

“NOTHING DONE!”:

THE POET IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In this dissertation, I argue that early nineteenth-century American poets' and readers' interpretations of Romanticism shaped their understanding of the role poetry and its producers could play in a developing national culture. By examining the public careers and private sentiments of four male poets — William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jones Very — I analyze how each reconciled poetic vocation with the moral and economic obligations associated with the attainment of manhood. I locate these poets and their critics within specific historical discourses of aesthetic reception and production, focusing on the tensions and overlaps between Scottish Common-sense and Romantic aesthetic thought. Finally, I suggest that as a career objective the production of poetry paralleled rather than opposed the middle-class project of the “self-made man.” The effortful self-mastery urged upon young men by prescriptive writers was echoed in critics' assessments of American poets' works. Both the male poet and the self-made man operated within discourses which stressed imperatives — do, be, act — without specific objects. Yet, for aspiring poets, Romantic emphases on spontaneous composition and emotional expressiveness made deliberate craftsmanship irrelevant to poetic production. By identifying poetic production as spontaneous and as the highest form of disinterested intellectual labor, antebellum American critics and poets alike obscured the actual work

involved in poetry writing. This erasure of conscious literary labor separated effort from its products, replacing a poet's personal motives for writing poetry with the more nebulous goal of service, to be achieved through evidently inspired transcription than through purposeful composition. The title 'poet' suggested devotion to higher, more abstract goals, above mere commodity production. Each of these poets' careers show how ambition compelled aspiring American poets to justify their work while disclaiming their individual hopes for their poetry and their reputations. Each poet promoted an understanding of poetic labor that demanded just such disclaimers. By underscoring the insubstantial and all but effortless nature of poetic composition itself, all four of these poets contributed to an enfeebled definition of the male poet — as a man who received impressions rather than produced them, and who observed rather than acted.

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Chapter 1

“The Triumph over Passion”: The Poet and the Self-Made Man

[W]hen storms of wild emotion
Strike the ocean
Of the poet's soul, erelong
From each cave and rocky fastness,
In its vastness,
Floats some fragment of a song:

.....
From the strong Will, and the Endeavor
That forever
Wrestle with the tides of Fate;
From the wreck of Hopes far-scattered,
Tempest-shattered,
Floating waste and desolate; —

Ever drifting, drifting, drifting
On the shifting
Currents of the restless heart;
Till at length in books recorded,
They, like hoarded
Household words, no more depart.¹

In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem “Seaweed,” poems are the products of the poet's “strong Will” and “Endeavor.” The poet wrestled with “wild emotion” and “restless heart,” finally sublimating his passions into “books recorded” where they became fixed and resolved, suitable for household consumption. In the form of this poem, printed in Graham's Magazine in January 1845 and in The Belfry of Bruges (December 1845) before appearing in his 1850 collection The Seaside and the Fireside, Longfellow offered his readers a lesson in the management of emotion. Yet, in the poem itself, although effort was made to contain that emotion, the final product of that labor was “seaweed,” a gift given by a force beyond man's command. The poem portrays what Edgar Allan Poe referred to as the sign

¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Seaweed,” in The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 6 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, The Riverside Press, 1886), 1:259 (hereafter cited as Poetical Works).

of a poem's essential goal, its "triumph over passion"² while at the same time hinting at the service poetry could offer its readers: by demonstrating the poet's own "triumph over" passion, poems could serve as guides to similar "triumphs" for readers.

This tension between spontaneous poetic creation and conscious mental effort reflected a broader cultural understanding of poetry which took shape in antebellum American culture. Longfellow and his contemporaries increasingly separated the poet's efforts from the production of poems and redirected that effort towards the production of a poetic persona. The tangible products of a poet's labor — finished, printed poems — began to stand separately from their producers, functioning as reified subjects in their own right. Poets presented themselves as seers possessing unique abilities to communicate with nature and God rather than as men engaged in conscious, effortful mental labor. The real effort involved in poetic creation was obscured by the emotionally subjective and spontaneously composing Romantic personae nurtured by many American poets in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the rise of new forms of white-collar 'mental' work also made it increasingly necessary for male authors to justify time and energy spent in literary work. A nascent business culture in the first half of the nineteenth century placed a premium on intellectual labor. Advice literature directed towards young men urged a host of mental strategies on its readers, linking right thought and feeling to social and economic success. The successful achievement of middle-class manhood, represented by the figure of the 'self-made man,' rested on the careful manipulation and presentation of one's own inner life. Antebellum advice writers stressed the importance of reading for self-improvement, often

² [Edgar Allan Poe], "Anne C. Lynch," Godey's Lady's Book (September 1846), in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols., (New York: 1902), 15:117 (hereafter cited as Works). Emphasis in original.

recommending specific books to embrace and warning against more dangerous books. The wrong reading material could encourage improper thoughts and set the reader on the path toward vice. The right reading would replace inappropriate thoughts or feelings with uplifting sentiments.³

The reading recommendations in these success manuals dovetailed with early American literary critics' emphasis on the moral and emotional service the best literature could provide to its readers. In the wake of the Revolutionary War and the struggles to develop a republican government, American critics and authors struggled with the problem of establishing a distinctively American culture. Cultural leaders called for a literature that would inculcate the public virtue necessary for the survival of the new nation. Discussions

³ On the growing distinction between mental and manual work in the antebellum decades, see Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900, Interdisciplinary Studies on Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On prescriptive literature directed towards young men, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870, Yale Historical Publications, Miscellany: 129 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), esp. 1-55; Allan Stanley Horlick, Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975); Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865, Interdisciplinary Studies on Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Mary P. Ryan, Empire of the Mother: American Domestic Writing, 1830-1860 (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985); G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976); John G. Cawelti, Apostles of the Self-Made Man (1965; reprint, Midway Reprint, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Irvin G. Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches (New York: The Free Press, 1954); Paul Boyer, Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 108-120. See also Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons, intro. Anthony Giddens (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Colin Campbell, The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, Ideas (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1987). For important treatments of the concept of masculine self-fashioning in the context of prescriptive culture, see Herbert Sussman, Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, vol. 2. of The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1990). For an important treatment of undefined masculine goals, see Jan Lewis, "Motherhood and the Construction of the Male Citizen in the United States, 1750-1850," in Constructions of the Self, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 143-163. Also, in a slightly different context, Vincent J. Bertolini has drawn on fictional representations of bachelorhood to demonstrate the liminality and emotional goal-lessness of the young unmarried middle-class man. Bertolini uses the sexual and social aimlessness attributed to these figures to suggest the possibilities of transgressive sexual and social behaviors. I would also suggest that these liminal figures also reflect beliefs about the economic and intellectual aimlessness of purely literary creation. Vincent J. Bertolini, "Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s," in Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 19-42.

of literary vocation overlapped with debates on literary nationalism. Early literary criticism fused the older concept of vocation with a more secular emphasis on republican virtue: literary work was work done for the greater good of the new nation and its citizens. This understanding of literary effort lent legitimacy to the gentlemanly pursuit of letters while also working against arguments for compensation.⁴

As prose fiction began to bring selected American authors a semblance of a livelihood, poetry brought its creators only a marginal income. Poetry as a profession did not pay, and that lack of sales value became part of the general aesthetic understanding of poetry in the United States. As the critic William Charvat has noted, the nature of poetry writing in the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on close attention to metrical and rhyme schemes, and the low rate of pay received by poets meant that poets worked harder on their materials than did novelists, and received considerably less pay for their harder work. Charvat correctly attributes this imbalance to the omnipresence of poetry in antebellum American culture. But the disparity also stemmed from a broader cultural perception that the composition of poetry did not involve significant effort. Established American poets did not challenge this assumption. Poetry was indeed omnipresent — it was published in daily newspapers both as an end in itself and as a form of communication; it shaped personal letters written in verse form; it dotted the pages of the popular gift annuals; it surfaced in numerous volumes of poetry self-published by hopeful poets. Yet this very ubiquity suggested that poetry was a genre that anyone and everyone could try his hand at, and, consequently, that the production of poetry required no particular training, no particular or

⁴ William Charvat, The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835 (1936; reprint, New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1961), 5-26; Robert A. Ferguson, Law and Letters in American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; Daniel Walker Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), esp. 174-204; Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957).

unique configuration of mind, and no particular effort beyond a heightened attentiveness to rhyme and rhythm in everyday language. Why after all should a poet be paid for doing something anyone could do?⁵

With a far broader range of employment opportunities available to them, men more than women had to justify attention given to poetic creation. That justification took the form of defenses of poetry as both a high and useful form of art. The strong feeling involved in its production could, theoretically, be channeled into a poem and transmitted to readers for their own benefit. Using the language of moral uplift, male poets presented the writing and reading of poetry as exercises in the expression and sublimation of strong emotion. This identification of poetry's serviceability allowed the poet to present himself as a disinterested contributor to republican virtue. Moral service, not mere fame or wealth, would be the poet's highest and truest motive. Existing in tension with these high motives, however, were American poets' own individual yearnings for fame and wealth, or at least, recognition and cultural influence. Poets' and critics' identification of poetry as a form of disinterested service cloaked less apparently worthy motivations, including the simple desire to write poetry. That emphasis on service suggested that the poet's labor could convert his own, more selfish desires for literary renown and recompense into a concrete product which could provide for the emotional needs of readers.⁶

⁵ William Charvat, The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli, (1968; reprint, *Social Foundations of Aesthetic Forms*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 100-110.

⁶ My thinking about the relationship between emotional manipulation, literary creativity, and marketability has been strongly shaped by Colin Campbell's work on romantic/sentimental consumption, as well as by the literature on Scottish common-sense aesthetics; although this school of thought did not directly address the issue of market values for literature, it did strongly connect creative impulses and the cultivation or manipulation of feeling. Campbell, Romantic Ethic; see also Terence Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 369-395.

I will make two primary arguments: first, that poems are the concrete products of a specific configuration of mental labor involving both intellectual and emotional effort. By identifying poetry this way I focus on how ideas about spontaneity and craftsmanship have developed within specific historical discourses of aesthetic reception and production. Specifically, this project will examine how interaction between Scottish Common-sense and Romantic aesthetic thought worked to create a particular yet amorphously defined figure of the male poet. Secondly, I argue that as a career objective in the mid-nineteenth century, the production of poetry paralleled rather than opposed the middle-class project of the “self-made man.” The effortful self-mastery and self-control urged upon young men by antebellum prescriptive literature was echoed in critics’ assessments of American poets’ works; yet for aspiring poets, Romantic emphases on spontaneous composition and emotional expressiveness made conscious preparation or effort irrelevant to poetic production. This emphasis on spontaneity dissolved the connection between the means of achieving the title of “poet” — writing poetry — and the recognition of the author as a bona fide poet. Young men and would-be poets alike were exhorted to effort, but for both figures the purposes of that effort were rarely spelled out. Both the male poet and the self-made man operated within discourses that stressed imperatives — do, be, act — without specific objects. Effort was valued for its own sake and for the moral service offered by adherence to duty rather than for the concrete results of labor itself. By demonstrating how poetic and masculine identity both hinged on the separation of action from goals, I aim to illustrate the instability of the figure of the self-made man as well as explore the complex cultural meanings associated with the term “poet” at a critical moment in American cultural history.⁷

⁷ On spontaneous composition, see esp. Eliza Richards, “Poetic Attractions: Gender, Celebrity, and Authority in Poe’s Circle,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1997; Zachary Leader, Revision and Romantic Authorship, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); M. H. Abrams, **Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition**

This separation between effort and end was rooted in the Protestant idea of the calling or vocation, the believer's earthly efforts, pursued for subsistence and for the glory of God rather than for the worldlier ends of wealth and fame. By the early nineteenth century, the same separation also appeared within liberal ideology, in the belief — or the wish — that the pursuit of one's own interests would necessarily result in the larger public good. Indeed, effort without goal and resolution without a clear purpose were inherently part of the chaotic economic, political, and cultural changes occurring during the Jacksonian decades. If older definitions of manhood, which emphasized public service and the communal good, gave way to more individually oriented ambitions during these years, Americans resisted the abandonment of republican values, or, at least, struggled to retain the vocabulary associated with those values. The liberal vision of virtuous self-interest involved the avoidance of a clearly stated end beyond effort for its own sake; this evasion resulted in rhetoric which seemed to stress literally end-less labor, reflected in Tennyson's "Ulysses": "How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!"⁸ This emphasis on the abstract rather than tangible benefits of effort would conceal the more material aspects of self-interest that liberal ideology hoped to transcend rather than oppose.⁹

and Revolution in Romantic Literature, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971). For a different account of the relationships between gender and creativity, see Christine Battersby, Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

⁸ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," in Poetry, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr., Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), 53.

⁹ On changing conceptions of manhood during the antebellum decades, see E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993); David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Sellers, Market Revolution, 369-395; Charvat, Profession of Authorship; Charvat, Origins; for the changing stances of literary critics during the antebellum decades, see also Whalen, Poe and the Masses, 21-108; Nina Baym, Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). For a suggestive argument about capitalism and the cultivation of mental strategies, see Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," parts 1 and 2, American Historical Review 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 339-361; no. 3 (June 1985): 547-566. For more general treatments of liberal ideology, see Sellers, Market Revolution; Joyce Appleby, Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism in Old and New Contexts," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series, 43 (1986): 20-34; Harry L.

