to Fields, contributing essays, stories, book reviews, and even a serialized novel. Ellery Sedgwick, The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 78.
Higginson begins his "Letter" by addressing an imagined would-be contributor to the Atlantic Monthly, a contributor who is a composite of the many young men and women who wrote to Higginson over the years, submitting manuscripts and seeking advice on how to get published. In effect, this essay is Higginson's letter to the world of hidden aspiration, a letter that consolidates the private appeals piled on the editor's desk and that responds to them publicly. "My dear young gentleman or young lady," the essay begins, "...it seems wrong not to meet your accumulated and urgent epistles with one comprehensive reply, thus condensing many private letters into a printed one." Anticipating his emphasis on the importance of a public readership, Higginson turns what could have been a series of private correspondences into a public discourse. He responds to a prototypical, amateur author who wants to earn a living with the pen by presenting an essay that is a mentoring form of public judgment. In this way, the editor presents an example of the "discipline of public criticism" he advocates in his 1890 preface, using this "discipline" as a means to the end of "enforced conformity to accepted ways."

The advice Higginson so publicly offers ranges from the practical to the philosophical. Some of the advice is as straightforward as the suggestion that would-be contributors "use good pens, black ink, nice white paper and plenty of it" (402). When writers follow these guidelines, the task of the editor becomes easier and the likelihood of publication increases. The editor's job is easier, too, when writers follow certain rules of punctuation. "Reduce yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes," Higginson advises; "if you employ them merely from clumsiness, they will lose all their proper power in your hands." Likewise, the contributor should "economize quotation-marks." Instead of relying on the "dust" of accumulated quotations and citations, the writer should opt for the cleaner, less cluttered style of allusion. "...assume your readers to be acquainted with the current jokes and the stock epithets: all persons like the compliment of having it presumed that they know something, and prefer to discover the wit or beauty of your allusion without a guide-board" (407).
On an immediate level, Higginson's advice is calculated to simplify the publishing process. A general willingness among writers to observe certain rules of composition and presentation will help make the whole enterprise run smoothly. This advice is not simply or myopically utilitarian, however. The plenitude of "nice white paper" and the consistencies of punctuation are the nuts and bolts of Higginson's broad vision of convention and its "enforced" virtues. The power of conformity and its creative lessons in socialization begin with standard formats of writing. When the writer assumes that he or she shares with the reader a common body of information (current jokes and stock epithets), then the power of conformity expands beyond the stylistic and the mechanical – the decision to use few quotes, say – to the philosophical. In essence, Higginson argues that the "young contributor" (and all authors generally, we might infer) should write as though he or she is an integral part of a community, a community defined by its shared information and by its collective rules.

Higginson's philosophy of writing is based on several types of confluence – what we might regard as the components of merger in a fundamentally conformist view of art and society. To begin, Higginson identifies "Letter to a Young Contributor" as "one comprehensive reply" to the many epistles he has received over the years, a "condensing [of] many private letters into a printed one" (401). His advice as a seasoned editor presumes that aspiring authors are similar enough in their concerns and questions that all of their letters can be answered at once. This convergence of concerns and questions into a single response is, in turn, the foundation for Higginson's claim that no manuscript stands alone. The fate of one manuscript determines the fates of many others just like it. "[U]pon the destiny of any single [manuscript] may hang that of a hundred others just like it," Higginson writes, because of the "fixed standard" by which all manuscripts must be judged. Higginson argues the necessity of objective, binding standards of literary judgment, standards that will enable editors to separate mediocrity from excellence. Editors and readers together should then police that distinction, for "whatever the standard fixed, it is equally for the interest of all concerned that it be enforced without flinching" (401). While
such unflinching judgment is, on the one hand, divisive, it is ultimately a tool for conformity and consensus that imposes a collective meaning on every single text. For the good of all literature depends on the separation of the extraordinary from the ordinary. The power of the "fixed standard," therefore, should not obscure the mutual interests of the contributor and the editor—a fact that Higginson declares on the first page of his essay. However often aspiring authors may appeal to the generosity of an editor, or however much they may fear his opinion, the long-term ambitions of authors and editors coincide. "...[T]he real interests of editor and writer are absolutely the same, and any antagonism is merely traditional.... No editor can ever afford the rejection of a good thing, and no author the publication of a bad one." As Higginson points out, the "difficulty... in drawing the line" between good and bad can be a formidable challenge, but the shared, long-range interests of editor and author transcend the immediate problems that drawing this line poses (401).

In general, Higginson's advice to the young contributor emerges from a collective sense of artistic purpose and identity. No individual author, editor, or reader carries such weight that eccentricity or personal eminence should be a primary consideration. Writers should not obtrude themselves on editors by "insist[ing] on reading... whole manuscript[s] aloud to him, with appropriate gestures" [402]. No individual contributor is important enough to monopolize the attention of an editor this way. Nor should a writer "yield to his own private eccentricities of dialect" [404]. Rather, an author should rely on the stylistic virtues of imitation. "Rules for style, as for manners, must be chiefly negative: a positively good style indicates certain natural powers in the individual, but an unexceptionable style is merely a matter of culture and good models" [403]. Given the drift of these observations, is it any wonder that Higginson shook his head when Todd approached him about publishing Dickinson? Was there ever any greater perpetrator of the "private eccentricities of dialect?" Anyone less inclined to embrace "good models?" Indeed, Dickinson stood for the opposite of all that Higginson values in "Letter to a Young Contributor." She defied the fixity of any standard of judgment, just as she defied fixity of meaning in her
poems. She not only assumed a degree of antagonism between herself and her few editors, but — in her correspondence with Higginson — she built on this antagonism with a taunting and evasive condescension. Higginson claims in an 1891 essay that the poet “persisted in regarding [him] — with very little ground for it — as a literary counselor and confidant,” yet Dickinson essentially remained for him the anti-Contributor. Her dependence on him as a “counselor and confidant” weighed against “the utterly recluse character of her life and by her aversion to even a literary publicity,” while her “curious… rise… into a posthumous fame” was a “suddenness of success” practically independent of Higginson’s influence as counselor, confidant, and editor.¹⁴

At first glance, Higginson resembled such writers as Richard Henry Stoddard, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Bayard Taylor, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich in his emphasis on enlightened conformity. Higginson appears to have shared with his genteel contemporaries a hierarchically collective understanding of culture and a distrust of exaggerated individuality. While these traits of understanding and distrust contributed to what I have called the corporate identity of the genteel writers (a cultural, increasingly institutional solidarity that mattered as much, if not more than, the successes and failures of individual authors), Higginson’s insistence on the merging interests of writers and editors, and on the importance of emulation, was more rooted in the collective definitions and concerns of the market than was the genteel ethos. As we have seen, Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard both struggled against poverty and an apathetic readership for

¹⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Emily Dickinson’s Letters,” Atlantic Monthly 68 (October 1891): 444-56. (Quoted from Reception 182-83.) Interestingly, Richard Henry Stoddard greeted Dickinson’s published letters in 1895 with the opinion that the poet’s correspondence with Higginson is the one redeeming aspect of the volume. Dickinson “knew but one man of letters,” Stoddard writes in the New York Mail and Express. “—Mr. T. W. Higginson, who edited, we believe, her posthumous remains, or was instrumental in their publication, and to whom she wrote the only letters in these volumes that are worth reading today.” In Stoddard’s view, most of Dickinson’s letters, like most of her poems, are not worth reading. When Roberts Brothers sent Stoddard a pre-publication copy of the first volume of poems, Stoddard responded — again in the New York Mail and Express — with a dismissive review that takes its cues from Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s damning assessment of Dickinson as “an eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse” (Reception 282-88). Stoddard’s low estimation of Dickinson did not change between the appearance of the first volume of poems and the later publication of the poet’s letters. For while the “Dickinson-Higginson correspondence… [is] a justification… for [the] preservation and publication” of the letters, Stoddard writes, it is clear “Mr. Higginson could do nothing” for a poet “to whom a ripe intellectual maturity seemed impossible” (Reception 422-23).
much of their careers. Even so, both writers – but especially Richard – managed to project a literary and critical authority that was seemingly independent of financial reward. At the very least, the Stoddards were not going to let scant compensation or recognition deter them from their pursuits. Richard Stoddard, we should remember, vowed from an early age that he would either earn his bread from writing or starve. And, in fact, there were periods in his career when it seemed he would starve.

For Higginson, by contrast, the market was a primary determinant of value – a fact suggested by his monetarily charged language when he advises the young contributor to “economize quotation-marks” and to accept a “short allowance of parentheses and dashes” (407; italics added). His belief in the shared interests of contributor and editor, in the importance of an unobtrusive, familiar style, and in the lessons that public criticism can impart attest to his view that success is determined by saleability. Higginson objects to the belief that “the practice of compensation by the page work[s]... injury” to the writer (a belief “ignorantly” espoused), and instead regards this impetus to production as a healthy recognition of the supply-and-demand, profit-driven terms of a basically economic enterprise (408). The literary life, for Higginson, was a series of transactions into which the experienced and intelligent broker (i.e., editor) could school the young contributor by pointing to precedents and the markets they have established. The strength of these markets, Higginson further maintains, is only increasing, so that “the profits of true literature are rising.” From this perspective, “cheap work is usually poor work” – destitute of both merit and financial reward – while good work is enriching in both cultural and monetary senses (408). “If your work does not vindicate itself” (that is, if the value of your work is not self-evident within the defining context of the market), then you should “not waste a minute, not a second, in trying to demonstrate to others the merit of your own performance.” The most a writer can do when a work is not well received is “labor steadily on to something which needs no advocate but itself” (407). By this reasoning, the idea of the misunderstood genius is a whimsical
rationalization for “poor work,” while the creativity that elicits praise and dollars is the ideal for
which the young contributor should strive.\footnote{About the author of a work called, “The False Medium excluding Men of Genius from the Public,” Higginson writes sardonically: “He spent years in ineffectually trying to repeal the exclusion in his own case, and has since manfully gone to the grazing regions in Australia, hoping there at least to find the sheep and the goats better discriminated” (407).}

Higginson’s understanding of writing as a market-driven activity was not confined to the
strictly literary, but shaped his understanding of journalism as well. As we saw in the last
chapter, Walt Whitman, during his conservative phase as editor of the \textit{Brooklyn Daily Times},
disparaged the effects of journalism on literary writers, believing that the immediacy and the
vulgarity of newspaper readers’ demands must eventually compromise an author’s capacity for
innovation and complexity. Higginson had a different view, one that presumed a benign
continuity between journalistic and traditionally literary writing. Given his emphasis on how
texts are received, it comes as no surprise that the demand-and-supply proximity between readers’
expectations and what the journalist writes on his stacks of “nice white paper” was welcomed by
Higginson. In his essay, “The Career of Letters,” Higginson acknowledges the prominence of
society columns or “personal journalism” – “a prominence in this country with which nothing in
any other country can be compared.”\footnote{Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The Career of Letters,” \textit{Women and the Alphabet: A Series of Essays} (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881) 238-39.} The prominence of such journalism attests not only to
readers’ tastes, but to the sort of training many writers receive since they so often enter the career
of letters through newspaper writing. Higginson approves of this training, and even calls the
“newspaper-office” a “capital preparatory school” for authors who wish to learn “to write
availably” ("Contributor" 404). In fact, “nothing is so good to teach the use of materials, and to
compel to pungency of style” as the newspaper-office. For “being always at close quarters with
his readers, a journalist must shorten and sharpen his sentences, or he is doomed” (404).