With dramatic advances in printing and distributive technology during the first half of the nineteenth century expanding the range of reading material available in the United States, American critics moved from calling for an American poetry to instructing readers in the proper appreciation of poetry. Reviewers and readers focused on the mental utility of poetry, downplaying the effort involved in its production. The spirituality and spontaneity attributed to composition itself could redirect the poet's personal desire for fame or wealth towards the higher and more disinterested goal of service to others. In contrast to the novelist, the aspiring poet, by virtue of the spiritual elevation and minimal market value attributed to his work, seemed best equipped to redeem the tensions between art as disinterested service and art as commodity. If, as Charles Sellers has argued, the Christian content of the tracts and Bibles produced by such businessmen as the Tappan brothers justified the market skills and strategies used in their manufacture and distribution, the mental strategies — read, believe, act — urged by such texts also supported the free-labor market ideology that fueled the circumstances of their production. Similarly, critics' and poets' understanding of poetry's place in antebellum American culture relied on the possibilities for idea transmission offered by mass publication and distribution; at the same time, critics and poets alike located the processes of poetic composition and consumption on a spiritual plane far above the noise and dirt of the marketplace.¹⁰

Watson, Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Houghton, Victorian Frame; T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), esp. 3-58. See also Jan Lewis, "Motherhood... and the Male Citizen."

¹⁰ Sellers, Market Revolution; Charvat, Profession of Authorship; Charvat, Origins.

CRITICAL INFLUENCE

In 1815 a small club of literary gentlemen in Cambridge, Massachusetts founded the North American Review out of the ashes of an earlier Federalist literary club's journal The Monthly Anthology. The North American, the most successful and longest-lived of the journals which appeared in the United States after the War of 1812, was a conscious attempt to foster American literary effort. An early editorial attributed the lack of an American literature to the channeling of citizens' time and energy into the political and economic projects of nation-building. This argument implied that literary production required labor and energy which had — temporarily — gone instead into other, more urgent activities. The very appearance in the early nineteenth century of critical reviews like the North American suggested that belles-lettres could carry significant weight in the emerging public discourse of the nation.¹¹

A November 1815 editorial in the North American asked:

Would not a collection of all that has been done for poetry among us, which is worthy the name, be an honourable labor for a vigorous mind? It might embrace the biography of our poets, — It might contain, the real state of this department of literature among us, and if it were found deficient, trace the source of its deficiency, and show the remedy.¹²

Such a passage attributed value not merely to “worthy” poetry but also to the biographies of its producers and to the critic able to classify the poets of early America.¹³ The reviews in

¹¹ For treatment of literary products characterized as the bearers of disinterested service, see Charvat, Origins, esp. 1-26; Meredith McGill, “Poe’s Plagiarisms: Literary Property and the Authorial Self in Antebellum America,” (Ph.D. thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1993); Michael Warner, The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Dena Goodman, The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 32-47.

¹² “Reflections on the Literary Delinquency of America,” North American Review, 2, no. 4 (November 1815): 42-43. Emphasis added.

¹³ On the rise of the North American and other similar reviews, see Charvat, Origins; Lewis P. Simpson, “A Literary Adventure of the Early Republic: The Anthology Society and the Monthly Anthology,” New England

the North American and other American journals were, however, anonymous and uncompensated, given by their authors for the good of American readers (and, not incidentally, for the health of the journal itself). The anonymity of these critical efforts reflected the reviewers' understanding of themselves as disinterested men of letters concerned with the improvement of the American mind. Although these essays signified labor done in the name of literature and authorhood, their authors did not publicize their participation in the sphere of letters. Anonymous reviews stood as examples of literary authority extended for readers' edification; they also represented work done and disclaimed.¹⁴

Such an emphasis on literature's serviceability drew on Scottish common-sense aesthetic thought, which strongly influenced early republican literary criticism. Scottish common-sense thought assumed the existence of a God-given 'moral taste' in the mind of each man, and valued literature for its ability to use emotionally affecting imagery to fuse pleasure with moral uplift. An innate 'moral sense' was to regulate but not eliminate the passions; both reason and affect were identified as powerful sources of human motivation. Consequently, literature could serve as a highly motivating force if it played upon the emotions and helped reason to order unruly passions. If passion motivated, reason moderated. The result was a mind stimulated but not excessively so, motivated by emotion but not unrestrainedly so. Restraint would balance, or channel, not deny, human passions.¹⁵

Quarterly 27, no. 2 (June 1954): 168-190; Lewis P. Simpson, "The Tudor Brothers: Boston Ice and Boston Letters," in The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973, 46-48; Howe, Unitarian Conscience; Henry May, The Enlightenment in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 355-357; Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines (1938; reprinted, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1967), vol. 2: 1850-1865, 219-261; Martin, Instructed Vision, 15-18, 38-45.

¹⁴ Michael Warner has argued that this cultivated anonymity was an important requirement for entering public discourse; anonymity signaled disinterestedness and commitment to the general public good, but also signaled a conscious embrace of anonymity for this purpose. Anonymity became a strategy for asserting the right to participate in the public sphere. Warner, Letters; Charvat, Origins.

¹⁵ On Scottish common-sense aesthetic theory, see esp. Terence Martin, The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction, Indiana University Humanities Series, no. 48 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961), esp. 13-39, 57-103; Howe, Unitarian Conscience; Charvat,

Within Scottish common-sense aesthetic theory, an author's success would be measured by the intellectual and emotional effect the finished work would have on its audience, which included its critics. The author was expected to resist attracting attention to the skill and effort put into the work's creation. As Scottish theorist Archibald Alison put it:

[W]hen the hand of the artist disappears, and the embellishments of his fancy press themselves upon our belief, as the voluntary profusion of nature, we immediately pronounce that the composition is perfect — we acknowledge that he has attained the end of his art; and, in yielding ourselves up to the emotion which his composition demands, we afford him the most convincing mark of our applause.¹⁶

The “perfect” work would draw forth an emotional response from its audience, and bear no signs of the artist's effort. An artist would be judged not by his skill or presence in the work, but by the effect his work would have on an audience, an effect best judged by an appropriately learned critic.

While early American literary reviews provided readers with critical treatments of a developing American literature, they also exposed readers to newer developments in European literature. Although the majority of American reviews responded cautiously at best to European Romanticism in its many permutations, Romantic aesthetic thought offered would-be American poets — male and female — a model of literary achievement which continued to link moral usefulness and aesthetic production while assigning the poet a much more visible role in the creation of that serviceable literature. In the wake of the excesses of the French Revolution, Romantic writers called for individual and inward-looking renewal to be achieved through man's reintegration with nature. Towards this end, the Romantic poet was to serve as a secular prophet whose literary creations would articulate

Origins, 5-26; for an example of Scottish aesthetic tenets applied to more visual arts, see Stein, Ruskin; Adam Sweeting, Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996), esp. 94-95.

¹⁶ Archibald Alison, Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste, corr. and impr. by Abraham Mills, (New York: G. & C. & C. Carvill, 1830), 77-78.

the poet's own intensely felt interactions with nature and impart those to his readers. As a man uncommonly able to moderate strongly felt emotion through ordering thought, the Romantic poet would transmit his message of cultural renewal through his poetry — the finished products of his own positively defined and spiritually charged mental activity and effort.¹⁷

The emotionally charged inspiration and spontaneity of expression attributed to the Romantic poet helped to mystify the mental labor involved in poetic creation. This development would promote, on the one hand, the image of the highly emotional 'poetess' and lead, on the other, to a perception of the male poet as an effeminate idler who yearned for aristocratic leisure. Nevertheless, a man who wrote poetry still understood himself to be participating in a long tradition of masculine authorship which stretched back to antiquity, and which Romantic writers in Europe were vigorously working to claim for themselves in the wake of the powerful cultural changes brought by political and industrial revolutions. Both the Scottish common-sense and Romantic schools of thought identified the artist's mission as one of service to his or her audience, service often defined in terms which fused the moral with the emotional. While the Scottish belief in the critical 'moral sense' may seem to offset Romantic emphases on subjective and spontaneous feeling, both schools assumed a powerful relationship between strong feeling and moral uplift. While Romantic poets pushed the boundaries of acceptability in content and in degree of emotional expressiveness — consider Byron's incest poems — their efforts contested rather than overthrew the lines separating appropriately and inappropriately expressed sentiment.

¹⁷ On Romantic thought, see M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism; Marlon Ross, The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); on American critics' ambivalent responses to Romanticism see Charvat, Origins; Doreen M. Hunter, Richard Henry Dana, Sr., Twayne's United States Author Series, 511 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 20-41.

Certain feelings, activities, or areas of thought continued to be considered unfit subjects for poetry.¹⁸

Key Romantic thinkers also considered conscious effort a necessary part of poetic creation. Wordsworth followed his famous definition of good poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” with an assertion that poetic production involved not only feeling but careful thought which would modify and direct those powerful feelings:

Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued fluxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.¹⁹

¹⁸ On the figure of the ‘poetess’ see Richards, “Poetic Attractions;” Cheryl Walker, The Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982); Cheryl Walker, introduction to American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Cheryl Walker, American Women Writers (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), xv-xliii; Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

Although their focus is on British men of letters, I have found James Eli Adams’ and Sussman’s work to be especially useful in thinking about literary work as a sign of masculine aristocratic standing. Richard Bushman, Karen Halttunen, and Adam Sweeting have written evocatively about relationships between genteel aspiration and aesthetic display in the United States. Bushman’s work in particular has been useful, but tends to focus on aesthetic consumption rather than production per se; Sweeting’s work focuses more specifically on the complex relationships between genteel performance and aesthetic labor, although he shies away from some of the gender issues raised by his arguments. James Eli Adams, Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Sussman, Victorian Masculinities; Richard Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Random House, 1992); Halttunen, Confidence Men; Sweeting, Reading Houses. For an important treatment of relationships between authorial labor and aristocratic gentility, see Sandra Tomc, “An Idle Industry: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Workings of Literary Leisure,” American Quarterly 49, no. 4 (December 1997): 780-805.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1802 ed., The Poems, ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols., (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 1:870-871. This understanding of the poet’s mind as balancing active and passive, receptive and creative faculties, also appears in key Romantic texts: see for example Wordsworth’s description, in “Tintern Abbey,” of a “presence” in nature

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought....

.....
Therefore I am still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, — both what they half create,

And what perceive; ...

William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” The Poems, ed. Hayden, 1:360. Emphasis added.

Similarly, in his Biographia Literaria, Coleridge described the poet's work:

The poet] diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and . . . [fuses] by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed control. . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; . . . a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the nature to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.²⁰

Coleridge required the poet to work consciously on his materials, yet also subordinated that labor to the finished poem itself: the active “will and understanding” contributed to a “gentle and unnoticed control.” Wordsworth's and Coleridge's conceptions of the creative mind overlapped rather than opposed the more conservative Scottish common-sense models of thought; subjectivity, emotion, and even intuition had their place in Scottish realism, always operating in instructive tension with the moral faculties rather than in direct opposition to the conscience or moral sensibilities. According to both schools of thought, strong emotions were to be tamed or contained, managed by the will of the poet into more seemly subjects or approaches.²¹

While Wordsworth and Coleridge called for a balance between inspiration and conscious mental effort, other Romantic poets' work drew attention to the emotional and apparently effortless nature of poetic composition. Consider for example this stanza from Byron's Childe Harold:

²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. H. J. Jackson, Oxford Authors, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 319. Emphasis added. Compare this with Coleridge's discussion of the origin of metre, which he attributes to “the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion. It might be easily explained likewise in what manner this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state, which it counteracts; and how this balance of antagonists became organized into metre. . . by a supervening act of the will and judgement, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure.” *ibid.*, 350.

²¹ See Leader, Revision and Romantic Authorship.

Could I embody and unbosom now
 That which is most within me,— could I wreak
 My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
 Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
 All that I would have sought and all I seek,
 Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe — into one word
 And that one word were Lightning, — I would speak;
 But as it is, I live and die unheard,
 With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.²²

This stanza, which made its way into the commonplace book Jones Very kept as a student at Harvard, dramatically called attention to the narrator's strong feeling and a corresponding inability to express that emotion adequately. The passage demonstrates — to us and to its nineteenth-century readers, including Very — the Romantic poet's paradoxical self-representation as a man struggling to express the inexpressible.

This understanding of the poetic character directed attention to that persona rather than to the poet's craftsmanship. While Byron's passage presented readers with a characterization of the emotional state of the creating poet, it also suggested a detachment from the labor involved in poetry-writing. The conscious emotional and intellectual labor involved in poetic composition was upstaged by the mysterious and affectively charged state of inspiration, a state which in Byron's highly visible case also connoted aristocratic ease. The identification of composition as spontaneous made the achievement of the title of poet irreproducible: if the poet him- or herself could not or did not claim the effort put into poetry making, the path towards poetic identity was obscured. An individual's claim to poet status was closely related to the mystery surrounding poetry composed involuntarily, even as that spontaneity obliged the poet to disclaim conscious effort.²³

²² George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto III, in *Poetic Works*, new rev. ed., ed. John Jump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 223. Emphasis in original. The stanza is transcribed with only a few changes in punctuation in Jones Very, *Scrap Book*, 50, Jones Very Papers, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University.