Higginson’s embrace of newspaper writing is not unqualified, however. For he does concede
that the “mental alertness” journalism imparts “is bought at a severe price” ("Letter" 404). The
rapid exchanges of knowledge and opinion that comprise journalism, Higginson claims, have a
tendency to devalue the writer's work and to cheapen his existence through the diminished
separation - not just of the journalist and his readers - but of the journalist and his words.
Journalism offers a "living from hand to mouth [that] cheapens the whole mode of intellectual
existence," not merely because the journalist depends on the instantaneous and short-lived
satisfactions of his readership, but because he depends on personality and name-recognition as
ways of garnering these satisfactions. This is especially true of (but not limited to) society
correspondents who become "thoroughly convinced that the highest desire of every human being
is to see his name in print" (Alphabet 237). The newspaper writer is drawn into an economy of
emotion and identity in which the transactions (i.e., newspaper articles) are the "pay off" of
personal allegiances, as well as of grudges and slights (Alphabet 238). Underpinned by the
immediacy of its reader response, the occupational logic of journalism is such that people's
identities (including journalists') become quick currency. The proximity that accounts for brevity
and animation in style, therefore, also draws the subjectivity of the writer into its compressed
system of exchange, so that the writer's personal presence becomes part of his literary trade. For
this reason, Higginson states, "no successful journalist [can] ever get the newspaper out of his
blood" ("Letter" 405).17

17 Higginson's ambivalence toward journalism, with his endorsement of the practical apprenticeship that
magazines offer and his distrust of their audiences' cheapening demands, is best understood in the context
of his connection with the Atlantic. A highbrow publication that weathered the appearance of cheap, mass-
circulation magazines with its purist views shaken but intact, the Atlantic Monthly offered its loyal
contributor, Higginson, a stance from which to experience journalism's changes as both powerfully
impressive and repugnant. Conceived with a missionary sense of cultural improvement, the Atlantic was,
in Higginson's words, the center of the New England endeavor "to guide the nation, to civilize it, [and] to
humanize it" (Sedgwick 4). This genteel vision of purpose was challenged by what Higginson described as
the "commonplace and debasing success" of post-war society, by the prosperity of the Northeast that
whittled away at the Atlantic's "cultivated class" of readers and engendered a mob of semi-literate
consumers. The challenges posed to the Atlantic by "industrial capitalism, class politics, and the rise of
mass culture," Ellery Sedgwick argues, resulted in the magazine's "shift in tone and mood" toward
decreased optimism and entrenched, reactionary idealism. Higginson himself responded not so much with
genteel cynicism, as with an apparent desire to maintain the high road of elitist uplift while laying out a
humbler path for the literate populace. In Sedgwick's words, "Higginson expressed optimism that these
apparent dichotomies between material progress and cultural stasis, between political democracy and high
culture, between the majority and the intellectual elite, could be resolved." Translated into his general view

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Despite his recognition of journalism's limitations, however, Higginson's warnings to "literary aspirants" do not attest to a genteel belief that market demands are merely secondary in the life of a writer, or that the influence of the market is to be ignored. As Higginson tells his readers with regard to book publishing, "You can take the standard which the book market offers... and acquire directness, vividness, animation, [and] dash," or (the implication is) you can take a more idiosyncratic route and risk probable failure (Alphabet 235). In either case, the writer -- whether of novels or society columns -- must think in terms of capital. What Higginson's concerns about journalism do indicate is his belief that the young contributor's efforts should be supported by an economy that emphasizes deliberate, even arduous production, over the quick deliveries and fulfillments of consumption. Higginson's concerns about journalism's compressed circuit of exchange indicate that his intellectual values are caught up in a producers', rather than a consumers' economy -- that he views letters as, ideally, a system of exchange predicated on handicraft, rather than clipped, reactionary surfeit. Insisting on the importance of the market, Higginson sees writers prospering in a specific sort of economy, an economy built on self-control, emulative discipline, and the deferred gratifications of production. The close and uncontrolled tangle of transactions that "cheapen" a writer's work, on the other hand, derive from the newer economy emerging in the nineteenth century, the consumer economy that accelerates the sense of personal need with its mass-produced means to contrived distinction. The newspaper office -- and the school of journalism generally -- is a "capital preparatory school," it follows, not simply because its compressed atmosphere makes for an accessible writing style, but because these "close quarters" mimic the increasingly compact nexus of a consumer economy where production (i.e., writing) is immediately shaped by desire (i.e., the readers' preferences). The phrase, "capital preparatory school," becomes ambiguous in this light, and not entirely laudatory. For the newspaper office not only prepares the cultural capital of writing for brevity of style, but it

of journalism, this "optimism" became Higginson's ambiguous perception of periodicals as a welcome opportunity for writerly advancement and as a threat to literary integrity (107).
commodifies the journalist’s experience of personality for the concise transactions that characterize an economy based on appetite and consumer response. Journalism schools writers and their texts for the quick exchanges of consumer capitalism.

The implicit paradigm of a productive economy registers on a compositional level in Higginson’s call for creative “self-control” and editorial “sacrifice.” The ideal writer, outlined in “Letter to a Young Contributor,” has “the power to prune out [his] most cherished sentence” and to perform “the proper subordination of [his] own thoughts” for “the symmetry or vigor of the whole” project (405). This author, able to defer the immediate fulfillment of personal promotion, and to see the fruition to which delay and restraint may lead, writes from an ethos that pre-dates consumer capitalism’s emphasis on individual gratification and entitlement – an ethos that derives from the aggregate (i.e., pre-specialized, pre-fragmented) perspective of a producing, artisan-based system. Something as simple as Higginson’s recurring use of the term “contributor,” in fact, reveals this ethos, for the “contributor” – unlike the “author” or the “writer” – is inconceivable without the idea of contribution to a (preferably symmetrical and vigorous) whole. In the strictly literal confines of Higginson’s advice, the term “contributor” refers to the writer who contributes to a magazine – specifically, to the Atlantic Monthly. In the more expansive, philosophical sense revealed by close attention to Higginson’s language, however, “contributor” conveys a telling balance between individual value and deliberate, collective enterprise.

Likewise, Higginson’s advice to “be noble both in the affluence and the economy of your diction” reveals that he thinks of the young contributor and his craft not just in the financial terms of abundance and frugality, but in the almost vestigial terms of an anti-democratic, anti-consumeristic nobility. In calling on the contributor nobly to “spare no wealth that you can put in, and tolerate no superfluity that can be struck out,” Higginson indicates that the writer must calculate his success within a long, hierarchical trajectory of artistic prerogatives – a trajectory that mimics the genealogy of nobility, and that complicates the direct lineage of democratic desire.
Perhaps the epitome of such nobility is in the calculated self-denial that Higginson recommends when he tells the young contributor to “have faith enough in your own individuality to keep it resolutely down for a year or two.” Higginson recognizes the value of resources – including creativity and innovation – that are reinvested at the price of immediate recognition. Knowing that reputation as well as text counts as capital, Higginson asserts that “a man has not much intellectual capital who cannot treat himself to a brief interval of modesty” (405). If a writer can’t afford to sacrifice opportunities for stylistic or imaginative display and invest his artistic potential back into the disciplined observation of his craft, then he doesn’t have enough “intellectual capital” to carry him into lasting respect anyway. The flashy and shortsighted display of untutored talent, like the conspicuous display of the impulse buy, leads only to the bankruptcy of originality. Higginson refers to this bankruptcy of originality as “premature individualism,” a contrived and exaggerated trademark of identity that can only sustain itself as pretense. The literary distillation of the artificially, endlessly entitled self supported by consumer capitalism, this “premature individualism commonly ends either in a reaction against the original whims [that inspired it], or in a mannerism which perpetuates them” (405). The alternative to such “premature individualism” is a controlled “individuality” (the kind that is resolutely kept down for a year or two). The young contributor can, in effect, choose to possess capital (in which case he can decide to reinvest his resources), or to be capital, in the manner of the later Whitman and Twain. In the latter case, the contributor risks promiscuity and passivity that will spell the end of his art.

Certainly, Higginson must have considered Dickinson an executor of such “premature individualism.” Interpreting her unconventional style as a sign of isolation and the lack of discipline, Higginson shook his head at Mabel Loomis Todd’s publication proposal because he had long considered the Amherst poet a practitioner of grotesque and uncontrolled idiosyncrasies. Higginson was reluctant to touch Dickinson’s poetry, both during and after her life, because he thought of her as a writer who put individual taste and style before self-sacrifice and the
subordination to consensus. He read her as the genteel capitalist that he was — as a critic who thought fundamentally in terms of the market, and who was irremediably suspicious of consumerism’s potential to exaggerate and commodify individuality. Higginson translated the historical transition from a producer to a consumer economy, in other words, into a philosophy of letters that conservatively emphasizes marketability — that is, that puts the commercial value of familiarity before the novelties of conspicuous individuality. Consequently, he construed creative eccentricities such as we find in Dickinson’s poetry as the monstrous outgrowth of intellectual consumerism. Ironically, Higginson regarded the poet who shunned publicity as an identity contrived by commercialism.

Biographer James Tuttleton points out that Higginson struggled with his own poetic identity through much of his life. A fairly prolific if — in Tuttleton’s estimation — “a minor poet of the Genteel Tradition,” Higginson published volumes of poetry as early in his career as 1853 (Thalatta), and as late as 1893 (Such as They Are: Poems). Despite the long span of his poetic output, Higginson questioned whether verse was as compelling a calling as other forms of creative or intellectual enterprise. In time, Tuttleton writes, Higginson turned from poetry “to more pressing considerations like reform and literary criticism” — activities that Higginson would have preferred if only because of their sheer evaluative consensus (92). As he grew into his views on society and literature, Higginson realized he was more comfortable articulating collective judgments (for surely he saw the driving “discipline of public criticism” in reform and in literary criticism), than in rendering the subjective, aesthetic judgments of the individual artist. Indeed, Higginson wrestled with the suspicion that art in general — and poetry in particular — had an isolating potential that must, through the forging of critical standards, be strenuously balanced against collective taste. Increasingly invested in the social, ultimately economic dimensions of literature, “Higginson was unable to accept the possibility that the artist might be an isolato whose ultimate purpose in life is to traffic with the creations of his own imagination” (99).
the while developing his career as a public man of letters, “Higginson feared that the life of the artist – withdrawn, solitary, introverted by its preoccupation with invention – might be the real unforgivable sin.” At times Higginson tried to work through this fear in fiction – a middle ground between potentially enigmatic verse and analytical prose. Two stories in particular, “An Artist’s Creation” and “The Monarch of Dreams,” “urge... the necessity of the individual’s total involvement in the community about him” (99). Ultimately, however, Higginson dealt with his misgivings about the poet-isolato by – on a personal level – developing a belletristic career, and by – on an intellectual level – advocating a systemic, socializing view of literature. In this systemic view, the isolato is an aberration, a preventable mutation of inspiration. The poet who traffics only in the products of his own mind, or who trades in incomprehensible style, is a dubious, even unwelcome contributor to an economy that depends on creative consensus.

The image of Emily Dickinson as a mysterious recluse, it follows from all of this, derives as much from Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s experience of literature as from the poet’s behavior or words. Her posthumous appearance as an eccentric recluse testifies to one way in which the culture of nineteenth-century capitalism, articulated through literary professionalism, inflected authorial identity. Her exceptional presence, in fact, testifies to the way capitalism inflects identity in its broadest terms. But what if Dickinson’s initial readers were less governed by an ethos of professionalism? What if the concerns about an exclusive conformity and marketability were less influential in her introduction to the world? What would the poet look like then?

This is where Mabel Loomis Todd comes into the picture. As already stated, Todd began sorting through Dickinson’s fascicles at the personal behest of the poet’s sister. From the beginning, Todd’s involvement with the poems had a personal impetus far different from the impersonal efficiency that inspired Higginson to write his public letter to an abstract “young contributor.” Todd was motivated by her ties to the deceased poet’s family, and by her conviction that the verse was worth preserving, however much in need of editing. Her

inspiration, in other words, did not derive from a profit-seeking ambition. Not an altruist either, Todd nonetheless proceeded with the editing project after Higginson dismissed it as an unprofitable investment in time. She warned Lavinia of how long the project would take — two, maybe three years — if the poems were sorted and copied as (she believed) they should be. She was willing to sift through the newspaper scraps and envelopes on which some of the poems were written, to decipher the poet's almost illegible handwriting, and to negotiate the "baffling" number of word alternatives penciled in the margins — all for little prospect of compensation ("Debut" 464).

Nor did Todd expect much in the way of recognition. From the time that Higginson agreed to lend his assistance, Todd assumed the role of junior editor. She was the junior partner, even though she had done most of the preparatory work, and even though she would promote the first three editions of Dickinson's poems more aggressively than Higginson. Initially, Todd was told that she and Higginson would cosign the introduction to the first edition of poems. Higginson subsequently changed his mind, though, insisting that only his name should appear with the introduction ("Debut" 467-8). The senior editor's rationale for this change was that his personal acquaintance with Emily Dickinson was greater than Todd's. Because the introduction relied on retrospect and the anecdotal, the attachment of Mabel Loomis Todd's name would be implausible. Even so, Higginson didn't hesitate to attach Todd's name to the title page and identify her as the poet's "friend" — perhaps because the designation "friend" reinforced Todd's junior status. For although the "friendship" between Todd and Dickinson did not justify the appearance of Todd's name in the introduction, it did apparently suffice to label the junior editor as emotionally — rather than intellectually — invested. As Dickinson's "friend," Todd's serious intellectual contribution to the project was subtly but effectively compromised ("Debut" 468).

Higginson wasn't the only person whose interest it was in to reinforce Todd's less than professional position. Soon after the fascicles were discovered, Lavinia Dickinson appealed to Todd as a friend of the family. Such an approach to Amherst's young, amateur woman of letters...
was not necessarily benign, however. As the years passed, Lavinia relied on the compelling aspects of personal association to justify Todd’s largely unpaid efforts to prepare the poems for publication. As Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, pointed out a generation later, Lavinia never publicly conceded that Todd deserved payment as editor of Dickinson’s work, and thought “in reality an honor had been conferred by giving [Todd] the opportunity to link her name with Emily’s” (Bingham 327). Nor were circumstances any different when it came to the publication of the poet’s Letters. Todd received no royalties for the Letters, for in Lavinia’s estimation editing the Letters would “make [Todd’s] reputation” (Bingham 338, 358). The work was to be its own compensation.

Looking back on all her efforts, Mabel Loomis Todd claimed that she had “no financial interest in either of the volumes” (of poetry or correspondence). Even so, she “was [gratified] to know that Emily’s sister was reaping a harvest from the extraordinary sales....” The implied sting here was not meant to pass unnoticed by Todd’s readers, despite her assertion that she had “no financial interest” in the project. Elsewhere in her Harper’s Monthly essay Todd observes, “I had done the work, and without pay. But nothing but both copyright and proceeds would satisfy [Lavinia]” (471). The tone here is unmistakably bitter. Yet an element of dissemblance prevents this tone from being entirely righteous. For in truth Todd did receive some money – not enough to compensate for her labor, but enough to render her claim that she did the work “without pay” a fabrication. For the first edition of poems Todd received one hundred dollars, while by the time the Letters were published she had received two hundred dollars in royalties. Not much money, and certainly ample cause for complaint – especially since Lavinia received “customary” royalty checks from Roberts Brothers throughout the 1890s (Bingham 329). Yet not exactly “no pay.” It seems, in fact, that Todd cultivated her image as a nonprofessional. She was probably more gratified by an 1895 Critic review of her editorial work as a “labor of love,” than by the “harvest” of “extraordinary sales” that Lavinia reaped (Reception 415). The resentment underlying Todd’s
claim of "no pay," therefore, likely points to her hope for a different sort of compensation—compensation in the currency of honorable recognition, rather than in cash.

Mabel Loomis Todd was a woman of considerable accomplishments. As Polly Longsworth states, Todd "painted in oils and watercolors on canvas, wood, paper, and china; she played the piano seriously and well, and sang in a lovely trained soprano. She was well-read, had ambitions as an author, and had had several essays published while growing up" (9-10). From her earliest days, this talented and industrious woman, who would eventually write or edit hundreds of articles and a dozen books, "felt the possibility of great things in the way of writing." As she confided to her father, Todd wished "to become, & be known as, a thoroughly well-read and intellectual person." For this reason Todd kept an ongoing inventory of the books she read, thereby demonstrating to herself and to others the extent of her erudition (Longsworth 27). The "being known as" as a learned and intelligent person was always very important to Todd. One of her driving traits, in fact, was the desire to be perceived and admired for her accomplishments. "Far from being retiring about her abilities, she put herself forward with a vivacious charm that enabled her to attract the attention of the gathering in any room she entered. In fact, she took intense pleasure in feeling all eyes turned toward her, and quite indulged her flair for arousing admiration and winning lavish praise" (Longsworth 10).

For all that she craved recognition, though, Todd did not try to secure the reputation that a professional artist, musician, or writer would draw. Over the years, Todd received a modest amount of money for her writings and for the art lessons she gave in Amherst. Her main interest, however, seems always to have been in garnering an unmercenary recognition. She relished the role of the conspicuous amateur, even when she would have been better off fiscally by promoting herself as a professional. This was true not only of her role as editor of Dickinson's poetry, but of her overall presence as a Renaissance woman. Todd struggled to maintain the "pretense that she wrote, taught, gave painting lessons, and sang publicly for the sheer pleasure of expressing her
overabundant talents” (Longsworth 419). In truth, though, Todd was often in great need of what money she earned through these talents. Todd once confessed to her mother,

Almost anybody can go five or six thousand dollars in debt to build a house, & teach to get money to furnish it & write & paint, I suppose. You think all these things come easily to me, because I say nothing about the debts. If you could see the pile of January bills on my desk, & know that I have drawn all the salary ahead for three months.... But I never talk about these things (Longsworth 419).

Todd never “talked about these things,” even though they pressed on her from all sides, because she considered her persona as a “laborer of love” – a cultivated, amateur intellectual and artist – as important as her need to pay the bills. In part, this reticence can be attributed to the fact that she was the wife of an Amherst College astronomer. The public pursuit of her talents, without the appearance of monetary need, was an important confirmation of class. Married to a respected scientist, Todd considered the leisurely dimension of her activities a crucial signifier of her bourgeois integrity. The valuable appearance of leisure, in other words, precluded the look of industry and need, and shifted Todd’s expectation of compensation from cash to recognition.