²³ Cf. Leader, esp. 80-90 for Leader's discussion of Byron's identification of revision and proofreading as 'work' in a separate class from composition. Leader quotes Scott describing Byron's "managing [of] his pen with the

Yet that effortlessness was apparent rather than real. The rhythm and rhyme schemes utilized by nineteenth-century poets attest to effort: no one achieves perfect rhyme or meter spontaneously every time. The production of a poem necessarily involved not merely inspiration but also concrete composition and revision. To be published, after all, a poem must be written — and, arguably, revised. Revision in particular stands as a form of conscious labor, of craftsmanship, in contrast perhaps to the spontaneity implied by the word “inspiration,” but also in crucial ways linked to inspiration. As William Cullen Bryant wrote in his review of Henry Pickering’s Ruins of Paestum and Athens, published in the July 1824 number of the North American Review:

It is true, that if the high state of mental excitement, requisite for the writing of poetry, could be kept up from the beginning to the end of a production of any tolerable length; if all the parts could be written with the same glow of inspiration, it might be better for the work that, the author should not tamper too freely with what had been written so felicitously and forcibly struck out. But all poems will have their languid passages, the moment of exhaustion always arrives too soon, and often a stubborn idea refuses to be happily expressed. For these evils there is no remedy but revision; the weak passages may be strengthened; the original excitement may be recalled; a lucky moment may supply what was wanting in the first search[.]²⁴

Bryant’s remark blended Romantic inspiration with neoclassical attention to order, form, and polished effect. Revision involved both a receptivity to emotional inspiration and a willingness to work on words and rhythm to form a poem. And yet Bryant’s call for revision echoed the more common understanding of poetic creation by implying that most readers would grant the name of Poetry only to what seemed written under “the glow of inspiration.”

careless and negligent ease of a man of quality” and quotes Byron himself dismissing those “thousand handicraftsmen [who] wore the mask | Of Poesy[.]” Sir Walter Scott, unsigned review of Childe Harold, canto III, in Quarterly Review of February 1817, in Leader, Revision and Romantic Authorship, 84; Byron, quoted in *ibid.*, 85.

²⁴[William Cullen Bryant], review of The Ruins of Paestum (1822) and Athens (1824), [by Henry Pickering], North American Review 19, no. 44 (July 1824): 44.

Consequently a finished poem would be at once emotionally expressive and a model of emotional mastery. The poem would simultaneously express and contain strong feeling, channeling it not merely into the content of the poem, but also into the very form of the poem. Reading the poem would be not simply a pleasurable activity, but also an exercise: the poem would both describe and demonstrate a pattern of experience or behavior carried across the body of the poem itself. A poem, then, would provide service to its readers through its ability to affect readers and then guide the resulting emotions into a productive, morally acceptable pattern of thought and feeling. Such a poem would offer its readers, literally, an ordered and ordering experience.²⁵

Revision was the key to the creation of such exercising poetry, and encompassed the two forms of “finishing” involved in the production of poetry: the work involved in bringing the poem to its finish or conclusion, and the work required to “finish” the poem, to make it presentable. Bryant urged Pickering to “[a] little of the limae labor, a stricter attention to the niceties of poetical diction, and a more painful revision of weak passages,”²⁶ adding:

[A]ll authors of what are called works of taste, should set out with a resolution never to come hastily before the public. . . . There is a respect due to the literary world, which should restrain an author from publishing his work before he has made it as perfect as he is able; in like manner as the decorums of civilized society restrain us from ushering ourselves into a polite assembly with a long beard, an unbrushed coat, and dirty boots.²⁷

The poet, implied Bryant, was an essentially gentlemanly figure, responsible for ensuring the genteel, orderly appearance of the products of his mind and pen. At the same time, in Bryant’s description the poem itself was a gentleman who needed to watch and maintain his appearance. Associating poetic revision with personal grooming, Bryant conflated the bodily

²⁵ See Campbell, Romantic Ethic; Sussman, Victorian Masculinities.

²⁶ [Bryant], rev. of Airs of Paestum and Athens, 42-43.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 44.

‘finished’ appearance of the gentleman with the physical appearance and auditory experience of the poem itself. The performance or the presentation of the self as the politely groomed gentleman poet fused with the management of the properly ordered poem.²⁸

Bryant’s call for revision echoed other critics’ assessments of aspiring American poets’ efforts. A reviewer for the United States Literary Gazette opened a June 1825 review of John G. C. Brainard’s Occasional Pieces of Poetry by stating, “We are sorry that Mr[.] Brainard should have published his poems at this time,” and went on to lecture:

No truly valuable work, — nothing that could safely be committed to ‘time, truth, and posterity,’ was ever thrown off at a single heat. . . . We are satisfied, that had the author’s labour in [his poems’] composition been commensurate with his energy of conception, his volume might have placed him . . . on a level with Bryant and Percival.²⁹

The following month, Jared Sparks, then the North American’s editor, compared Brainard unfavorably with the “good old way [of] Virgil, and Milton, and Dryden,”³⁰ and grumbled:

The author will do wisely to . . . make poetry more of a task, and less of a pastime, than seems to have been his habit. It was a maxim with the ancients, which the moderns have never called into question, that nothing good is brought to pass without labor. No proof exists, that poets are exempt from this common fatality of the human condition.³¹

The need for hard literary labor was a common theme in the biographical essays contained in Rufus W. Griswold’s 1843 anthology The Poets and Poetry of America. James G. Percival was described as having “all the natural qualities of a great poet,” but, according to the biographical sketch published in Griswold’s anthology, Percival

lacks the artistic skill, or declines the labour, without which few authors gain immortality. . . . He writes with a facility but rarely equalled, and when his thoughts are once committed to the page, he shrinks from the labour of revising, correcting,

²⁸ Cf. Halttunen, Confidence Men, 92-111.

²⁹ Review of Occasional Pieces of Poetry, by John G. C. Brainard, United States Literary Gazette 2, no. 5 (1 June 1825): 167.

³⁰ [Jared Sparks]. Review of Occasional Pieces of Poetry, by John G. C. Brainard, North American Review 21, no. 48 (July 1825): 217. On Sparks’ editorship, see Mott, History of American Magazines, 2:219.

³¹ [Sparks]. Review of Occasional Pieces, 224. Emphasis added.

and condensing. He remarks in one of his prefaces, that his verse is ‘very far from bearing the marks of the file and the burnisher,’ and that he likes to see ‘poetry in the full ebullition of feeling and fancy, foaming up with the spirit of life, and glowing with the rainbows of a glad inspiration.’ If by this he means that a poet should reject the slow and laborious process by which a polished excellence is attained, he errs. Nothing truly great was ever accomplished without long and patient toil.³²

Brainard may have “lacked the mental discipline and strong self-command which alone confer true power” and his poems may have borne “marks of haste and carelessness”³³ — but Griswold’s anthology included eighteen of his poems, composed, according to his biographical sketch, in the flush of consumption. The very presence of selections from Brainard’s and Percival’s poetry in Griswold’s volume suggests that their poetry found an audience in spite of — perhaps because of — their willingness to “decline the labor” of revision. That critics continued to urge labor on would-be poets might indicate the growing popular acceptance of apparently effortless poetry and a decline in the cultural authority wielded by learned critics. Their use of the language of toil suggests critics’ and poets’ need to identify their efforts as a legitimate form of masculine labor.

THE POET AND THE SELF-MADE MAN

The absence of effort attributed to the poet also made livelihood a vexed issue. If poetry were defined as an effortlessly produced entity and the result of strongly felt emotion, the issue of compensation was, literally, immaterial: one could not expect to be compensated for labor not done. In that sense, the work of literary creation paralleled other forms of work not identified as worthy of pay — most particularly, the work attributed to

³² “James G. Percival,” in *The Poets and Poetry of America*, 4th rev. ed., intro. and ed. Rufus W. Griswold, (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1843), 160-161. Emphasis added.

³³ “John G. C. Brainard,” in *Poets and Poetry*, ed. Griswold, 178 for quote, 178-184 for his poems. Brainard died in 1828.

middle-class white women during the nineteenth century: housework lovingly performed for one's family or the caretaking of a beloved child. These types of work were identified as non-labor as a means of resisting the commodifying trends of a nascent market economy. At the same time, the general popular acceptance of the novel in American culture along with expanding literacy and book availability increasingly associated the literary with feminine readers, feminine writers, and feminine sensibilities. As the production of prose fiction became a potential source of income for American authors, concerns rose about the commodification of literature: could a literary work that sold well and brought reputation for its author really be identified as the product of disinterested labor?³⁴

Women authors whose literary efforts brought them a significant income were able to justify their disquieting public status by citing their own economic hardship (as widows, as in the case of Godey's editor Sarah Josepha Hale, or as wives of improvident husbands, as in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe). Or they might attribute their work to divine inspiration, e.g. Stowe's claim that God, not she, had written Uncle Tom's Cabin. This gesture disclaimed Stowe's own labor while simultaneously exalting the book her pen had, after all, written. "God forbid. . . . no happy woman ever writes," says Fanny Fern's fictional Ruth

³⁴ Cf. Jeanne Boydston on the pastoralization of housework. Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), esp. 13-14, 89-125. On the rise of the novel and female authorship and readership, see Cathy Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Mary Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Nina Baym, Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). On market concerns, see Leverenz, Manhood; Michael T. Gilmore, American Romanticism and the Marketplace (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Charvat, Profession of Authorship; Ronald J. Wilson, Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). The literature on the concept of 'separate spheres' in relationship to a nascent market economy is considerable; see in particular Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39; Boydston, Home and Work; Gillian Brown, Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Lewis, "Motherhood . . . and the Male Citizen."

Hall, when her daughter, seeing mother at work, asks, “[W]hen I get to be a woman shall I write books, mamma?”³⁵

And yet Mary Kelley has suggested that as girls many antebellum women writers had dreamed of becoming writers. Kelley’s argument that these women found the realization of these girlhood dreams to be disillusioning and painful reflects the sharply restricted economic opportunities for women during the antebellum decades; with few options open to a woman who needed to earn a livelihood or to supplement a husband’s income, these women may have felt forced to turn their dreams into cash. Their fears and concerns about publicity and commodification actually underscored the extent to which literary production was expected to be disinterested service and not serious remunerative work.³⁶ Additionally, since women’s work within the home was not identified as gainful employment, a woman’s dabbling in letters could be seen as an extension of her domestic duties: consider for example Sarah Josepha Hale’s 1830 publication of a collection of educational poems for children intended as songs, which could easily be identified by poet and reader alike as a logical outgrowth of Hale’s maternal responsibilities.³⁷

If women could justify — or attempt to justify — literary activity by economic necessity, this was an argument patently not open to men, whose employment opportunities were less limited than women’s were.³⁸ For men as well as women, the choice to spend time

³⁵ [Fanny Fern], Sara Parton Willis, Ruth Hall and Other Writings, ed. and intro., Joyce W. Warren, American Women Writers Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 175.

³⁶ Kelley, Private Woman; Douglas, Feminization; on Stowe’s claim of divine inspiration, see also Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War, (1962; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 3-52, esp. 5.

³⁷ Hale’s volume was Poems for Our Children. Sherbrooke Rogers, Sarah Josepha Hale: A New England Pioneer, 1788-1889 (Grantham, NY: Tompson & Rutters, 1985), 41; Patricia Okker, Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century Women Editors (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 54.

³⁸ Men’s employment opportunities remained shaped by factors beyond gender, including discrimination based on race and class. Middle-class white men enjoyed a broader range of vocational possibilities and options. An educated young man could choose among a number of professions — law, the ministry, medicine — and, as the decades passed, institutions devoted to specific professional training (beyond the ministry) arose. A young

writing poetry suggested both a higher devotion to disinterested literary pursuits and resistance to literary commodification. Yet as Romantic thought began to influence American beliefs about poetic labor, distinctions were subtly drawn between male and female poets and the nature of their work. Women were increasingly associated with spontaneous and emotional composition; men were associated with conscious artistry. The man who aspired to the title of poet faced increasingly sharply defined cultural expectations that assigned emotional affect to the feminine and intellectual discourse to the masculine. At the same time, male poets cultivated an emotional sensibility or receptivity often identified as feminine. Ambivalently praising female poets' allegedly greater capacity for affect, male poets hinted that women aspiring to higher poetic accomplishment needed to nurture the same conscious artistry that male poets sought to overcome in themselves.³⁹

Both modes of mental activity — spontaneous receptivity and deliberate intellectual ordering — were required of the poet. Yet poetic personality came to be identified with the spontaneity and expressiveness associated with the feminine. This development contributed

man could also choose to go into business, to find a position as a clerk or other white-collar mercantile position and become part of America's nascent business culture, more and more separate from the artisanal and manual labor increasingly defined in terms suggesting class differences. See especially Blumin, Emergence of the Middle Class for increasing division between mental and manual work as class-based modes of masculine work. Halttunen, Confidence Men; Ryan, Cradle; Leverenz, Manhood; Ferguson, Law and Letters.

³⁹ See for example Rufus Griswold's introduction to Female Poets; Griswold wrote:

It does not follow, because the most essential genius in men is marked by qualities which we may call feminine, that such qualities when found in female writers have any certain or just relation to mental superiority. The conditions of aesthetic ability in the two sexes are probably distinct, or even opposite. Among men, we recognise his nature as the most thoroughly artist-like, whose most abstract thoughts still retain a sensuous cast, whose mind is the most completely transfused and incorporated into his feelings. Perhaps the reverse should be considered the test of true art in woman, and we should deem her the truest poet, whose emotions are most refined by reason, whose force of passion is most expanded and controlled into lofty and impersonal forms of imagination.