The hunger for honorable recognition was especially acute in Todd’s later years because of the public scandal she and her husband endured as a result of an inheritance dispute. The bitterness that registers in Todd’s 1930 essay, “Emily Dickinson’s Literary Debut,” and in the letter to her mother in which she describes the bills piling up on her desk, is the bile of someone who felt cheated out of her due. Todd felt cheated out of the reputation and respect she expected from her editorial efforts by the lawsuit that followed the death of Emily Dickinson’s brother. Widely – though tacitly – acknowledged to be Austin Dickinson’s paramour, Mabel Loomis Todd was the unofficial inheritor of a meadow on the Dickinson estate and of some stocks and bonds. The plot of land, the dimensions of which Todd jotted on a blank deed, was measured out by Austin Dickinson and Todd’s husband, David, the spring before Austin’s death. Although Austin named
Lavinia in his will as the official inheritor of the meadow, he told Mabel that Lavinia promised to turn the strip of land over to the Todds after his death. Presumably hoping to spare the public dignity of Susan Dickinson, his wife of many years, Austin sought to make the transfer of property to the Todds as informal and inconspicuous as possible. The informality of the transaction proved to be its undoing, however. For the lack of a completed deed or of a legal will designating Mabel Loomis Todd as an inheritor made it possible for Lavinia to retract her promise. Soon after her brother's death, Lavinia denied that Austin wanted the land to go to the Todds. Literary historians speculate — fruitlessly, in the end — about whether Lavinia decided not to honor Austin's wish to give the meadow to the Todds for her own personal reasons, or whether Susan Dickinson (whose relationship with Lavinia ran hot and cold, but whose hatred for Mabel Loomis Todd was unwavering) had some influence on Lavinia's decision. Certainly, neither Lavinia nor Susan Dickinson was pleased by Mabel's mournful acknowledgement of Austin's death by "wearing black dresses, a black cape and hat, and a crepe veil about town" (Longsworth 402). Had Todd not thrust herself into the public role of the grieving widow, in direct competition with Susan's rightful mourning, it is possible that Lavinia would not have objected to the transfer of the property.¹⁹

After the death of Austin Dickinson, Todd joined her husband on a solar eclipse expedition to Japan. While the Todds were out of the country, the inheritance dispute developed into a lawsuit as Lavinia filed a Bill of Complaint. In this Bill, drawn up at the law firm of Hammond and Fields, Lavinia accused Todd of fraud. Todd obtained Lavinia's signature on the unsigned deed, the Bill alleged, through misrepresentation. Requiring a formal response, the Bill was given its Defendants' Answer when the Todds returned to Amherst in October of 1896. Mabel Loomis

¹⁹ To date the two most complete — though not necessarily scholarly or objective — accounts of the relationships between the Dicksons and the Todds are Polly Longsworth's Austin and Mabel and Millicent Todd Bingham's Ancestors' Brocades. Longsworth has an epilogue entitled "The Law Suit and the Trial," while Bingham has a chapter devoted to "The Lawsuit."
Todd consulted her friend, Judge Everett C. Bumpus, and drew up an Answer maintaining that Lavinia signed the land deed with full knowledge of what she was doing.

Interestingly, for our purposes, the Defendants’ Answer argued that the transfer of the meadow to the Todds was intended as remuneration for Mabel’s many years of hard work on the poems. Amherst residents gossiped that the transfer was Austin’s posthumous acknowledgment of the woman who had been his mistress. Townspeople speculated that the Bill of Complaint, accordingly, was Susan Dickinson’s way of getting back at her husband’s mistress through Lavinia. “Many observers of the [legal] debacle...” Longsworth writes, “saw it as Sue’s opportunity, at long last, to wreak revenge on Mabel, and thought that Vinnie became a puppet in her sister-in-law’s manipulating hands” (406). The trial that first came to the Massachusetts Superior Court in February of 1897, therefore, “opened the floodgates” of gossip as the love affair that “was long a hushed, unmentionable matter that Amherst people only whispered of” became public domain.

The Todds’ argument in court, however, focused on the time and labor that Mabel had devoted to organizing, copying, and editing Emily Dickinson’s poems. The land, they claimed, was bequeathed by Austin as compensation for Mabel’s literary efforts (Longsworth 410). Such, indeed, was the testimony of Frances E. Seelye, housekeeper for Lavinia’s friend and business adviser, Leonard Dwight Hills. It was “soon after Mr. Dickinson’s death,” Seelye claimed, that Lavinia

‘said it had always been Austin’s wish that the Todds…should have the land.’ I said, ‘What land?’ She [Lavinia] said, ‘The meadow.’ ...I said, ‘Why?’ She said, ‘For what they have always done for him.’

This ambiguous testimony was clarified as Seelye went on: “Something was said with reference to the poems, that they never would have been published without Mrs. Todd’s help, never could
have been published without her. That was said in connection with what she [Lavinia] said about giving the land..." (Bingham 356).

Another servant, on the other hand, gave very different testimony. Maggie Maher, who had lived with theDickinsons nearly thirty years, barely admitted in cross-examination that “Vinnie ever discussed Mabel’s editing of the poems or the land question during the long hours spent [with Mabel]... in the [Dickinson] Homestead” (Longsworth 413). According to Maggie, the work on the poems was not a significant topic of conversation for Lavinia and Mabel, while the connection between this literary work and the land - if it existed at all - was tenuous. Lavinia, too, downplayed the importance of Todd’s editorial contribution to the poems. In all likelihood, Lavinia perceived how powerful her opponent’s case might become if the legitimacy of Todd’s literary efforts and their remunerative link with the Dickinson land were established. “I intended to have [the poems] published...,” Lavinia testified.

    I did not make application to any one. Not to my niece nor to any person.

    Mrs. Todd asked the privilege of doing it. The handwriting was peculiar,
    but very legible to most persons, not difficult to read, easy to read. We should
    not think of sending the original poems to the printer because they would
    be soiled, perhaps lost. No other reason, - they might be soiled or lost in the
    printer’s hands (Bingham 357).

In this account, Todd’s work of several years counts for next to nothing. The handwriting, which Higginson considered too illegible for him to decipher, is suddenly “easy to read.” The copying process itself is made out to be a mere formality, a precaution taken in the event of printers’ carelessness. Lavinia even denies that she appealed to Todd for assistance - a denial that contradicts earlier statements. Now Todd is depicted as self-serving and status hungry, rather than as assiduous and intellectually principled.

    In the end, the court ruled against the Todds. Judge John Hopkins announced in April 1898 that the strip of land was to remain Dickinson property. Mabel Todd’s reaction, not surprisingly, was
to become utterly dispirited. "That lawsuit has blackened every sunny day," she claimed; "has hurt the quality of every bit of work I have accomplished, has squeezed my heart, creased my forehead, and given me an unspeakable pain in every breath I draw" (Longsworth 423; italics added). Humiliated in her community and betrayed in a friendship, Todd considered the lawsuit and the unfavorable verdict a dark cloud over her personal life. Just as damaging was the intellectual debacle that the lawsuit represented. Because Todd had presented her claim to the land on the basis of her work on the poems, the verdict discredited her intellectually. Denying Todd's logic of intellectual remuneration, the trial's outcome minimized her work on the fascicles and, more destructively, compromised the value "of every bit of work" she accomplished as an editor and writer. The price of the lawsuit exceeded the loss of any particular inheritance, for it devalued her as an intellectual laborer after the intangible rewards of credibility and recognition.

Recounting this unhappy episode in her mother's life, Millicent Todd Bingham claims that Lavinia did acknowledge Mabel's intellectual worth in the form of envy. Certainly, a fundamental "clash of personalities - that underlying lack of understanding for which immediate causes were only a vent" was at the root of the women's falling out (363). This clash was compounded, though, by Lavinia's secret wish that she could claim all the credit for the poems' publication. Bingham writes that her "mother was running away with something that belonged to Lavinia - the prestige with which, as editor of Emily's poems, she had been endowed," and that this, in Lavinia's eyes, "was an injury which could not be forgiven." Not the affair, not Susan Dickinson's influence, not even simple greed for the disputed property can account for Lavinia's betrayal, in Bingham's assessment. "In the last analysis, [Lavinia's] resentment, I think, more than any other one thing supplied the drive that transformed anger and a sense of outrage into action" (364). The outcome of the lawsuit, therefore, was Lavinia's ultimate victory because it stripped away the intangible capital that Todd had accumulated as steadily as Lavinia had collected the publisher's royalty checks. Only a shred of intellectual dignity was left to Todd in Higginson's belated and effete consolation. As Todd wrote in her diary on April 26, 1898,
“Colonel Higginson… left at 2:30, dear old man. He says he wishes he might have gone on the stand for me, to testify to my labor on the poems, and give his opinion of Vinnie!” (Bingham 360).

By the end of 1898, the lawsuit had so soured Todd’s perception not only of the Dickinsons, but of her editorial work on the poems, that she put away the hundreds of letters and poems still in her possession and focused on other projects until her death in 1932. She became active in astronomy, writing about her husband’s researches and helping to raise money for a new observatory. She traveled extensively throughout the northeast, lecturing on a variety of subjects. And she joined David on astronomical expeditions to the Andes, the Dutch East Indies, and Tripoli—combining her appetite for travel and her literary eye to produce various accounts of eclipse expeditions, including her 1912 book, Tripoli the Mysterious.20

In the estimation of many scholars, Todd’s story is one of tangential human interest when it comes to the writings of Emily Dickinson. As Wolff reminds us, Todd didn’t move to Amherst until five years before the poet’s death, and her most personal knowledge of Emily Dickinson was derived through Austin and Lavinia. It is true that Todd “played a central role in preserving Dickinson’s work for future readers,” writes Wolff, but neither Todd’s “character nor her relationship with Austin had any bearing on [Emily Dickinson’s] poetry” (6). The important truth that Wolff and others overlook, however, is that the act of preservation for Todd extended beyond the organization and transcription of the poems, to the preservation of a certain image of Emily Dickinson. Todd devoted years not only to the publication of the poems, but to the “Auction” of Dickinson’s “Mind” (the poet’s own definition of publication). This preservation and presentation to the world of Emily Dickinson’s mind, moreover, had everything to do with Todd’s character. Todd worked assiduously to prepare a picture of Dickinson, and this picture was as much a projection of Todd’s intellectual sympathies and self-image, as it was a portrayal of the Amherst poet.
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, as I have argued, approached Dickinson with commercial biases that made him highly attuned to the poet’s distinctiveness, which he read as a stylistic and, ultimately, a personal “premature individualism.” Higginson’s own identity was the foundation for this emphasis on the individual and the distinct, for his self-conscious status as a professional man of letters was caught up in consumer capitalism’s construction of individuality (the ideological basis for consumer choice) as a primary category of experience. Mabel Loomis Todd, by contrast, was an amateur woman of letters whose sense of herself, of Emily Dickinson, and of authorship generally, was less engaged with the idea of the conspicuous individual than was Higginson’s. Less the professional than Higginson, Todd was less inclined than the Colonel to read Dickinson’s choices – whether poetic or personal – as signs of an exaggerated individualism. For Todd, Dickinson did not have to be a “virgin recluse poet;” she could be a woman who preferred to write unconventional poetry while leading a private life. Dickinson did not have to be publicly labeled a withdrawn eccentric, but could be read and understood as someone who pursued her creative desires in a low-profile, independent manner. The difference is subtle but key. It is the difference between the publicized coalescence of originality into saleable personality, and the willingness to let reserve or unconventionality be inscrutable. It is the difference between promoting (or censoring) a commodified historical presence, and seeing people – even-widely read or discussed people – as less visible than the two-dimensional ubiquity of commercialism would suggest.

Todd was quick to use Dickinson’s writing as a platform for public speaking. In this sense Todd showed an entrepreneurial use of her resources and an advertiser’s savvy. Telling, however, are the facts that her lecturing fell short of a career, and that her talks repeatedly attempted to correct the reductive, exaggerated image of Dickinson as a recluse. Even when Mabel Loomis Todd was at her most promotional – when she was touring and lecturing on

---

Dickinson—she fought against the tendency of the media to reify the deceased poet as an enigma or a curiosity.

Framing Todd’s lectures and the vision of Dickinson that inspired her to write them was Todd’s awareness of her own status as an authority figure—a status that garnered the attention of audiences and the coverage of local papers, but that resulted in little monetary reward. Austin lamented that Mabel had a general tendency to sell herself short. In a letter that is revealing, not only in its amorous bias, Austin writes, “you don’t half understand and appreciate your power and your qualities, as compared with other women. It is so native to you to be charming, fascinating, satisfying [and] you think nothing of it, and do yourself the greatest injustice and harm by your underestimate” (Longsworth 354). Austin was referring to Todd’s overall demeanor in his letter from April 1890, yet he probably would have agreed that Todd’s habit of speaking for nothing—or next to nothing—was an example of such “underestimate.” It is true that by 1891 Todd began charging ten dollars plus expenses for her Dickinson talks. Ten dollars was not a lot of money in 1891, however. Mark Twain, we should remember, earned much more than this in the mid-1890s. Touring to pay off his prodigious debts, Twain netted five thousand dollars for one month of lecturing in North America, and over two thousand dollars from two weeks of lecturing in Australia.\footnote{Justin Kaplan, \textit{Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966) 333-334.}

Even after Todd began charging for her talks, she was not unwilling to speak for free from time to time—a concession that it is difficult to envision Higginson making. While Higginson may not have been likely to commit the self-“underestimate” that Austin describes, he was, on the other hand, willing to orchestrate such devaluation on Todd’s behalf. In a letter dated January 7, 1895, Higginson asks Todd if he should write to the secretary of the [Cambridge?] Woman’s Club to arrange a lecture. “They pay nothing, as you know,” Higginson adds, “but are a good advertisement” (Bingham 315). Apparently, Higginson saw no reason why Todd shouldn’t work
for free, even if he personally would not stoop to such generosity. If he felt any need to rationalize this arrangement, he did so by observing that the club offered valuable publicity.

What Austin Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson both missed, whether in lamenting or utilizing Todd's willingness to work for little or no money, is precisely what Lavinia Dickinson turned to her advantage during the trial. Lavinia Dickinson argued that Todd edited the fascicles because of the recognition such work would confer. Likewise, Millicent Todd Bingham claims in her memoirs that her mother reaped a fortune in prestige — a fact that gratified Mabel Loomis Todd and that piqued the envy of the poet's sister. Both Lavinia Dickinson and Millicent Todd Bingham saw, in other words, how Mabel Loomis Todd worked in a system of remuneration where the currency was recognition and credibility, rather than cash. As a pointedly amateur woman of letters, Todd operated on the periphery of commercialism's nexus of compensation and conceptualizations.

This is why the outcome of the trial meant so much to Todd. Aside from its emotional association with Austin, the disputed plot of land was a symbol of the alternative economy in which Todd profited. In the belletristic barter system she inhabited, the meadow was a conspicuous example of the non-monetary pay she grew to expect and count on as a sign of her industry and credibility. The withholding of the land, therefore, was a public assertion that all of her efforts to publish Emily Dickinson's poems were not worth recognition. The verdict was a public denial of her work's worthiness, rather than the denial of a purely personal and arguably illicit entitlement. Ultimately, Lavinia was able to beat Todd on the grounds of her own amateurism, however. For in saying that Todd never expected any conventional reimbursement for her editing work, Lavinia prepared a foundation for her argument that Todd expected payment in the form of the land only as a mercenary afterthought. In the end, Todd looked for satisfaction in the applause of people outside of Amherst. Denied the Dickinson meadow, she depended on the accolades she received for a variety of travel lectures she began delivering in lieu of the Dickinson talks. Writing of a speech she gave on the Ainu before the Geographical Society of
Philadelphia, Todd confides, “I think it was the best talk I have ever given... an absolute storm of enthusiasm” (qtd. in Longsworth 411).

Todd began lecturing on Dickinson soon after the appearance of the first edition of poems. She delivered a talk on the Amherst poet to the Springfield Women's Club in December of 1890, and was invited back the following April. An account of the spring lecture, which described Todd’s presentation of the little known poet as “interesting,” appeared in the Springfield Republican and was reprinted in the Amherst Record. One month after the second Springfield Women’s Club lecture, on May 2, Todd spoke to an audience of about two hundred at the Boston College Alumnae Club. Again her subject was Dickinson’s poetry. On March 23, 1892, Todd delivered another talk to the Literary Club of New Britain, Connecticut. Later that spring she lectured in Amherst College’s Walker Hall, where she was introduced by the college’s president, Merrill Edwards Gates. This Amherst lecture was printed in the Critic, much to Todd’s delight.

This steady schedule of lecturing continued, with the first half of 1895 proving one of Todd’s busiest times. Todd spoke to a club of two hundred women in Worcester’s Memorial Hall on January 23, 1895. After this talk, the fullest account of one of Todd’s lectures on Emily Dickinson appeared in the Worcester Spy. The next month Todd spoke twice on Dickinson – on February 4, at Boston’s Unity Art Club, and on February 25, in Worcester.23 She spoke again in Lynn, Massachusetts, on March 20, and in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, on April 26. This hectic spring culminated with a May 28 lecture before a Sunderland audience.

From her early efforts to promote Emily Dickinson, both in print and from the podium, Mabel Loomis Todd tried to correct the reductive, exaggerated image of the poet as a mysterious recluse. When Dickinson’s poems were first published in 1890, Todd used her position as a

---

22 In preparation for the April lecture before the Springfield Women’s Club, Todd produced sixty handwritten pages in a single day of feverish composition. As Todd states in her diary, these pages contained “informally” told “incidents” interspersed with “graver paragraphs” on Dickinson’s accomplishments as a poet (Bingham 123-24).

23 Todd actually gave two lectures in Boston on February 4, 1895. The second lecture, before the New England Woman’s Club, was on Todd’s ascent of the Japanese mountain, Fuji-san.
columnist for *Home Magazine* to present the poet as singular (November 1890). This distinctive image was quickly picked up and perpetuated in the media, with the November 16, 1890 issue of the *Springfield Republican*, for instance, describing Dickinson as a "recluse" whose "singular life" and "seclusion" were the source of her originality. On November 21, 1890 the *Hartford Courant* referred to Dickinson as a "recluse" of "unique... genius," while the November 22, 1890 issue of the *Boston Daily Traveller* claims that Dickinson "habitually concealed her mind like her person." The November 27, 1890 issue of the *Boston Post* describes Dickinson as a "voluntary recluse" of "peculiar habits."

There is no question that Todd initiated much of this rhetoric with her *Home Magazine* essay, "Bright Bits From Bright Books." Here Todd informs readers that as "the hollowness and insincerity" of society began to distress Dickinson, the poet "withdrew more and more into herself."

The fine old family mansion, built by her grandfather, and still occupied by his descendants, offered, with its beautiful grounds, ample breathing space for a recluse. And such she increasingly became. At first, seeing only those who called, she at length abandoned even her loved work among her flowers, and while shutting herself entirely indoors, saw fewer and fewer of those who still sought the time-honored hospitality of the well-known homestead.

Todd also helped to establish the myth of the poet's ghostly appearance in this early essay. "Dressed always in white," Todd observes, "[Dickinson's] graceful passing about the house seemed rather the coming and going of some gentle spirit than any mere earthly presence." Indeed, it is arguable that the popularly received image of Dickinson as an agoraphobic genius who always wore white originated with this early piece by Todd.

It wasn't long after the publication of this *Home Magazine* essay, however, that Todd began to see how the sudden publicity surrounding Dickinson's personality would distort — even as it
helped to sell – the Amherst writer’s work. Evidently repenting her own contribution to this publicity, Todd set about correcting the image of the poet as an incomprehensible eccentric. According to the Springfield Republican, when Todd spoke before the Springfield Women’s Club in April, 1891, she presented “anecdotes and bits of verse illustrating the individuality of Miss Dickinson.” Even so, “many of the false reports circulated in regard to Miss Dickinson’s seclusion were pronounced false.” One month later, on May 7, the Northampton Daily Herald reported that Todd, in her talk before the Boston College Alumnae Club, “corrected the popular impression that [Dickinson] was always a recluse....” According to this article, Todd countered the ideas that Dickinson “was an invalid, an irreverent woman, an eccentric person in matters of dress, or a monument to a love-tragedy” by claiming that the poet “had seen society in more than one place, and [that] her nature was a joyous one.” Also covering the Boston College address, the Critic for May 9, 1891 reports that Todd “explained away” ideas of Dickinson as an “eccentric” and an “invalid.”

Apparently, these talks delivered in 1891 were only the first wave in a campaign to flesh out the exaggerated and simplistic image of the poet that took such a quick hold in the popular imagination. Four years later, claims the Worcester Spy, Todd was still trying to correct the reclusive image of Dickinson. According to the Spy’s verbatim account of the talk at Worcester’s Memorial Hall, Todd stated that “as a woman, Miss Dickinson was quite as original and daring as her poetry.” Nonetheless, Todd insisted, “the popular imagination which pictures [Dickinson] as a recluse, clad always in white and never stepping outside the house, though based on truth, is due largely to that desire for the sensational and romantic that lurks in every breast.” What a far cry from the Home Magazine essay in which Todd says that Dickinson was a “withdrawn” spirit “dressed always in white!” It is clear that by 1895 Todd recognized the popular image of Dickinson as the displacement of the real, artistic woman by the projection of readers’ desires. The mysterious recluse, Todd now saw, was fabricated out of readers’ needs for the sensational – a realization that lacks the economic vocabulary of Higginson’s essays, but that registers an
amateur editor’s wariness of consumer need and a distrust of the contrived, mass circulated personality. Todd was able to acknowledge and act on this distrust, after 1891, exactly because she was not a professional woman of letters. As a serious, amateur intellectual and artist, Todd was able to discern the popularly received image of Dickinson as the embodiment of promotional emphases on novelty, instant recognition, and quick assessment. Thus she spent a considerable portion of her energies as a lecturer retracting a vision of the Amherst poet, even as her mission was to inform the public about Dickinson.