Rufus W. Griswold, preface to The Female Poets of America, ed. Rufus W. Griswold (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1859), 7. Eliza Richards and other feminist critics have discussed at length these separate standards for male and female poets during the antebellum decades; Richards has taken this argument a step further by arguing that male poets in the United States actively worked to shape these separate standards as a means of distancing themselves from and establishing themselves as aesthetically superior to the women poets who helped to establish the intense popularity of lyric poetry in the United States during the 1830s and 1840s. Richards, "Poetic Attractions," 1-84; Walker, Nightingale's Burden; Walker, introduction to American Women Poets, xv-xliii.

to ambivalent image of female and male poets alike — as overwrought poetesses and effete loafers. Both images obscured any labor involved in literary production. If the poetess simply poured her feelings onto the page and into the frameworks offered by metre and rhyme, the male poet resisted the sterner intellectual demands of business or the professions for the lighter ‘work’ of literary composition. A man who hoped for a reputation in letters would have to justify time and energy taken from breadwinning and spent on less profitable literary pursuits.⁴⁰

Poetry’s unprofitability made it an impractical vocational goal for a young man who needed to earn a livelihood. As Stephen Longfellow wrote to his son Henry, in response to Henry’s assertion that he “eagerly aspire[d] after future eminence in literature,”⁴¹

[T]here is not wealth & munificence enough in this country to afford sufficient encouragement & patronage to merely literary men. And as you have not had the fortune, (I will not say good or ill) to be born to a fortune rich, you must adopt a profession which will afford you a subsistence as well as reputation.⁴²

As virtually the only nineteenth-century American poet to approach earning a living from his poetry, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would become the exception to the rule that a poet could not earn a livelihood from poetry alone. Yet, Stephen Longfellow did not object to his son’s dabbling in literature per se; instead, he identified it as a pastime which would add to his son’s professional reputation — which, when he wrote the above counsel, he expected his son to achieve as Stephen Longfellow himself had, through legal training. Physician

⁴⁰ Kelley Private Woman; Boydston, Home and Work; Walker, Nightingale’s Burden; Leverenz, Manhood; Tomc, “Idle Industry;” Julie Ellison, “The Gender of Transparency: Masculinity and the Conduct of Life,” American Literary History 4, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 584-606.

For less explicitly gendered treatments of aesthetic versus productive male work, see Wilson, Figures of Speech; Gilmore, American Romanticism; Sweeting, Reading Houses; Whalen, Poe and the Masses.

⁴¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Brunswick, ME, 5 December 1824, in The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ed. Andrew Hilen, 6 vols., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1966-1982), 1:94-95.

⁴² Stephen Longfellow to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington, DC, 26 Dec 1824, in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as Longfellow Papers).

Peter Bryant had had similar hopes for his son Cullen, when he arranged for the publication of the young lawyer's poem "Thanatopsis" in the North American Review (1817).⁴³

While poetry was not a suitable vocational goal for a young man because it did not constitute 'productive' labor, poetic production was a desirable avocation or pastime for a professional man. It was a mark of gentility, mental agility, and learning. Formal education, especially classical education, exposed boys (more than girls) to a long tradition of poetry rooted in ancient languages. Yet this association of poetry with formal education also may have linked it with preparation for adult responsibilities rather than actual accomplishment of those responsibilities. Dabbling in poetry and polite letters connoted leisure as well as learning, the possession of (or the desire for) free time and energy to direct towards the arrangement of words in highly ordered forms, as well as a tendency towards youthful irresponsibility.⁴⁴

To become more than a "merely literary" man during the antebellum decades meant to establish oneself as a responsible adult male, capable of supporting himself and his future family. During the first half of the nineteenth century, standards of masculine achievement shifted away from community responsibility and service and toward a work ethic that stressed individual achievement and career-oriented ambition. Entrepreneurial skills and values — as patterns of thought — were enjoined upon young men as they came of age and considered their vocational options. Vocational desire was shaped by the need to establish economic competency. The emergence of white-collar positions which emphasized mental over manual labor increasingly merged intellectual work with social status, and established

⁴³ For an important discussion of the links between professional reputation and literary effusions, particularly in the legal profession, see Ferguson, Law and Letters.

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also Rotundo, American Manhood, esp. 167-185 on vocational choice and work identity. For a related treatment of relationships between the traditional classical curriculum, gender, and poetry, see the discussion of Coleridge in Walter J. Ong, S.J., Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 225-283.

intellectual ability and training as markers of middle-class identity. The “self-made” businessmen and their brothers, the professionals who had undergone higher and specialized education, were men who had received considerable intellectual training — formal or informal — and whose work primarily involved mental effort. By characterizing poetic composition as spontaneous rather than conscious, American critics, readers, and poets placed poetry outside the bounds of productive intellectual labor, rendering it a pastime rather than a professional pursuit.⁴⁵

During these years American ministers and moralists produced a large amount of prescriptive literature for young men, particularly those who were migrating to the nation’s growing cities to find work. These tracts were designed to substitute the wholesome sentiments they contained for the dangerous influences their young readers would encounter. In a sense, authors like T. S. Arthur, Henry Ward Beecher and E. H. Chapin offered their “textual” friendship and guidance to strengthen readers against the more dangerous actual friendships they might forge with less savory characters. These writers urged intellectual and emotional strategies onto their readers, strategies which were intended to build and preserve character — be industrious, be frugal, persevere, remember morally influential family members, pray, read the Bible and other edifying books.⁴⁶

The upright mental activities urged by these authors were intended to protect young readers from more dangerous patterns of thought, which were often connected directly to bodily feelings — particularly greed and sexual desire— and corresponding immoral

⁴⁵ Leverenz, Manhood; Rotundo, American Manhood; Ryan, Cradle; Blumin, Emergence; Haskell, “Capitalism and Origins,” parts 1 and 2.

⁴⁶ On the cultivation of virtuous thought and behavior as a barrier against temptation and vice, see Halttunen, Confidence Men, esp. 1-55; Ryan, Cradle; Barker-Benfield, Horrors; Houghton, Victorian Frame, esp. 218-262. The two classic analyses of self-made manhood touch on moral preservation slightly. Paul Boyer’s treatment of the early YMCA movement is also useful on this subject. Cawelti, Apostles; Wyllie, Self-Made Man; Boyer, Urban Masses, 108-120. For specific treatments of the mental strategies and work involved in the achievement of antebellum middle-class masculinity in the United States, see also Leverenz, Manhood.

activities. Also dangerous were emotions which might push the young man towards such desires — boredom, homesickness, loneliness, overambition. Mental habits served as character talismans: thinking good thoughts, the right thoughts, would preserve character. Reading for self-improvement and self-preservation was an important theme of these advice manuals, which often recommended specific books and warned more generally against others. Ironically, these self-help books encouraged literary consumption rather than production as a means of properly directing the mind. Young men were encouraged to read rather than write uplifting literature, advice which downplayed any of the advice writers' own interests in seeing their work sell. The very existence of advice manuals enacted a split between means and ends: their authors hoped to exercise influence over their readers, and, as a side benefit, sell enough volumes to cover the book's costs or even turn a profit.

In this sense these self-help books dovetailed with early literary critics' emphasis on the moral and emotional service the best literature could provide its readers. The wrong reading material would encourage the development of improper thoughts and set the reader on the path towards vice; the right reading would help replace dangerous thoughts or feelings with uplifting sentiments. Literature was valuable precisely for the directing and improving influence it could have on impressionable minds. The best literature would provide just this moral and emotional service for its readers.⁴⁷

But the tone and the content of this literature also represented a powerful means of justifying the literary effort put into such texts: their utility, presumably, outweighed any more self-interested motivations for producing these books. Creative literary production

⁴⁷ Cf. also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1979), esp. 135-169; my analysis places more specific emphasis on the role played by the consciously directed cultivation of the mind towards the control of the body, but Foucault's treatment of discipline as a means of producing the docile body — especially in reference to the body of the student — seems applicable to the question of the production of the docile mind as well.

was less obviously utilitarian, and required more careful justification. By simultaneously identifying poetic production as spontaneous and as the highest form of disinterested labor, American critics and poets contributed to an understanding of poetry which obscured the actual work involved in poetry writing. This erasure of the poet's conscious effort separated that effort from its products, effectively replacing the poet's own personal motives for writing poetry with the more nebulous goal of service to be achieved through inspired transcription rather than deliberate composition. The moral and emotional service a poem could provide to readers was to be the poet's primary goal. Fame, wealth, or even personal satisfaction, if achieved by any poet, were to be welcome byproducts, the results of the poem's salutary effect on readers. And according to critics and poets, neither goal, presumably, could be achieved through conscious effort alone.⁴⁸ To antebellum Americans, the title of 'poet' suggested a disinterested devotion to higher, more abstract goals, and above mere commodity production.

The four poets I treat in this dissertation all sought, in various ways, to justify their poetic labor by claiming this service for their poetry. In their literary criticism, Bryant, Very, and Longfellow all asserted the utility of poetry by linking it to moral and mental uplift. In the lectures on poetry he delivered at the New York Athenaeum in 1826, Bryant clearly suggested that the moral and aesthetic edification offered by poetry should outweigh readers' awareness of the actual creative activity undertaken by the poet. In his 1838 essay/lecture "Epic Poetry" Very identified poetry as a means of transmitting the Christian gospel of eternal life and rebirth. Longfellow's 1832 review in the North American of Sir Philip Sidney's Defence of Poesy stood as his own defense of the utility of poetry, a defense which

⁴⁸ Cf. Poovey, Uneven Developments; see also Boydston, Home and Work. For a discussion of how the opposition of the home as 'haven' and the hostile, competitive workplace actually helped to reinforce and legitimate competitive capitalism by offering the possibility of a space outside of and separate from the workplace which would offer shelter and refreshment to the male worker, see Brown, Domestic Individualism.

also sought to identify the production of poetry as manly labor. Although Poe strongly resisted the use of poetry to effect moral instruction, he nevertheless defended poetry as a means of communicating a particular formulation of uplifting sentiment. Explicitly resisting Longfellow's inclination towards poetical moralizing, Poe's criticism defined poetry as an essentially indefinite entity capable of transmitting ideal and intangible beauty to its readers. While his understanding of the service poetry could provide to readers differed from Longfellow's more conventional moralism, like Bryant, Very, and Longfellow, Poe argued that a poem's value lay in the demonstrable emotional effect it had on its audience.

As they struggled with private concerns about their accomplishments as poets and as men, each of these poets also sought to accrue cultural authority sufficient to defend and define poetry on terms that would communicate its moral value to American readers while also sustaining its market value. Bryant and Longfellow both entertained youthful dreams of earning a living through an editorial association with a literary magazine; Poe made several attempts to establish a magazine of his own; Very collaborated with Emerson to publish a volume of his works in order to convert readers to his religious beliefs. Bryant's short-lived belletristic magazine career was followed by a long and successful (if not always satisfying) career as editor-in-chief of the Democratic New York Evening Post. Longfellow would narrowly escape a legal career by securing a position as Professor of Modern Languages at Bowdoin College, only the fourth such position in the country. Both men would use their public platforms to further the cause of aesthetic culture in the United States. Poe spent the bulk of his career as a journalist, producing reviews and tales for other men's papers, but never managing to establish the magazine of his own which he dreamed would allow him influence over the direction of American literature.

At the same time, by emphasizing the service that finished poetry could provide to American readers, all four poets' careers contributed to an understanding of poetry that separated the product from the producers — themselves. Poe's critical emphasis on prosody and other aspects of poetic craft was offset by his descriptions of the "poetic sentiment" as an ethereal (yet managed) emotional essence, only to be embodied in the form of poem by a person possessed of the proper mental faculties: did the poet consciously create a poem, or did he merely receive it? Finally, Longfellow's image of the poet — and Longfellow himself as a poet — ultimately obscured the connection between mental work and poetic production by focusing exclusively either on the mysterious processes of the poet's mind or on the moral service provided by the completed poetry itself. Longfellow, who achieved extraordinary popularity even during his lifetime, presented himself as more seer than craftsman; yet his career bolstered a conception of poetry as a commodity that would provide intellectual and moral service to readers. That conception ultimately helped to sell poetry (including, of course, Longfellow's own) while separating the finished commodity from the mental labor that went into its production.

Beliefs about the effort involved in poetic creation supported nineteenth-century (not to mention present-day) assertions that poetry was not a paying profession. For these economic reasons, "poet" was not a vocational identity that an aspiring middle-class young man could legitimately pursue. The careers of these four poets show how each man's ambition to become a poet compelled him to justify his own production of poetry while disclaiming his own hopes for that poetry and for his own position in American culture, and at the same time promote an understanding of poetic labor which demanded such disclaimers. If, by focusing attention on the utility of poetry, these poets sought to create an audience for American poetry, they also helped to shape an image of the poet which

obscured the work they themselves had put into poetic production. By defining a poem's claim to the title of Poetry in terms of its capacity to affect its readers emotionally, these poets encouraged readers to embrace a conception of poetry which concealed the poet's hand while praising his mental faculties. By underscoring the insubstantial and all but effortless nature of poetic composition itself, all four of these poets contributed to an emasculated definition of the male poet — as a man who received impressions rather than produced them, and who observed rather than acted.

Chapter 2

“On The Value and Uses Of Poetry”: The Early Poetic Career of William Cullen Bryant

In 1835, William Cullen Bryant, traveling with his family in Europe, wrote to the sculptor Horatio Greenough,

My labors as you are pleased to term them are not worth inquiring about. I am occupied with nothing of importance — but I am only trying in my active interests to recover what I nearly unlearned in the course of several years, thinking and writing on political subjects; namely, the modes of thought and mechanism of languages which belong to poetry.⁴⁹

Bryant characterized poetic production as mental labor potentially incompatible with the effort required by political journalism. This private letter, written to a friend struggling with the conflicting demands of the public and his own aesthetic sensibilities, revealed a conflict that shaped Bryant’s early career: the problem of reconciling his desire to write poetry with his very real need to earn a livelihood and his hopes of serving his country.⁵⁰

The son of a physician who dabbled in poetry and music, young Cullen Bryant had grown up in a household open to literary pursuits. The success of his first published poem, the anti-Jefferson “The Embargo,” convinced Peter Bryant to give his son a professional education. Trained as a lawyer, Bryant used his early poetic compositions to explore the competing demands law and poetry placed on his time and energy. When, through the exertions of his father, “Thanatopsis” was published in the September 1817 North American Review, Bryant and his poetry became part of a broader discussion about the emerging

⁴⁹ William Cullen Bryant to Horatio Greenough, Pisa, Italy, 27 February 1835, in The Letters of William Cullen Bryant, 6 vols., eds. William Cullen Bryant II and Thomas G. Voss (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), 1:440. Emphasis in original. The chapter title is Bryant’s title for the second of four lectures on poetry he would deliver in 1826.