If Mabel Loomis Todd did not wish to perpetuate a simplistic image of Dickinson as a recluse, she did, on the other hand, wish to convey that Dickinson was complicated and at times inscrutable. In an essay printed after the 1894 publication of Dickinson’s Letters, Todd confides that she didn’t know what to expect when she began sifting through the poet’s correspondence. “It was with a certain feeling of dread that I approached these letters to make them ready for the public in a volume,” she confesses, “lest the too deep revelations of a peculiarly shy inner life might so pervade them that in truest loyalty none might properly be used.” Todd was relieved to discover, though, that even in her letters the poet did not reveal too much. “…Emily kept her little reserves, and bared her soul but seldom,” we are told. In the volume of Letters itself Todd writes that Dickinson’s was “a nature so richly endowed” that “personal isolation, or real loneliness of spirit” was impossible. Dickinson’s character, in other words, was so complex, so private, and so inscrutably complete that it defied the conspicuous discreteness both of lived isolation and of commodified popularity. Dickinson’s “nature” defied the singularity of solitude, just as it posthumously defied the popular label of “a singular life.” As Todd tells her reader in “Emily Dickinson’s Literary Début,” “…why attempt to explain Emily’s seclusion? It was as inevitable, as inherent in her nature, as for the hermit thrush to prefer the depths of the forest” (469). Readers should be satisfied with a fleeting glimpse of the thrush as it retreats among the trees.
Significantly, Todd relies on the language of the natural world to counter the artificiality of the conspicuous, constructed identity. Dickinson's "nature" is that of a bird living in the forest. Her behavior is the unexamined activity of a wild animal. To comprehend her, Todd further suggests, we must accept her in her element – the close, concealing environment not of the forest, but of the home. The hermit thrush must be seen – if it is to be seen at all – in the thick, dim intimacy of its private sphere. At the same time, we must refrain from domesticating Dickinson, from transforming her into a caged bird intended for display. Presenting Dickinson to the public as a curiosity involves just such a transformation, for when she is described from the platform or in print as the "virgin recluse poet," she is made the static and isolated object of a possessive scrutiny. As readers of Dickinson, Todd ultimately implies, we should acknowledge the personal and artistic eccentricities of the poet, as well as her need for privacy, without turning these traits into a spectacle.

While Dickinson remains somewhat inscrutable from this perspective, what does become clear is the degree to which natural imagery serves as an analytical reservoir for Mabel Loomis Todd. Lacking the broker's vocabulary of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Todd turns to the natural world to explain Dickinson's work and behavior as an elusive phenomenon. Instead of understanding the poet in the parceled and estimable terms of capital, Todd presents Dickinson in terms of the natural world and its unfathomable movements. It is as difficult to say what innate compulsion moved Dickinson to become reclusive, as it is difficult to track the flight of the retiring thrush. Of course, Higginson – like many writers – is also given to using nature as a trope. In "Letter to a Young Contributor," Higginson compares the overeager young writer to "an ambitious echinoderm claiming a private interview with Agassiz, to demonstrate by verbal arguments that he is a mollusk" (402). From this figurative point of view, the writer is an organism whose visibility depends on the "microscopic" eye of the naturalist. The editor, by extension, is the naturalist who "can classify nine out of ten specimens by one glance at a scale or

a feather" (402). The natural world that underpins this amusing comparison of the young contributor with "an ambitious echinoderm" is one of systemic order. More importantly, it is a world full of components striving for a place - place in the sense of distinction, and place in the sense of taxonomy. Nature, here, insofar as it requires the assessment of the scientific eye, is a system that operates on the importance of visibility. Todd's natural world, by contrast, thrives in the possibility of invisibility. This world is the thick of unexplored forests and the enigma of elusive creatures. It is a world of mysterious regions and beautiful eclipses.

It is important to keep in mind what else Todd was doing during her years as an editor of and lecturer on Emily Dickinson. Married to an eminent astronomer, Mabel Loomis Todd was almost as occupied with the study of solar eclipses as she was with Dickinson's fascicles. Throughout the 1880s, '90s, and beyond, Todd accompanied her husband, David Peck Todd, and other scientists on numerous eclipse expeditions, often working with her husband to compile his data into a narrative, and penning observations of her own. While editing Dickinson's fascicles in 1887, Todd went on an eclipse expedition to Japan. Todd describes this journey and the interregnum that it posed in "Emily Dickinson's Literary Debut:"

During this time of intensive work, I had to leave the poems for four or five months while I was absent in Japan on one of my husband's solar eclipse expeditions, in the work of which I have always been actively interested. But I came back to them [the poems] with renewed ardor, having indeed thought of them constantly during my absence (465).

Mabel Loomis Todd may have been thinking about the poems during her trip, but she devoted enough energy and attention to Fusiyama to publish an article in the Nation about her eight months in the Orient. Indeed, Todd was so actively interested in her husband's work that she got Roberts Brothers, the publishers of Dickinson's poems, to publish Total Eclipses of the Sun

---

25 Mabel Loomis Todd, "With the Eclipse Expedition to Japan" Sept. 1887 Nation.
the same year that Dickinson's *Letters* appeared. Todd co-authored *Total Eclipses* with her husband, although — in a reversal of the imbalance she experienced with Higginson — only her name appears on the title page. Before the end of her writing career, Mabel Loomis Todd also published *Corona and Coronet, A Cycle of Sunsets,* and *Tripoli, the Mysterious* — all works that chronicle the quest for the complete survey of a solar eclipse.

This preoccupation with astronomy, and with solar eclipses in particular, gave Todd an intellectual paradigm that stresses inscrutability in the midst of natural law. While she lacked a commercial paradigm governed by economic principles, she possessed through her "active interest" in David Peck Todd's work a model of appreciation and analysis that accepts invisibility as a reward for observation. The methodical charting of the planets, as Todd describes it in her writings on solar eclipses, leads to a blinding vision of concealment as the moon passes before the sun. Similarly, a deliberate walk in the woods may be rewarded with a glimpse of the vanishing hermit thrush. And the painstaking preparation of manuscripts may elicit a barely discernible poet of mystery.

Mabel Loomis Todd's astronomical writings are, indeed, infused with the language of mystery. While her goal was to acquaint the lay reader with the science of eclipses, she succeeded, too, in conveying the enigmatic aspects of the phenomena that astronomers chart. In *Total Eclipses of the Sun,* for example, Todd's discussion of the sun's corona during an eclipse emphasizes the almost supernatural effect of that "out-flashing glory." Likening the "opportunities for studying [the corona to]... the visits of angels," Todd observes "that no one has yet entirely explained or analyzed this marvellous silvery halo surrounding the totally darkened Sun" (48-49). Thanks to the precise and persistent observations of astronomers, "the total eclipses of a half-century have cleared up a few obscurities." Yet these eclipses have "added many perplexities," too. It is certain that the corona is "a truly solar phenomenon," but just what it is and why it occurs remain.

---

26 Mabel Loomis Todd, *Total Eclipses of the Sun* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894).
for Todd and her readers, an enigma (70). “...the mystery of the corona is by no means solved, and the entire subject will require many years of patient and critical investigation in the future,” Todd states (76). For now the reader must accept that “nature’s most imposing phenomenon is perhaps the most mysterious” (48).

The corona is only the most enigmatic manifestation of an entire planetary process that mystifies civilized and uncivilized people alike. The “savage” watching an eclipse “is awe-struck because he does not know what terrific happenings such a spectacle may forebode” (6).

“Astronomers and physicists,” by contrast, may not stand in awe of an eclipse for what earthly events it might portend. Yet they are “perplexed in their attempts to unravel the labyrinth of mysteries surrounding the Sun which the kindly intervention of the dark Moon discloses” (9). Throughout Total Eclipses of the Sun, Todd contrasts the superstitious awe of “savages” with the unsatisfied curiosity of educated Westerners. “At this stage,” she writes, “primitive peoples, particularly in parts of India and China, even now beat upon gongs, and, with wild shouts and savage uproar, endeavor to drive off the evil monster who is ‘eating up the friendly Sun’” (21).

Rational observers, meanwhile, feel the more sedate puzzlement Todd expresses when she writes, “it may be possible [during an eclipse] to detect strange wavering lines of light and shade dancing across the landscape... -- a curious and beautiful effect not yet fully understood” (21).

At the beginning of Chapter VI, Todd writes, “To a fabulous age all nature was mystery. In our own day, with superstition far in the background, and with clear scientific explanation for nearly all natural phenomena, the prodigious effect of a solar eclipse upon primal races is hard to apprehend” (80). Todd then goes on to describe the various “prodigious effects” of eclipses on “primal” people, ranging from the belief of Chinese courtiers that Heaven can “eat the Sun,” to the Indian belief that eclipses are “occasioned by a certain dragon... [who] wants to seize those two bodies” of the sun and the moon with his “very black claws” (81). Although Todd recounts these superstitious views to underscore the progress that “civilized” people have made, she evinces a fascination with the primitive perspective in the detail of her accounts – a fascination
that reveals her reverence for the unknown. Westerners have the advantage of science, she implies, but this does not mean that Western observers of an eclipse must be immune to the awe-inspiring power of the phenomenon.

Indeed, Todd says as much when she offers the anecdote of "a distinguished astronomer [who said] that he had never seen a total eclipse of the Sun...." This wry astronomer claims that he had "always been too busy in observing" eclipses to actually see them (18). Todd picks up on this distinction between observing and seeing, and translates it into the difference between scientific and artistic or poetic perception. "Astronomers have indeed little chance to appreciate the strange poetry of a world in ashy and unnatural shadow," she writes, for they are so occupied with their instruments and their calculations (19). It is possible, however, for the scientist to shift gears and watch an eclipse not as an astronomical event, but as a magnificent natural occurrence.

...that even the professional astronomer might sometimes enjoy the opportunity to watch the unfolding glories of the corona from the standpoint of artist or poet, was perhaps implied by the late Dr. Peters of Hamilton College, who, when asked what single instrument he would select for observing an eclipse, replied, 'A pillow.'" (18-19)

For Todd, the point is not simply that astronomers are capable of enjoying an eclipse without analyzing it, but that the phenomenon embodies an enthralling and evasive grandeur best experienced from an artistic or poetic point of view. This grandeur, in fact, exceeds the abilities of science to gloss its mysteries. A full range of experience requires poetic perception in addition to scientific inquiry, in other words. And a full understanding of the world requires that the unknown – which is not necessarily unknowable – be revered.

Given this underlying set of beliefs, it is not surprising that the language of mystery informs Todd's writing not only when she is describing eclipses, but also when she is describing the places to which she traveled to watch the eclipses. In her Nation article, "With the Eclipse Expedition to Japan," Todd describes Fusiyama as a "sacred mountain... very chary of showing
itself either to the faithful or the heretic foreigner.” The first time she expected to set eyes on the mountain where she and a crew of scientists were planning to camp, she was disappointed to see that “Fusiyama was unhappily invisible in spite of the sunny atmosphere.” This depiction of the mountain as “very chary of showing itself” in the midst of a sunny atmosphere of course presages the inscrutability of the eclipsed sun, but it also typifies the landscapes Todd constructs in her scientific travel writing. As the title of her 1912 book indicates, Tripoli is presented as a fundamentally mysterious place. Fascinated with Tripoli’s little-known, interior spaces, Todd escorts her reader into caves and harem courtyards where Westerners rarely go. Climbing down “unexpected depressions, like deep holes,” Todd and her traveling party find themselves “before huge caves, in all over fifty, where the air was cool and dry, a different world from that of the scorching sunlight above” (78). Above ground, Todd presents a world as strange and invisible to Western eyes as that cool, cavernous place. Describing the dens where harem wives reside, Todd writes, “no moving air can penetrate those dark interior rooms of which the single barred window opens off the court” (88). Repeatedly, Todd chooses to focus on the enigmatic and indiscernible place – the concealed sun, the shrouded mountain, the hidden cavern, and the impenetrable den.

Not surprisingly, this preoccupation with mystery inflected Todd’s view of Emily Dickinson. Todd not only thought “constantly” of Dickinson’s poems while she was in Japan – she saw Fusiyama through the lens of Dickinson’s powerful yet reticent art. Furthermore, Todd came to see Dickinson herself – as a posthumous enigma –through the phenomenon of the solar eclipse. The image of the poet as a retiring thrush certainly conveys how naturally elusive Todd considered Dickinson. More telling, however, is the description of the poet that Todd offers at the beginning of “Emily Dickinson’s Literary Début.” Reflecting back on her few bizarre encounters with the poet, Todd writes,

I soon became acquainted with the strange, rare spirit, hiding behind the hedge in an atmosphere of reticence complete and inviolate. Although our actual interviews were confined to conversations between the brightly lighted
drawing-room where I was received and the dusky hall outside where she
generally remained, I grew very familiar with her voice – its vaguely surprised
note dominant (463).

Dickinson, in this depiction, is a "strange, rare spirit" who is simultaneously enticing and
impossible to know. She invites acquaintance in her oddly distant way, but intimacy with the
poet looks as likely as intimacy with... well, the moon or the sun. The scene that Todd describes
here is, in fact, a striking rendition of planetary observation – or, more precisely, planetary seeing.

Like the resolutely inscrutable sun during an eclipse, Dickinson occupies a dusky space beyond
Todd's reach. Todd herself, meanwhile, inhabits the brightly-lighted parlor like the astronomical
devotee who sets up camp in "the sunny atmosphere" that precedes an eclipse. The conversation
that takes place between the two women is, in effect, the poetic witnessing of an eclipse – what
Dr. Peters would have seen if he did use only his pillow. Elsewhere in her essay, Todd describes
Dickinson as though she is a pale jet that has flamed out from the sun's corona and landed briefly
on earth. "Dressed always in white, an interrogative spot of light in the half-dark hall, her
presence was like an inhabitant of some other sphere, alighting temporarily on this lovely planet"
(463). In the end, Dickinson is the celestial and mysterious – yet quite natural – vision that
rewards artistic understanding and attention. A vision quite different from the object that awaits
the precise scrutiny of science.

Ultimately, Todd sees not only Dickinson, but herself through the vocabulary of mystery and
astronomy that she acquired in her travels with her husband. For the tension between observation
and seeing that she lays out, in Total Eclipses of the Sun, in connection with the differences
between scientific and artistic perception is a transposition of the tension she experienced as the
junior editor of Dickinson's poems. The observing astronomer, by definition a professional, is
the transposed equivalent of the professional editor and author (i.e., Thomas Wentworth
Higginson), while the spectator who accompanies the expedition with no particular mission but to
provide a narrative account of the eclipse is the equivalent of the amateur editor and author (i.e.,...
Mabel Loomis Todd). This latter figure, the amateur/spectator, strives to make no particular profit from the expedition (or the literary enterprise), and possesses an inspired sense of artistry unhindered by methodology. As Todd positions this figure in Total Eclipses, the amateur/spectator is primarily the liaison between the phenomenon of the eclipse (embodied as Emily Dickinson hovering in the half-dark hall) and the reader (the audience for the 1890s editions of the poems). The amateur/spectator, moreover, works within a middle ground between the equipped and systemic precision of the professional, and the immediate experience of art. Like Mabel Loomis Todd herself, struggling to balance the expectations of her senior editor and the immediate ambiguities of the fascicles, the amateur/spectator negotiates the scientific calculations of the astronomer and the many unanswered, awe-inspiring questions dealing with the sun’s corona, for example.

This intermediary role of the amateur/spectator is exactly what Todd presents at the beginning of Chapter XII in Total Eclipses. The chapter opens with an excerpt from one of Emily Dickinson’s poem—“Eclipses are predicted,/ And science bows them in”—then proceeds with the following narrative:

Poets usually care little for the modus operandi of scientific phenomena;

the lines above embrace the fact, the result, the gist of the whole matter,

and that ought to be sufficient (191).

As the author of Total Eclipses, as an untrained if astute witness of solar eclipses, and as a sporadically (and usually under-) paid Renaissance woman of the arts, Todd knew the importance of “the fact, the result, the gist of the whole matter.” She knew the meaningfulness of the eclipse or the poem itself, aside from all astronomical and economic calculations. At the same time, she knew how important these calculations are to many other people. For she continues, “But many will desire to know more of detail, for instance, how it is possible that eclipses can be predicted” (191). To these many, Todd presents the “recondite portion of [her] subject,” the modus
operandi, the mathematical circumstances leading to “the gist of the whole matter.” As the amateur/spectator in this book, she acts as the link between the raw awe of the aesthetic, and the processual abstractions of the scientific. Throughout her tenure as editor of Dickinson’s poems, more generally, she acted as the link between the ambiguous art of the fascicles, and the economically-grounded predictions of the professional publishing world.

In the end, Mabel Loomis Todd labored against the exaggerated, popular image of Emily Dickinson as a “virgin recluse poet” because that image contradicted the image Todd derived as the junior editor of the poems. Her intermediary position between the professional world of letters and the unedited, raw world of poetic ambiguity left her with the sense of Dickinson as mysterious, yet entirely natural. Todd possessed a rounded sense of Dickinson as a human being, however eccentric — rounded as the eclipsed sun, and as entitled to obscurity. The “singular” image perpetuated in the press throughout the 1890s, on the other hand, was a product of economic abstraction, a distortion of identity emerging from the market. Todd recognized this static isolation as a trademark, a commodification of personality intended to promote curiosity in Dickinson’s poetry. And recognizing this image as such, Todd petitioned against it from the podium and in print.

Yet,ironically, Todd did more — unwittingly — to promote the artificial obscurity of the poet than any other literary person in the nineteenth century. For the long-term consequence of the Dickinson-Todd lawsuit was the division of Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts between the Todd and Dickinson families. As Ralph William Franklin explains, “the break between Mrs. Todd and Lavinia Dickinson because of the lawsuit was complete, and with the break came the division of the manuscripts. Lavinia had possession of packets 1-38, 40, Mrs. Todd of packets 80-95 and also a great many loose poems” (115). Even when the manuscripts left the two families in 1950, the poems remained divided and unorganized. The poems possessed by the Dickinson family went to Harvard University, while the poems belonging to the Todds went to the Amherst College.

These lines now read: “Eclipses be — predicted —/ And Science bows them in — ——”
Library. Not until 1955, when Johnson compiled his three-volume variorum edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, were all of the manuscripts brought together. Only then was the full scope of Emily Dickinson’s creativity available to the public. Between 1894, when the lawsuit was filed, and 1955, when Johnson’s variorum edition appeared, Dickinson suffered what can only be described as an unpredicted eclipse.
POSTSCRIPT:
The Incorporated Reader as Academic Reader

The publication histories and the audience receptions of Elizabeth Stoddard and Emily Dickinson offer a number of parallels. Initially published in the 1860s, Stoddard’s novels were reissued in revised editions only two years before the first publication of Dickinson’s poems. While the 1890 edition of Dickinson’s poems prompted a flurry of reviews and subsequent publications of poetry and correspondence, the favorable response to Stoddard’s revised novels inspired that Massachusetts-born writer to generate her own flurry of writing as she contributed to a range of magazines throughout the 1890s. Stoddard and Dickinson both were literary forces of respectable sway in the 1890s, albeit the latter’s presence was posthumous. Similarly, both authors entered into a period of invisibility after the 1890s — the Amherst poet after the Dickinson-Todd lawsuit, and Stoddard after her health and her enthusiasm waned. It wasn’t until 1971, as feminist criticism began to shape the study of American literature, that Stoddard gained the attention of twentieth-century readers. And it wasn’t until 1984 (with the appearance of the Buell-Zagarell edition of The Morgesons) that she achieved anything like an official introduction to an academic audience.

Dickinson’s twentieth-century reputation has also reflected the influence of feminist criticism as Dickinson scholarship has burgeoned since the 1970s. In the case of Dickinson, the feminist analyses of the late twentieth century were also preceded by biographical studies, appearing on the heels of Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s The Poems of Emily Dickinson (1930) and Further Poems of Emily Dickinson: Withheld from Publication by her Sister Lavinia (1929). MacGregor Jenkins, Josephine Pollitt, and Genevieve Taggard each published biographies of Dickinson in 1930. For Dickinson and Stoddard alike, most substantive commentary has revolved around what I have called subversive individualism, an operative concept of the author as an autonomous and questioning, if not disruptive agent in history.
Richard Henry Stoddard and Walt Whitman offer more contrasts than parallels as Whitman’s rising reputation can be charted against the declining reputations of Stoddard and the genteel circle. Whitman’s reputation among the genteel poets (and American readers generally) was tenuous at best, while the respectability of Stoddard and his circle seemed the secure measure of literary taste for aspiring writers and the reading public until the end of the nineteenth century. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, these roles were reversed as Whitman achieved wide renown (rather than notoriety), and as Stoddard and his colleagues became the effete embodiments of antiquated values. Of Whitman’s reputation Kenneth Price asks, “given Whitman’s shaky status at the turn of the century, how did he attain, little more than a decade later, such eminence?” (123). And what, we might append to this question, was the relationship between this new eminence and the decline of the genteel ethos?