⁵⁰ Greenough had written Bryant: “I have much advanced my statue [of George Washington] and wish heartily you were here that I might have your impressions about it— Mr. Everett writes me that it will never be popular— and hints that as I make it for the people I ought to consult their tastes as much as possible. This is a new view of artistical obligation which I feel a little opposed to.” Horatio Greenough to Bryant, Florence, Italy, 24 February [1835], in Bryant-Godwin Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as BG Papers).

republic's literary identity.⁵¹ In 1821, with the assistance of members of the North American Review's editorial board, Bryant published his first volume of poetry. Although Bryant turned almost no profit from its sales, positive reception of the volume in England and America encouraged literary editor and lawyer Theophilus Parsons, Jr., to offer to pay Bryant for contributions to his fledgling United States Literary Gazette. Encouraged by an expanding circle of literary friends, in early 1825 Bryant left his legal practice in western Massachusetts and moved to New York City where he found work as co-editor of the New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine. By 1827, after the failure of the New York Review and its successor, the United States Review and Literary Gazette, Bryant had taken a loosely defined editorial assistantship at the New York Evening Post, a small daily newspaper that would become an important Democratic party organ. When the paper's editor William Coleman died in 1829, Bryant took on his position. He would serve as editor-in-chief until his death in 1878.

His move to New York and his associations there brought Bryant into the city's rising arts community. In November 1825 he was asked to deliver a series of lectures on poetry at the New York Athenaeum during the following winter. Bryant's ability to distinguish between times and spaces devoted to legal and poetic work had allowed him to

⁵¹ See Ferguson, Law and Letters, 54-58, 87-95, and esp. 173-195 for Ferguson's treatment of Bryant's understanding of the public role embodied by the lawyer as writer. Ferguson argues that Bryant's years as a lawyer were his most poetically productive precisely because the early republican conception of the role of the lawyer in American society incorporated belletristic writing into the broader sphere of secular intellectual service to the republic which was the lawyer's particular responsibility. My argument differs from Ferguson's in that Ferguson argues that the declining quality of Bryant's poetry after he became full-time editor of the New York Evening Post reflected Bryant's separation of the high intellectual and aesthetic work of his poetry from the public service involved in his journalistic work. While I agree with Ferguson that Bryant's vocational anxieties in the 1820s drove many of his best poems, I believe Ferguson ascribes considerably more satisfaction with journalism to Bryant than Bryant actually felt, particularly in the 1830s when a series of poignant letters to Richard Henry Dana clearly reveal Bryant's resentment at not having the time or energy to concentrate on poetry. For other important treatments of the public man of letters in American culture, see Simpson, Man of Letters; Warner, Letters; Charvat, Origins, esp. 1-26. On the rise of the North American and other similar reviews, see Charvat, Origins; Simpson, "The Tudor Brothers: Boston Ice and Boston Letters," in Man of Letters, 46-48; Howe, Unitarian Conscience; May, Enlightenment, 355-357; Mott, History of American Magazines, 2: 219-261; Martin, Instructed Vision, 15-18, 38-45.

compose the poems which had brought him the reputation and authority as a poet he held by 1826. Anxious to preserve the image of the man of letters as a disinterested gentleman who worked for the general good of his readers, Bryant endorsed an understanding of poetry which demanded considerable cultural work from poetry while devaluing the mental labor involved in its creation. As a young man Bryant moved from an active understanding of the mental labor involved in poetic composition to a conception of poetry that disconnected the finished poem from the work involved in its conception and in its finishing.⁵²

EARLY INFLUENCES

As an old man, William Cullen Bryant would recall that his grandfather and father were the earliest readers of his poetry. Grandfather Ebenezer Snell, who served as justice of the peace in Cummington, Massachusetts, was the first person to pay young Cullen for his poetic efforts: “[M]y grandfather gave me as an exercise the first chapter of the Book of Job to turn into verse. I put the whole narration into heroic couplets. . . . For this task I was rewarded with the small Spanish coin then called a ninepenny piece.”⁵³ This task served the devout Calvinist Snell’s purpose of steeping his grandson in Scripture while indulging the boy’s fondness for versification. The small economic reward suggested the possibility of earning money from poetic creation while also hinting at how very limited such income could be.

⁵²As Mary Poovey has suggested, audiences expected literary labor to be done for love and not for pay; in this sense, as well as, perhaps, in its tendency to be task- rather than time-oriented, literary work came to be seen as similar to domestic work. Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 89-125; Boydston, *Home and Work*, 142-163; Kelley, *Private Woman*, 56-197.

⁵³William Cullen Bryant, “An Autobiography of Mr. Bryant’s Life,” in *The Life of William Cullen Bryant*, ed. Parke Godwin, 2 vols. (1883; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 1:22. Godwin states that Bryant wrote this autobiographical sketch in 1873-1874.

When presented with Cullen's attempts at poetry, Peter Bryant offered his son both encouragement and sharply constructive criticism; Bryant would recall that Peter Bryant "ridiculed these, and endeavored to teach me to write only when I had something to say."⁵⁴ Like his own father, Peter Bryant was trained in physick. He had settled on his father-in-law's farm in Cummington in 1799, when Cullen was five years old, and actively cultivated the sensibility of an eighteenth-century gentleman. A staunch Federalist inclined towards Unitarianism, Peter Bryant served several terms in the Massachusetts General Court; his aesthetic and intellectual interests extended to violin playing, an extensive and varied library which included, according to his son, "the works of most of the eminent English poets,"⁵⁵ and the publication of several of his conventionally Augustan poems in the Massachusetts Magazine in 1790 and 1791. The doctor and his son shared a common avocational interest in poetry until Dr. Bryant's death in 1820.⁵⁶

Peter Bryant played a crucial role in his son's early reputation as a poet. In 1808 Dr. Bryant, then serving in the Massachusetts General Court in Boston, arranged for the publication of Cullen's virulently anti-Jefferson poem "The Embargo," in a pamphlet "by a youth of thirteen."⁵⁷ "The Embargo" was briefly reviewed in the Boston magazine Monthly Anthology and Boston Review by the young lawyer Alexander H. Everett in June 1808, who

⁵⁴Bryant, "Autobiographical Sketch," in Godwin, Life, 1:22.

⁵⁵*ibid.*, 1:2.

⁵⁶ Peter Bryant would appear in a later poem of his son's, "A Lifetime," as a "kindly figure," who would "[point] to a line just written/And 'tis blotted from the page." William Cullen Bryant, "A Lifetime," quoted in Tremaine McDowell, "Bryant's Practice in Composition and Revision," PMLA 52, no. 2 (June 1937): 477. When Bryant recalled his father's comment to a friend that "[Cullen] will be ashamed of his verses when he is grown up," he seemed to have understood this comment to reflect his father's awareness of the poetic development time and experience would bring. Bryant, "Autobiography," in Godwin, Life, 1:2-3, 8, 23; Charles H. Brown, William Cullen Bryant (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 7-11, 33; Godwin, Life, 1:42, 52, 55-56, 59, 65; Donald M. Murray, "Dr. Peter Bryant: Preceptor in Poetry to William Cullen Bryant," New England Quarterly 33, no. 4 (December 1982): 514; Tremaine McDowell, "The Juvenile Poetry of William Cullen Bryant," Studies in Philology 26, no. 1 (January 1929): 96-116; Robert A. Ferguson, "The Emulation of Sir William Jones in the Early Republic," New England Quarterly 52, no. 1 (March 1979): 3-26, esp. 15 for brief discussion of Peter Bryant's accomplishments; May, Enlightenment.

⁵⁷[William Cullen Bryant], The Embargo, or Sketches of the Times: a Satire, by a Youth of Thirteen (Boston, 1808; reprint, intro., Thomas O. Mabbott, Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1955), 17.

claimed “We have never met with a boy at that age, who had attained to such command of language and to so much poetic phraseology.”⁵⁸ Printed at Dr. Bryant’s expense, the pamphlets were sold for 12 1/2 cents each and apparently did not bring any significant profit. After the passage of the final Embargo Act in January 1809, Dr. Bryant published the boy’s revisions to the poem along with several of Cullen’s other poems in a larger copyrighted edition which proclaimed the author’s age and name. Peter Bryant’s willingness to publish this early poem suggested his willingness to indulge his son’s literary dreams (especially when they worked towards Federalist goals) and foreshadowed the role he would play in the initial publication of “Thanatopsis” in 1817. The boy, eager to please his father, expanded and polished verses his father had admired for their political sentiments; the proud father arranged to have the poem published and distributed as a form of anti-Republican propaganda. The positive response from the Monthly Anthology and from his Boston friends convinced Dr. Bryant to send Cullen to college towards a legal career. “The Embargo” had earned the young man a professional education.⁵⁹

Living on his father-in-law’s estate at Cummington, Peter Bryant could not pass on land to his sons, who had to find other ways to earn their livelihoods. His legacy to Cullen would be higher education, first in the form of a college preparatory schooling, the boy’s brief matriculation at Williams College in 1810, and finally in the arrangements made for Bryant to study law. In November 1808 Cullen went to board at his uncle Thomas Snell’s residence in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, to prepare himself to enter Williams College

⁵⁸[Alexander H. Everett], review of The Embargo, by William Cullen Bryant, in Monthly Anthology 5 (June 1808): 39-40; reprinted in The Embargo, ed. Mabbott, 12-13.

⁵⁹Dr. Bryant wrote his family from Boston: “Tell Cullen his poem is very much admired in Boston, and I can hardly persuade them to believe it possible that so young a lad should have had any hand in it—They however on the whole give him the credit of being a very extraordinary genius—” Peter Bryant to Bryant family, quoted in Brown, Bryant, 25; Mabbott, intro., Embargo, 12-14; McDowell, “Juvenile Verse,” 104-106; Tremaine McDowell, introduction to William Cullen Bryant: Representative Selections (New York: American Book Company, 1935), xiii; Bryant, “Autobiography,” in Godwin, Life, 27-28; Godwin, Life, 68-75.

as a sophomore. During this period, Peter Bryant wrote to his son suggesting that he might translate passages of Virgil's Aeneid into English verse; Cullen dutifully returned to his father two rhymed translations after the first suggestion. Years later, remembering this period, Bryant would write, "I wrote rather better when I had no original to follow;" Dr. Bryant's suggestions, however, allowed Cullen a way of blending his formal education with his literary interests.⁶⁰

For young Cullen's edification, Thomas Snell borrowed a copy of Lord Teignmouth's Memoirs of Sir William Jones for the boy to read. Jones was a model Augustan gentleman, a lawyer and judge who was an authority on Oriental literature, master of twenty-eight languages, and, not incidentally, a published poet. Teignmouth portrayed Jones' initial interest in the law as essentially aesthetic and service-oriented. After reading Fortescue's treatise on English law, attracted by the "simplicity of the Latin style"⁶¹ more than by the subject, Jones became fascinated by the ordered beauty of English law and vowed to devote his life to the "useful olive" of law rather than to the "barren laurel" of literature.⁶² Jones announced his attention to lock up all books not related to law or oratory until he had earned a competency and fulfilled his desire to serve his country. In 1774 Jones wrote to a friend:

I have deserted or rather suspended, all literary pursuits whatever, and I am wholly engaged in the study of a profession, for which I was always intended. As the law is

⁶⁰After leaving Snell's, Cullen studied Greek at the Reverend Moses Hallock's college preparatory school in Plainfield, Massachusetts. William Cullen Bryant II, "Bryant: The Middle Years: A Study in Cultural Fellowship," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1954), 57-58; Tremaine McDowell, "Cullen Bryant Prepares for College," South Atlantic Quarterly 30, no. 2 (April 1931): 125-133; Brown, Bryant, 34-36; Godwin, Life, 85; Bryant, "Autobiography," in Godwin, Life, 1:28-34.

⁶¹John Shore, Baron of Teignmouth, Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of Sir William Jones (Philadelphia: Wm. Poyntell & Co., 1805), 39-40.

⁶²This phrase comes from Teignmouth's memoir and, according to Robert Ferguson, appeared in many American lawyers' writings as a vow that was made to be dramatically broken. Ferguson, "Emulation of Jones;" Ferguson, Law and Letters, 5-6, 31-33.

a jealous science, and will not have any partnership with the Eastern muses, I must absolutely renounce their acquaintance for ten or twelve years to come.”⁶³

An earlier letter to a friend who had vetted some of Jones’ poetry suggests that Jones’ dramatic repudiation of literature may have been a shrewd gesture rather than an earnest defection. Jones wanted the dates of the poems’ compositions printed to show that he had written them before he began his legal career, because:

[I]t would hurt me, as a student at the bar, to have it thought that I continued to apply myself to poetry, and I mean to insinuate that I have given it up for several years. . . . For a man who wishes to rise in the law must be supposed to have no other object.⁶⁴

Teignmouth concluded the biography with much praise for Jones’ mental acuity and his ability to manage time.⁶⁵

Bryant’s reading of Teignmouth’s life of Jones may have convinced him that with careful management of time and demeanor, a man could balance the separate demands of law and letters. The Memoirs sketched the career of a respected gentleman who had successfully woven his desire to write, his hunger for service to his country, and his need for economic competency into an exemplary life. Bryant left Williams after less than a year, hoping to attend Yale with his roommate; when the family finances would not permit him to attend Yale, Peter Bryant arranged for his son to read law in the office of Samuel Howe in Worthington, Massachusetts, beginning in the winter of 1811. When Bryant expressed a

⁶³William Jones to Mr. Howard, [London?], 4 October 1774, in Teignmouth, Memoirs, 130. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴William Jones to Mr. Hawkins, n.p., 5 November 1771, in Teignmouth, Memoirs, 101-102.

⁶⁵“[W]hat appears to me. . . particularly to have enabled him to employ his talents so much to his own and the public advantage was the regular allotment of his time to particular occupations, and a scrupulous attention to the distribution which he had fixed. Hence all his studies were pursued without interruption or confusion.” Teignmouth, Memoirs, 406. Ferguson, “Emulation of Jones;” Ferguson, Law and Letters, 31-33; McDowell, “Bryant Prepares.” See also Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 99-254.

wish to study in Boston, Dr. Bryant arranged for him to leave Worthington and to continue his legal studies with William Baylies of Bridgewater, Massachusetts.⁶⁶

Bryant described his legal studies to a friend in terms that echoed Jones' aesthetic attraction to the law:

The study requires diligence of research. . . accuracy of reasoning and nicety of discrimination. . . its connection with the History of our grandmother-country England is intimate, and I may add inseparable — and to me the necessity of being a dabbler in antiquarianism is not the least of its attractions.⁶⁷

Bryant's recollection of the influence the Memoirs had on him focused more on Jones' poetic reputation than on his legal career; Bryant recalled that: "[A] clergyman. . . who came to exchange pulpits with my uncle, observing me occupied with the book, kindly said to me: 'You have only to be as diligent in your studies as that great man was, and, in time, you may write as fine verses as he did.'" Bryant, "Autobiography," in Godwin, Life, 30.

On the circumstances of Bryant's legal training, see Tremaine McDowell, "Cullen Bryant at Williams College," New England Quarterly 1, no. 4 (October 1928): 443-466; Tremaine McDowell, "William Cullen Bryant and Yale," New England Quarterly 3, no. 4 (October 1930): 706-716; Brown, Bryant, 48-70.

⁶⁶During the early years of the republic, formal study at an educational institution dedicated to legal training was a rarity; although several schools existed before the turn of the nineteenth century, the first formal university-based law school was established at Harvard in 1817. Many lawyers received their training in the individual offices of established lawyers; such training could be limited to the mastery of only a few crucial texts beyond the de rigueur Blackstone's Commentaries. Bryant's legal education was typical of the time. On legal education in the early republican era, see Miller, Life of the Mind, 99-185; Ferguson, Law and Letters, 28-33; Michael H. Hoeflich, introduction to The Gladsome Light of Jurisprudence: Learning the Law in England and the United States in the 18th and 19th Centuries, ed. Michael Hoeflich, Contributions in Legal Studies, no. 49 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 5-6. As Robert Ferguson has argued, early republican legal training emphasized the acquisition of a broadly general body of knowledge based on the theory that the accretion of factual knowledge would both lead to and affirm a body of general principles. The developing American legal profession demanded skill at logical induction (from general to particular) based on the massive amounts of deduction (from particular to general) performed by English lawyers throughout the long history of the English legal system. This tension between the inductive and the deductive permitted the development of an American legal system that was intimately related to but arguably distinct from the British system; by favoring induction based principles gleaned from the English legal system, American lawyers could claim title to the orderly principles and virtues of the English system while claiming distinction on the basis of the uniquely American circumstances to which those principles were applied. Miller, Life of the Mind, 99-265; Ferguson, Law and Letters, 9-33, 54-58.

⁶⁷Bryant to John Avery, Worthington, MA, 27 March 1813, in Letters, 1:25-26. Emphasis in original. Bryant's letter was intended to suggest the benefits of studying law to Avery, who apparently had written Bryant a letter revealing uncertainty about his career choice (Avery's letter is unrecovered). Bryant's advice sheds some light on the texts he was reading as a law student:

Should you therefore coincide in opinion with the eloquent Lecturer Sullivan that 'The character of an honest and upright lawyer is one of the most glorious, because one of the most useful to mankind' and with Montesquieu (whose name needs no epithet of eloquent, or celebrated, or any thing else), that a multiplicity of laws are the evidences and the intrenchments of liberty; and lastly should you prefer it, before any other profession or plan of life I would then advise you to become an inquirer into what my Lord Coke calleth 'the amiable and admirable secrets of the law.'

Emphasis in original. *ibid.*, 1:26. Bryant referred to Francis Stoughton Sullivan's Lectures on the Constitution and Laws of England, (first American edition, Portsmouth, ME, 1805) and to Sir Edward Coke's The Institutes of the Laws of England, (American edition, Philadelphia, 1812); earlier in the same letter he had referred to

An aesthetic interest in the law would not be strong enough to overcome Bryant's love for the poetic muse. In a May 1817 letter to Baylies, Bryant wrote that he had bought out his partner George Ives. Earlier in the letter, Bryant had written, in response to Baylies' asking how Bryant liked his profession:

Alas, Sir, the Muse was my first love and the remains of that passion which not rooted out yet chilled into extinction will always I fear cause me to look coldly on the severe beauties of Themis. Yet I tame myself to its labours as well as I can, and have endeavoured to discharge with punctuality and attention such of the duties of my profession as I was capable of performing.⁶⁸

He went on to report that he had purchased his partner George Ives' share of the practice "for a mere trifle," and added, "the business of the Office has hitherto been worth about 10 or 12. hundred dollars a year. — It will probably be less hereafter yet I cannot think it will decrease very materially, as I am well patronized here[.]"⁶⁹ Baylies' pragmatic reply could not have been overly encouraging to a young man who hoped to balance poetry and law:

It is not surprising that you should meet with difficulty in breaking off all connection with the muse, as your love has ever met with so favourable a return. I do not however condemn your resolutions [to give up poetry]. Poetry is a commodity, I know, not suited to the American market. It will neither help a man to wealth nor office — you recollect no doubt the lines of Swift: more applicable to this country than his.⁷⁰

studying botany "as a sauce to my Blackstone," a reference to Blackstone's Commentaries. *ibid.*, 1:25-26, fn. 4, 7, and 9.

⁶⁸*ibid.* Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹Bryant to William Baylies, Great Barrington, MA, [c27 May] 1817, in Letters, 1:71. An earlier draft of this letter suggests that in spite of these bright hopes, Bryant was worried about his income: where in the printed draft of this letter, Bryant closed by saying "I should be much delighted to visit Bridgewater again, and mean to do so at no very distant period. I believe however that the circumstances of my business and the hard times will keep me at home the present season—" in the earlier draft, Bryant had struck out a sentence reading "I believe, however, that I must stay at home the present season, for money is as ~~pretty~~ scarce here as heart could wish." [strikeout Bryant's] See Bryant to Baylies, Great Barrington, MA, [undated] 1817, in BG Papers.

⁷⁰Emphasis in original. William Baylies to Bryant, Bridgewater, MA, 8 November 1817, in BG Papers. Baylies included the lines from Swift in the letter:

Not beggars brat on bulk begat
Not bastard of a Pedlar Scot
.....
Are so disqualified by fate
To rise in Church — or Law — or State
As he whom Phoebus, in his ire
Has blasted with poetic fire.

Baylies, who would later compliment Bryant's published poetry, wrote more to give Bryant a clear view of the position he understood poetry to have in American culture than he did to discourage Bryant from writing poetry.

Bryant had taken his father's copy of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads with him when he left Cummington to begin his legal studies under Samuel Howe; young Cullen had read Lyrical Ballads in 1811, after returning home to Cummington from Williams. He would tell Richard Henry Dana Sr. that "upon opening Wordsworth, a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in [my] heart, and the face of nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life."⁷¹ Certainly young Cullen Bryant's emotional and creative responses to Nature corresponded to Wordsworth's characterization of Nature as a pervasive and powerful inspiration; however, for Bryant, Nature was increasingly held at a distance.⁷² More formally, Bryant's poetic debt to Wordsworth can be seen most clearly in his use of natural imagery and in his simple and emotionally direct language. Wordsworth's definitions of the poet and of poetry in the Preface to his Lyrical Ballads (1800-1802), however, would also have contributed to Bryant's sense of poetic vocation. Like Alison, Wordsworth assigned moral and cultural power to the poet, but devoted more explicit attention to the workings of the poet's mind. Wordsworth's poet was "a man speaking to men,"⁷³ whose elevated

Emphasis in original.

⁷¹ Richard Henry Dana attributed this statement to Bryant in his 1833 preface to a published edition of Dana's Idle Man essays. Richard Henry Dana, Sr., preface to 1833 ed. of Idle Man, in Dana, Poems and Prose Writings, 2 vols., (New York: 1850), 1:150-151.

⁷² Although he gives little direct attention to Bryant, Adam Sweeting's discussion of the "genteel Romantics" of the Hudson River Valley and their perception of nature as a force to be tamed for the moral benefit of its viewers (rather than the epistemologically affecting experience of the Transcendentalists) seems applicable to Bryant as well. However, I suspect that Bryant's taming of nature was a learned response to the affecting environment; Sweeting does not directly address the possibility of more unsettling responses in any of the men he treats. Sweeting, Reading Houses, 4-13, 63-92.

⁷³ Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads, Poems, 1:877.

sensibilities set him apart from others while uniquely enabling him to speak for all men. The mind of this poet was both powerfully receptive and exquisitely creative:

[I]t will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure.⁷⁴

Wordsworth followed his definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” with an assertion that poetic production involved not only feeling but careful thought which would modify and direct those powerful feelings.⁷⁵ Able to moderate strongly felt emotions through directed thought, Wordsworth’s poet could exert cultural power through positively defined mental activity. Finally, for Wordsworth, writing and reading poetry were to serve more than merely individual ends. Wordsworth ended his 1800 Preface by stating that he wished not to criticize other poetry so much as he wanted to call into being “genuine poetry; in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations.”⁷⁶ Like Alison, Wordsworth believed poetry and the arts to have great value and use as instruments of moral agency, reform, and education.⁷⁷

Bryant’s readings of Wordsworth and of Scottish common-sense theorist Archibald Alison’s Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790) provided him with a conception of

⁷⁴ibid., 1:878.

⁷⁵ibid., 1:870-871.

⁷⁶ibid., 1:892.

⁷⁷Rebecca Rio-Jelliffe, “The Poetry of William Cullen Bryant: Theory and Practice,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1964); William Palmer Hudson, “Archibald Alison and William Cullen Bryant,” American Literature 12 (March 1940): 59-68; Charvat, Origins, 50-52, 89-97; Bernard Duffey, Poetry in American: Expression and Its Values in the Times of Bryant, Whitman, and Pound (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978), 7-11; Albert Gelpi, The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63-67. Rio-Jelliffe considers Bryant to fall “squarely in the romantic movement which he anticipates in America by over a decade,” (134); I am more inclined to agree with Gelpi’s assertion that Emerson rather than Bryant was Wordsworth’s true successor in the United States. See Gelpi, Tenth Muse, 65.

poetic vocation that melded aesthetic pleasure with moral uplift and attributed significant cultural power to the poet. Drawing on an associationist psychology, Alison characterized aesthetic sensibility as a malleable mental attribute that could be heightened or dulled by a range of social and cultural factors. Arguing that art served the high purposes of spiritual feeling and moral uplift, Alison made the artist responsible for the creation of appropriately stimulating images. While Alison assigned the poet considerable cultural power and responsibility, the poet was to discharge these duties without calling undue attention to himself.⁷⁸

Both Alison and Wordsworth claimed cultural significance and moral power for poetry; both assigned moral responsibility to the poet insofar as images were transmitted through the mind of the poet to the hearts and minds of readers. Romantic emphases on the artist's emotional sincerity and creative power could blend easily with Scottish common-sense emphases on effect and moral uplift if the ideas and emotions expressed fit within an acceptable range of moral or religiously inspiring sentiment. Bryant's conception of poetic vocation balanced common-sense emphases on reception and the "cultivability" of taste with Romantic stress on the poet's heightened capacity for thought and emotion. As a lawyer and would-be poet, Bryant struggled to reconcile the sensibilities attributed to the poet with the potentially dulling effect of his professional labors.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Alison, *Essays*, ff., esp. 80-96, 240-258. For an important treatment of the influence Alison's *Essays* had on Bryant, see Hudson, "Alison and Bryant;" McDowell, "Bryant Prepares;" Rio-Jelliffe, "Poetry of Bryant."

⁷⁹ Alison directly addressed the effects of professional and commercial spaces on aesthetic sensibilities: They who have been doomed [wrote Alison] by their professions to pass their early years in populous and commercial cities, and in the narrow and selfish pursuits which prevail there, soon lose that sensibility which is the most natural of all — the sensibility of the beauty of the country. The inferior situations of life, by contracting the knowledge and the affections of men, within very narrow limits, produce, insensibly, a similar contraction in their notions of the beautiful or the sublime. The finest natural taste is seldom found able to withstand that narrowness and insensibility of mind, which is, perhaps, necessarily acquired by the minute and uninteresting details of the mechanical arts. . .