Price argues that the Harvard poets—George Santayana, William Vaughn Moody, and George Cabot Lodge—were instrumental in establishing Whitman’s legitimacy as a poet (123). Although these Harvard poets were unwitting traditionalists in certain respects, they saw themselves as iconoclasts whose embrace of Whitman defied intellectual convention. As Price states, “the Harvard group created a Whitman modernist poets found eminently usable, an anti-genteel, non-canonical force who legitimized and, indeed, insisted upon experimentation” (124-25). For these poets, and for the critics, William James, Barrett Wendell, and Bliss Perry, the celebration of Whitman was part and parcel of the impulse to demolish the genteel tradition. Indeed, the poet and reluctant philosophy professor who coined the phrase, “the genteel tradition,” was at the forefront of the effort to establish Whitman as the true American poet, rather than as “a curious departure from the main tradition of American poetry” (Price 127). In his seminal essay, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” Santayana states:

The one American writer who has left the genteel tradition entirely

behind is perhaps Walt Whitman. For this reason educated Americans

find him rather an unpalatable person, who they sincerely protest ought
not to be taken for a representative of their culture; and he certainly
should not, because their culture is so genteel and traditional.¹

For all of their anti-establishmentarian sensibilities, Santayana and these other Harvard poets
and critics who championed Whitman initiated a dialogue about the New York bard that was
rooted in the academy. As representatives and associates of the nation’s oldest educational
organization, they took advantage of the academy’s new institutional authority at the turn of the
century to promote a writer who was often distrustful of the intellectual establishment – academic
and journalistic. This irony, of course, points to the transformation of higher education in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the legitimating transformation of professionalism. As
Price states, “gaining the admiration of the academy was crucial because by 1900 universities
exercised a major say in determining which pasts would be perpetuated” (125). The cultural
authority by which certain writers achieved (and others missed out on) canonical status shifted
after 1900 “from individual editors to an institution – the university.”² The ironic fact that
Whitman attained canonical respectability through the aegis of academics points to more than the
observable phenomenon of educational professionalization, however. This fact also points to the
formation of an intellectual ideology that is an effect of professionalization – an ideology that
links the turn-of-the-century rise of Whitman with the later rise of Dickinson through feminist
auspices, and that establishes these ascents against the fates of Elizabeth and Richard Stoddard.

Like the 1890s reviews of Emily Dickinson and her poetry, early academic assessments of
Whitman and his work emphasized his unique individuality. Barrett Wendell asserts in A
Literary History of America, published in 1900, that Whitman “had remarkable individuality and
power,” and that “he was among the most eccentric individuals who ever put pen to paper.”³ In

¹ George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” Winds of Doctrine: Studies in
³ This and the following quotations are taken from Walt Whitman: Critical Assessments, ed. Graham
Clarke (Mountfield: Helm Information Ltd, 1956) 3.
Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Santayana refers to "the singularity of [Whitman’s] literary form" and to "the idiosyncrasies of his style" (54), while in America’s Coming of Age Van Wyck Brooks describes Whitman as "an outrageous egoist" (86). In his 1921 critical work, The American Spirit in Literature, Bliss Perry states that the poet remains "an individualist" and "an outsider" in the minds of American students and critics – a view echoed nine years later in Vernon Louis Parrington’s description of Whitman as "a born rebel," "a radical of radicals" who did not "belong to any school" (120). These academic assessments vary in their appreciation of Whitman, but they share the common refrain that the poet, as a constitutive figure in the American literary canon, was indisputably subversive and unique.

The overlap between this critical refrain and the promotional rhetoric attending and defining Dickinson’s posthumous appearance in the 1890s is clear, as is the continuity between the assessments of Whitman and the later presentation of Dickinson by feminist academics. What is less immediately clear is the continuity between the individualism engendered by the literary market and by the broader influences of commercial capitalism (such as we see with Dickinson in the 1890s and with the overly photographed Whitman), and the defining individualism that emerges out of the academic establishment of American literature as a field. As an enterprise that revolved around the unique and subversive Whitman from its earliest stages, that discredited the genteel tradition with its collective and conformist ethos, that institutionalized the popularly construed eccentricities of Dickinson, and that – most recently – has introduced Elizabeth Stoddard as an author who covertly disrupts patriarchal notions of womanhood, the academic study of American literature sustains the faith in individual identity and independence that grows out of commercial culture both as a denial of capitalism’s manipulations, and as the psychological groundwork for consumerism. The individualism that was instrumental in articulating the boundaries of an American literary canon in the early decades of the twentieth century, and that still drives literary interpretation today, is profoundly connected with the commercialism that

---

promotes discrete identities – what we can call personalities – as a refuge from and reinforcement of its economic determinism. For as the culture of personal distinction and choice is an ideological phenomenon that belies the influence of capitalism even as it ensures a consumer base, so the intellectual establishment of American literature with its hallmark of subversive individualism belies the corporate influence of the academy, even as it secures the institutional boundaries of the discipline and its practitioners. The analytical focus on authors who defy convention – born rebels and eccentrics – is an ideological displacement of the autonomy academics increasingly lost as the university developed into a corporate entity at the turn of the twentieth century. The very conceptualization of American literature as a discipline, we might argue, was a compensatory maneuver in the midst of changes that stripped scholars of their intellectual individuality and freedom.

It is true that “universities exercised a major say” on many issues after 1900, but the internal fallout of this new institutional expertise was a rationalization and distribution of authority within the academy that dispersed the “major say” into a heteroglot competition of voices. Administrators and wealthy benefactors wielded an unprecedented control over higher education in the early years of the twentieth century, enacting policies and strictures consistent with the principles of good business, yet all too often incompatible with the spirit of scholarly inquiry. Thus as universities became corporate structures that could lay claim to professional authority, they also whittled at the independence of the faculty and their ideas. The commercialism that in its broadest effects generates a contrived consciousness of individuality, therefore, generated in the particular medium of the corporate university a discipline distinguished by individualism. It is no coincidence, that is, that the new academic viability of American literature (as defined against a genteel culture of letters) appeared with the commercialization and professionalization of the university.

Writing early in the twentieth century, Santayana had a deep and wary sense of how commercialism infused higher education. In The Genteel Tradition at Bay, he declares that “Big
Business" is a presence in the university that "generate[s] the sort of intelligence and loyalty which it requires," intelligence and loyalty that valorize "ambition, co-operation, and rivalry."5 Even more outspoken was Santayana’s contemporary, Thorstein Veblen. In his 1918 work, The Higher Learning in America, Veblen insists on the fundamental incompatibilities of the business and the education worlds.6 Run as a “corporation of learning,” he argues, the university in the twentieth century “is conceived as a business house dealing in merchantable knowledge” (85). The result is a profound bifurcation in the nature and the mission of the university. “Learning is... not a competitive business and can make no use of finesse, diplomatic equivocation and tactful regard for popular prejudices, such as are of the essence of the case in competitive business” (97). Learning is instead “a free pursuit of knowledge” that can only be rendered “perfunctory and mediocre” by the “piece-rate plan” by which the corporate university operates (221-22). In a damming summation, Veblen states that “the intrusion of business principles in the universities goes to weaken and retard the pursuit of learning, and therefore to defeat the ends for which a university is maintained” (224).

Several accounts of how the academy developed into a commercial enterprise have been published, including Hofstadter’s and Metzger’s The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States, Laurence R. Veysey’s The Emergence of the American University, and Burton J. Bledstein’s The Culture of Professionalism.7 In The Development of Academic Freedom, Metzger describes how universities in the last decades of the nineteenth century received the support of American businesses “on a completely unprecedented scale.” During the post-Civil War period, a Baltimore business man donated $3,500,000 to Johns Hopkins University, while in California the estate of railroad tycoon Leland Stanford donated $24,000,000 to the university

that bears his name. Even more impressive was the gift of $34,000,000 that the head of Standard Oil Company gave to the University of Chicago. The Carnegie Corporation and John D. Rockefeller’s General Education Board were also influential benefactors of higher education in the late nineteenth century.

Unprecedented resources for the receiving universities was not the only result of all this educational philanthropy. Another equally significant result was the tension and sometimes outright conflict between the benefactors or their administrative arms, and the faculty who chose to defy certain beliefs or notions of propriety upheld by university supporters. Metzger lists several such conflicts that occurred in the 1890s alone. University of Wisconsin professor, Richard T. Ely, was dismissed for his economic writings, as were economists at the University of Chicago, Indiana University, and Kansas State Agricultural College (421). At Marietta College, James Allen Smith was dismissed for his views as a political scientist, while — in a very publicized case — Edward A. Ross was dismissed from Stanford because of his views on silver and immigration (421).

Not all of the people who ran into trouble with university benefactors were faculty. Some administrators, including university presidents, were dismissed as well. As a rule, though, faculty and administrators experienced a growing divide that attested to the hold of benefactors and their business ethos on administration. As Veysey puts it, the new academic administrator of the twentieth century “was a gambler, dealing in university ‘futures’.” Spokesmen for a “Taylorite efficiency,” administrators “represented [in the minds of the faculty] an alien and illegitimate force which had ‘captured’ the leadership of the university” (309, 353).

It is in this rift between the faculty and the administration of the early twentieth century, I propose, that the disciplinary origins of American literature can be found. The articulation of the field around individualism, the canonization of authors (such as Whitman and Dickinson) who

embody a rebellious distinction, and the rejection of a literary heritage (the genteel tradition) that valorizes conformity and an establishmentarian mindset, all point to the conflicted, institutional circumstances in which Americanists forged their discipline. For now, the details of this juncture between the field of American literature and the corporate development of the university must remain the projected subject of an expanded study. The goal of this dissertation, as a preliminary analysis, has been to argue the historically specific, economically engendered dimensions of individualism as it appears (or does not appear) in the writings and the lives of four authors.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Boydston, Jeanne, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis. *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher


---. “Letter to a Young Contributor.” *Atlantic Monthly* April 1862.


---. The Lion's Cub: With Other Verse. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.


---. "With the Eclipse Expedition to Japan." Nation September 1887.


VITA

Valerie Ann DeBrava