Alison, *Essays*, 61. Emphasis added.

THE BARD AND THE BLACK-LETTER PAGE

The poems Bryant wrote during his legal career attempted to resolve concerns he had about his profession and his sense of poetic vocation. In his early poetry Bryant showed his adeptness at moving between the general and the particular to make the one represent the other. In his second lecture on poetry, delivered in 1826, Bryant would describe one of poetry's primary tasks as:

the exhibition of those analogies and correspondences which [poetry] beholds between the things of the moral and of the natural world. . . . its adorning and illustration each by the other — infusing a moral sentiment into natural objects, and bringing images of visible beauty and majesty to heighten the effect of moral sentiment.⁸⁰

Bryant's early poems showed his use of such analogies to draw universal moral conclusions from his observations of particular natural objects or events. His poems translated his own specific emotional experiences and concerns into a more universal vocabulary which drew on those moral-natural analogies. Even more specifically, these poems revealed the young lawyer struggling to come to terms with his desire to write poetry. When the editors of the North American Review published several of these poems, Bryant found himself praised for the general moral sentiments his poems carried and for the service those poems could provide for the American reading public.

Bryant, working as a lawyer in the small town of Great Barrington, hardly needed to worry that city life would cause him to lose the natural sensibility brought on by association with the countryside; however, as I will suggest, poems like "I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion" and "Green River" indicated that Bryant knew that he needed time away from professional concerns in order to enjoy those associations and translate them into poetry.

⁸⁰William Cullen Bryant, "Lecture Second: On the Values and Uses of Poetry," Lectures on Poetry, in Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant, ed. Parke Godwin, 2 vols., (New York, 1884; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 1:19.

His early awareness of the tensions between poetic creation and adult responsibility can be seen in “Stanzas,” an early version of a poem he would revise into “I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion,” first published in his 1832 Poems. “Stanzas,” which Bryant began around 1813 while a law student and published in the New York Review’s February 1826 number, clearly revealed the boy’s passionate attachment to the natural surroundings of his boyhood in western Massachusetts; the later poem, although smoother and more polished, retained the sentiments of the earlier verses. The first five stanzas contained nostalgic reminiscences of Bryant’s powerfully emotional experiences of Nature during his childhood; the final four stanzas were set in the narrator’s present. The fifth stanza describes the climactic moment of composition and blended the ecstatic with the ominous:

Till I felt the dark power o’er my reveries stealing,
From his throne in the depth of that stern solitude,
And he breathed through my lips, in that tempest of feeling,
Strains full of his spirit, though artless and rude⁸¹

In his later version of this poem, Bryant would revise this stanza to read:

Till I felt the dark power o’er my reveries stealing,
From the gloom of the thicket that over me hung,
And the thoughts that awoke, in that rapture of feeling,
Were formed into verse as they rose to my tongue.⁸²

In the later version, what the young Bryant had experienced almost as possession — the dark power “breathed through [his] lips. . . Strains full of his spirit, though artless and rude,” — had become at once less threatening and more intimately connected to a defined process of composition: feeling awakened thoughts, which “[w]ere formed into verse as they rose to [his] tongue.” The earlier draft was rawer, the poet less in control of his own emotional responses to Nature and of his own ability to translate that overwhelming inspiration into

⁸¹X.X., [William Cullen Bryant], “Stanzas,” New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine, (February 1826): 217.

⁸²William Cullen Bryant, “I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion,” in The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant, Roslyn ed., ed. Henry C. Sturges (New York: 1903; reprint, AMS Press, 1972), 88-89.

verse form. Significantly, however, in both drafts, the boy seemed passive and in the thrall of a “power” that stole upon him and brought on a “tempest” or a “rapture” of feeling.

The final four stanzas of “Stanzas” looked back nostalgically at those ecstatic moments of inspiration, which seemed lost to the narrator who had since “mixed with the world” and had acquired “a signet of care on [his] brow.”⁸³ In both versions of this poem Bryant associated the “beautiful day dreams” (which would become “bright visions”) of his childhood with the mental and physical innocence of a child, which in turn corresponded to a mind whose purity left it wholly open to Nature. The poem — particularly in the somewhat more lurid earlier draft, written during Bryant’s adolescence — suggested that Bryant felt himself separated from these visions not only by a sense of physical corruption but also by the necessary absorption in legal study and, as an adult, in legal work. Aware that he could not avoid worldly cares, Bryant hoped instead to blend his adult life with his youthful role as “pupil” of verse. The wistful “sometimes” in the final two lines — “But sometimes return, and in mercy awaken/The glories ye showed to his earlier years”⁸⁴ — suggested Bryant’s longing to find a balance between worldly cares and poetry — a desire which, to a young law student in 1813, may have seemed both more pressing and more possible than it did to the older Bryant in .

In both versions of this poem, Nature functioned as both inspiration and source of imagery; the two fused, but their fusion was outside and separate from Bryant himself. In the later version of the poem, that distance left Bryant uncertain of himself as a poet. The uncertainty transmitted by the poem, particularly the yearning for an effortlessly creative childhood in the later version, almost outweighed the passion contained in the young man’s memories of an environment so conducive to composition. The two versions of the poem

⁸³These phrases appear in both versions. [Bryant], “Stanzas,” 217; Bryant, “I Cannot Forget,” 89.

⁸⁴The final stanzas of each version are identical.

suggest a young man struggling to master his own passions through the transmission of those emotions into poetry: if the earlier poem suggested a narrator at once seduced by and nostalgic for his own powerful emotions, the later poem revealed a narrator whose mastery of those emotions — required of a respectable young lawyer — seemed to threaten the boy's essentially creative passion.⁸⁵

Bryant's poem "To a Friend on His Marriage," written before 1813 on the occasion of a friend's marriage, showed both the influence and the inadequacy of Sir William Jones' legal/authorial model for Bryant. In the fifth stanza of the poem, Bryant introduced himself as a legal scholar whose vow to give up poetry echoed Jones' resolve:

— O'er Coke's black letter page,
Trimming the lamp at eve, 'tis mine to pore:
Well pleased to see the venerable sage,
Unlock his treasur'd wealth of legal lore:
And I, that lov'd to trace the woods before,
And climb the hill a play mate of the breeze,
Have vow'd to tune the rural lay no more,
Have bid my useless classicks sleep at ease,
And left the race of bards to scribble, starve, and freeze.⁸⁶

The sixth and final stanza began with "Farewell," bid to the useless classicks, to the breeze and the woods, and to those shivering and hungry bards, who represented the unprofitability of poetry as a career. The stanza then reveals the overriding irresistibility of Nature:

Farewell. — When mildly through the naked wood,
The clear warm sun effus'd a mellow ray:
And livelier health propell'd the vital flood,
Loitering at large, I por'd the incondite lay,
Forgot the cares and business of the day,
Forgot the quirks of Lyttleton [sic] and Coke,
Forgot the publick [sic] storms, and party fray;
And, as the inspiring flame across me broke,

⁸⁵See Rotundo, *American Manhood*, for an important analysis of how boyhood leisure pursuits were expected to be either given up or channeled into adult activities on the attainment of adulthood. Rotundo's analysis of masculinity is particularly significant because of its suggestion that masculinity can be defined in relation to femininity and to boyhood.

⁸⁶[William Cullen Bryant], "To a Friend on His Marriage," *North American Review* 6, no. 3 (March 1818), 385. This poem is not reproduced in either of the two collection of Bryant's poems I have been using.

To thee the lowly harp, neglected long, I woke.⁸⁷

Cares, business, legal texts, “publick storms and party fray” all were overridden by the desire to write — that “inspiring flame” — that Bryant experienced when out in Nature. In spite of (or perhaps because of) the disorderliness of the “incondite lay,” the poet succumbs to Nature’s influence, is wakened into his old love of poetry, and writes this poem. While the poem contains Bryant as legal student, Bryant appears as poet both within the poem and as author of the poem. The very existence of this poem, with its inclusion of Bryant’s poetic and nonpoetic identities, suggested the stronger influence that poetry had on Bryant’s mind. After the publication of “Thanatopsis” in 1817, Bryant gave up any pretense of having set aside poetry in favor of the law.⁸⁸

As it became professionally necessary for Bryant to control his emotions and his imagination, he was more inclined to observe and to think “through” natural images than to participate in Nature as wholly as a Wordsworth or an Emerson might. “To a Waterfowl,” begun in the summer of 1815, showed Bryant’s growing ability to develop natural images carrying both universal and particular meaning. “Waterfowl” described the train of thought triggered in the narrator by his observation of a bird in flight; the poem was built on an analogy drawn between the bird and a narrator uncertain of his own path in life. The fourth and eighth stanzas of the poem drew the moral of the poem clearly:

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast —
The desert and illimitable air —
Lone wandering, but not lost.

⁸⁷ibid.

⁸⁸According to Teignmouth, William Jones broke his vow to give up literature to write a poem—called “The Muse Recalled”—celebrating the marriage of a former pupil. Teignmouth, *Memoirs*, 200.

Regarding the dating of “To a Friend,” William Brown points out that the poem was composed while Bryant was at Worthington studying under Samuel Howe (1811-1814) and so was composed before Bryant went to Bridgewater to study with William Baylies in June 1814. Brown also points out that in 1813, Jacob Porter, the friend to whom the poem was addressed, had the poem printed in a small pamphlet memorializing his bride after her death. Brown, *Bryant*, 56, 81.

.....
 He who, from zone to zone,
 Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
 In the long way that I must tread alone,
 Will lead my steps aright.⁸⁹

“A Power” or God can be trusted to guide the steps of man “aright” just as He guides the waterfowl home to a predetermined and particular resting place. “The Waterfowl” can also be read as a working out of Bryant’s own sense of vocation: as God would guide the solitary bird to a home where he could “scream among his fellows,” so would He guide the despairing poet on his solitary way towards his rightful cultural “home” and the companionship of other “fellow” men of letters. “The Waterfowl” contained both the universal moral lesson usually attributed to this poem and Bryant’s own specific vocational concerns; a single train of thought inspired by the sighting of a bird sustained both meanings.⁹⁰

Both “To a Friend” and a later poem, “Green River,” written in 1819 and first published in Richard Henry Dana’s Idle Man, showed Bryant working out a sense of himself as poet through the composition of poems which manipulated his double identity as poet and lawyer. “Green River” also showed Bryant’s continuing awareness of his emotional and intellectual responses to his physical surroundings. The poem described the emotional distance between the natural environment and the “jostling crowd” of the workplace while holding both within the structure of the poem. Quickly and sharply sketched, images of the workplace were followed and absorbed by a description of the river’s regenerative power:

Though forced to drudge for the dregs of men,
 And scrawl strange words with the barbarous pen,
 And mingle among the jostling crowd,
 Where the sons of strife are subtle and loud —

⁸⁹William Cullen Bryant, “To a Waterfowl,” in Poetical Works, 26-27.

⁹⁰See William Cullen Bryant II, “The Waterfowl in Retrospect,” The New England Quarterly 30, no. 2 (June 1957): 181-189.

I often come to this quiet place,
 To breathe the airs that ruffle thy face,
 And gaze upon thee in silent dream,
 For in thy lonely and lovely stream
 An image of that calm life appears
 That won my heart in my greener years.⁹¹

“Green River” is a narrative of Bryant’s own mental life, encompassed both the drudgery of the law and the inspiration found in Nature. His work among the “sons of strife” was in an important way supportive of Bryant’s poetry: although it permitted him limited time for composition, the law provided a modest but real income to sustain Bryant and his young family. In “Green River,” Bryant used his poetic talents to create a portrait of times and spaces dedicated alternatively to money-making work and to soul-soothing poetic creation.

As he juggled law and poetry, Bryant used his poetry to work out a sense of balance between the two. Both his letters and his poetry from these years reflected the tensions Bryant felt between the ideal of a lawyer who dabbled in literature and the real mental and physical demands such a combination placed on him. Bryant’s wistful comments to his former legal tutor about his resolution to give up poetry and the difficulty this caused him were echoed by but also dwelt on more emotionally in his poem(s) “Stanzas” and “I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion.” In spite of the sense of loss and regret that pair of poems held, however, the fact remains that Bryant wrote the initial “Stanzas” and would later revise it — retaining several key passages — into “I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion” for publication in his 1832 Poems. In “To a Friend” and “Green River,” the desire to write poetry, represented by and related to his entry into and observation of natural settings, “won” over the demands of law; the physical reality of the poems and their eventual publication attested to the “victory” of poetry which had successfully lobbied for a place in Bryant’s mind and heart.

⁹¹William Cullen Bryant, “Green River,” in Poetical Works, 27-29.

Finally, throughout his legal training and career, Bryant revised “Thanatopsis,” one of his best-known poems. While literary critics disagree on the date of the first writing of the lines that would become this poem, they generally agree that Bryant began to compose “Thanatopsis” in his mind during the summer or fall of 1811, between Bryant’s term at Williams and the beginning of his legal studies in winter 1811, and that the poem probably was written out between 1811 and 1813. The version that appeared in the North American Review is believed to be taken from his first written draft. The poem then apparently went through three significant revisions, the last one resulting in the version which appeared in the volume of poems Bryant published in his 1821 Poems.⁹² What began as a darkly stoic rumination on the inevitability of death, composed in response to his reading of several graveyard poets, fear of his own death and, conceivably, some concern about the course his own life would follow, would become a poem well known for its moralistic and uplifting conclusion which exhorted its readers:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
 The innumerable caravan, which moves
 To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
 His chamber in the silent halls of death,
 Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
 Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
 By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
 Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.⁹³

Rebecca Rio-Jelliffe has argued that “Thanatopsis” in its final form announced Bryant’s maturation as a poet. In the final version’s introduction, (female) Nature appeared as an educating force teaching the value of life; the body of the poem, understood now to be the

⁹²The most significant changes throughout the drafts were in the introduction and the conclusion of the poem. Bryant experimented with the persona introducing the body of the poem, the section beginning with “—Yet a few days. . .” At first he put those words into the mouth of the (male) protagonist’s “better genius” which suggested an internal dialogue within the protagonist; in the final version’s introduction, a female Nature speaks. The moralizing conclusion did not appear until the “final” draft which appeared in Bryant’s 1821 volume Poems.

⁹³William Cullen Bryant, “Thanatopsis,” in Poetical Works, 23.

voice of Nature, used sensuous natural imagery to embody abstract and paradoxical ideas about death and eternity. The conclusion, where Nature used death to teach the listening protagonist (and reader) the meaning of life, showed Bryant's powerful ability to utilize Nature and its imagery to express a series of paradoxes: abstract/sensuous; eternal/transient; general/particular.⁹⁴

In its final version, "Thanatopsis" most clearly showed Bryant's skill at using natural imagery to convey both general and particular lessons or sentiments; its long period of gestation, marked by several significant revisions following its first version's publication, revealed not simply Bryant's poetic maturation, but also his growing confidence in himself as a poet determined to reach a level of maturity and willing to spend time on the revision of a poem until he felt it was complete. The moralistic affirmation of life in the 1821 version's conclusion reflected Bryant's heightened faith in his ability to function as a poet while working as a lawyer. Along with "Waterfowl" and "Green River," "Thanatopsis" and its revisions showed Bryant's developing ability to translate his own specific experience of the conflicting pulls of creative desire and economic necessity into a series of deeper and more universally applicable themes. At the same time, "Thanatopsis" also suggested that for Bryant a life worthy of the "pleasant dreams" to follow death would include the composition of poetry.⁹⁵

⁹⁴Rio-Jelliffe, "Poetry of Bryant." Rio-Jelliffe makes a similar argument more compactly in "'Thanatopsis' and the Development of American Literature," in William Cullen Bryant and His America: Centennial Conference Proceedings, 1878-1978, ed. Stanley Brodwin, Michael D'Innocenzo, and Joseph Astman, Hofstra University Cultural & Intercultural Studies: 4 (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983), 133-153; see also William Cullen Bryant II, "The Genesis of 'Thanatopsis,'" New England Quarterly 21, no. 1 (March 1948): 163-184.

⁹⁵Bryant, "Green River," in Poetical Works, 27-29. Biographer and colleague John Bigelow has noted that after Bryant bought his rural retreat at Roslyn, Long Island, he refused to bring any Evening Post work to the house. According to Bigelow, "Not even the shadow of his business must fall upon the consecrated haunts of his muse." John Bigelow, William Cullen Bryant, American Men of Letters (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1890). See also McDowell, "Bryant's Practice," 466-477; Rio-Jelliffe, "Poetry of Bryant;" Norbert Krapf, "William Cullen Bryant's Roslyn Poems," in Under an Open Sky: Poets on William Cullen Bryant, ed. Norbert Krapf (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 3-16.

UNDER HIGHER OBLIGATION

Bryant's association with the Boston-based North American Review began in 1817 with the review's publication of the first version of "Thanatopsis" and continued well into the 1820s. His connection with the North American became an important source of moral support to a young lawyer toying with abandoning poetry altogether. Founded in 1815, the North American functioned within an Anglo-American critical theory based on Scottish common-sense aesthetic theory, which focused more on aesthetic reception than on creation. Common-sense associationist psychology privileged broadly determined social, national, and universal associations over specific and individual associations; mental associations became external standards to be realized rather than sources of original thought. Scottish realism's powerful hold on the early critical community gave rise to a didactic literary aesthetic: literature was seen as worthwhile insofar as it sought to inculcate republication virtue in American readers. Literature would serve as a means of fostering associations conducive to general public virtue.⁹⁶

Within this broader critical framework, under the influence of Richard Henry Dana, Sr., Willard Phillips, and Edward T. Channing, the North American briefly reached out towards European Romanticism. Generally the North American embraced a conservative Romanticism, one which can be seen not only in its critical reviews, especially those written by Dana, but also in the stamp of approval the review gave the young Bryant's poetry and critical essays. Setting Bryant and other favored writers up as illustrations of the possibilities of an American literature, the editorial board's embrace of Bryant's affecting and uplifting poetry freed them on the one hand from the ornateness and formal rigidity of the

⁹⁶Martin, Instructed Vision; Howe, Unitarian Conscience; Charvat, Origins; Stein, Ruskin, 18-31.

Augustans, and, on the other hand, distinguished themselves from the emotional excesses of the more radical examples of Romantic thought. As a model for would-be poets, Bryant bore the approval of one of the young nation's most powerful reviews.⁹⁷

Bryant was brought into the North American's literary circle chiefly through his father's connections in Boston. In May 1817 Peter Bryant, then serving as a state senator in Boston, wrote to his son that Willard Phillips, who had lived in Cummington and visited at the Bryant home, was, as a member of a Harvard-based literary club, on the editorial board of the new North American Review and that Phillips had asked Dr. Bryant to ask his son to contribute something to the journal. Wrote Dr. Bryant to his son: "I wish, if you have the leisure, you would comply, as it might be the means of introducing you to notice in the capital. Those who contribute are generally known to the literati in and about Boston."⁹⁸ When Bryant was unable to produce anything immediately, Dr. Bryant passed on to Phillips several fragments, including the blank-verse lines which became "Thanatopsis" and "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," and four quatrains about death. Because Dr. Bryant had recopied "Thanatopsis" and the quatrains on death, the editors of the review believed he had written those items himself and published the quatrains and the blank-verse lines together under the title "Thanatopsis."⁹⁹

⁹⁷Tremaine McDowell, "Bryant and the North American Review," American Literature 1 (March 1929): 14-26; Hunter, Dana, Sr., 20-41; see also Charvat, Origins, on conservative Romanticism and the impact of Wordsworth. On the North American's repeated negative responses to Byron, see H. L. Kleinfeld, "Infidel on Parnassus: Lord Byron and the North American Review," New England Quarterly 33, no. 2 (June 1960): 164-185.

⁹⁸Peter Bryant to William Cullen Bryant, quoted in Brown, Bryant, 78. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁹McDowell, "Bryant and the North American," Brown, Bryant, 78-81; Godwin, Life, 148-155. After the publication of "Thanatopsis," Phillips wrote to Peter Bryant asking for more poetry and wrote to Cullen that "Your 'Fragment' was exceedingly liked here. Among others, Mr. Channing, the clergyman [William Ellery Channing] spoke very highly of it, and all the best judges say that it and your father's 'Thanatopsis' are the very best poetry that has been published in this country." Once it was established that Cullen and not Peter Bryant was the poet responsible for "Thanatopsis," the North American published "To a Friend on his Marriage," "To a Waterfowl," and "Translations of a Version of Simonides" in its March 1818 number. Willard Phillips to Bryant, Boston, MA, 2 December 1817, in BG Papers.

It is likely that Peter Bryant encouraged his son to publish in the North American precisely because literary publication would add to his status and his reputation as a lawyer; affiliation with the review would add to his notice in the “capital,” an importantly flexible term which referred Boston’s status as both the capital of Massachusetts and as the literary capital of the young nation. Peter Bryant’s fostering of his son’s legal career, begun with his own publication of the boy’s politically charged “Embargo” and culminated in his passing the lines of “Thanatopsis” to Willard Phillips (who was, like Channing and Dana, a lawyer by training). By 1817 the anti-Jeffersonian boy had given up his Federalist beliefs and was embracing the doctrine of free trade; the Federalist father remained the Augustan gentleman who patronized Boston’s new literary review while serving as state senator. Peter Bryant’s efforts to get his son’s poetry into print reworked the Sir William Jones model of the literary lawyer: publication of the “Thanatopsis” brought the young man to the attention of the Boston literati while at the same time concealing his identity, since all items in the review were unsigned and anonymous.¹⁰⁰

“Thanatopsis” was well-received. After its publication, Phillips wrote to Peter Bryant asking for more poetry and wrote to Cullen that William Ellery Channing had praised his “Fragment;” adding, “[A]ll the best judges say that it and your father’s ‘Thanatopsis’ are the very best poetry that has been published in this country.”¹⁰¹ Once it was established that Cullen himself was the poet responsible for “Thanatopsis,” the North American published “To a Friend on his Marriage,” “To a Waterfowl,” and “Translations of a Version of Simonides” in its March 1818 number. Although the North American never paid Bryant for the poems and essays they received from him, the magazine’s editors provided Bryant with a

¹⁰⁰Ferguson, “Emulation;” Ferguson, Law and Letters; McDowell, introduction to Representative Selections, xvi-xxiii; Brown, Bryant, 107-109; Warner, Letters; Charvat, Origins.

¹⁰¹Willard Phillips to Bryant, Boston, MA, 2 December 1817, in BG Papers.

broader purpose for his poetry writing. In September 1818, Edward T. Channing wrote to Bryant:

It is one of our objects to . . . secure the confidence of readers by a steady adherence to the principles on which we started, and if possible, by making the book better and better every number. Excuse me, then, when I ask you to spare a little time from your profession, and give it to us.¹⁰²

Channing hoped that Bryant, by contributing to his periodical, would continue to contribute to the cause of American literature. Bryant responded in kind, thanking Channing for the review's "favourable reception" of his work, and added:

[I] feel myself happy if I may be esteemed to have done any thing for the literature of my country. In the mean time I may occasionally attempt something for your journal, and lend such assistance as might be expected from one situated as I am. . . distant from books and literary opportunities, and occupied with a profession which ought to engage most of my attention.¹⁰³

In March 1819, Channing thanked Bryant for sending him "The Yellow Violet." Explaining that the North American had given up its poetry department, Channing asked if Bryant had considered publishing a volume of his poetry, adding:

The Author of the 'Waterfowl' and 'A Fragment' is under higher obligation than any American Bard to do more. If I had any right or wish to commend you — in your own hearing — I should have urged your obligation to write by comparing you with greater men than we can boast of. . . .¹⁰⁴

Channing set the needs of the North American and, by extension, of the American reading public, against the obligations which legal practice placed on Bryant.

Bryant's modest response to Channing's letter ("To commendations so flattering as you are pleased to bestow on me, coming from such a quarter, I hardly know what to say") revealed Bryant's awareness of his need for encouragement and literary companionship as

¹⁰²Edward T. Channing to Bryant, Boston, MA, 3 September 1818, in BG Papers.

¹⁰³Bryant to Channing, Great Barrington, MA, 6 September 1818, in Letters, 1:86.

¹⁰⁴Edward T. Channing to Bryant, Boston, MA, 8 March 1819, in BG Papers. Emphasis added.

well as the cultural impact the North American's moral support of favored authors could have:

I may perhaps, some time or other, venture a little collection of poetry in print, — for I do not write much — and should it be favourably received, it may give me courage to do something more. In the mean time I cannot be too grateful for th[e] distant voice of kindness, that cheers me in the pursuit of those studies which I have nobody here to share with me.¹⁰⁵

When Bryant wrote, in “To a Waterfowl,” of the bird:

All day thy wings have fanned,
At that far height, the cold, thin atmosphere,
.....
soon that toil shall end;
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.¹⁰⁶

he may have written of his own longing to find fellows to “scream among” after his hard mental labor in “the cold, thin atmosphere” of the law. His association with the North American Review brought him those fellows; their enthusiastic reception of his poetry — and their publication of that very poem — also provided him with a culturally legitimating rationale for writing poetry. The connection Channing encouraged Bryant to draw between his own literary production and the moral and intellectual well-being of American readers, gave Bryant a powerful reason, beyond his own personal emotional circumstances, to find the time to write poetry.

ESSAYING ON AMERICAN POETRY

In July 1818 Bryant's first literary review, written at the request of Willard Phillips, appeared in the North American. In the review, of Solyman Brown's Essay on American

¹⁰⁵Bryant to Channing, Great Barrington, MA, 25 March 1819, in Letters, 1:88.

¹⁰⁶Bryant, “Waterfowl,” in Poetical Works, 27.

Poetry, Bryant surveyed the limited history of American poetry and offered instruction to would-be American poets, aiming to guide the “poetic adventurer,” by

point[ing] out the faults of his predecessors, as to commend their excellences. He must be taught, as well what to avoid, as what to imitate. This is the only way of diffusing and preserving a pure taste, both among those who read and those who write, and, in our opinion, the only way of affording merit a proper and effectual encouragement.¹⁰⁷

Bryant was most critical of the early American poets who over-imitated certain English poets and produced poetry that lacked authentic emotional impact. Behind the cold artificiality of the poetry of Robert Treat Paine and other’s poetry, suggested Bryant, lay the influence of the emotionally limited, form-oriented Augustan poets popular in the mid-eighteenth century. By imitating these men, American poets had hoped

to attain a certain lofty, measured, declamatory manner — an artificial elevation of style, from which it is impossible to rise or descend without abruptness and violence, and which allows just as much play and freedom to the faculties of the writer as a pair of stilts allows the body. The imagination is confined to one trodden circle; doomed to the chains of a perpetual mannerism, and condemned to tinkle the same eternal tune with its fetters. Their versification. . . . is formed upon the same stately model of balanced and wearisome regularity.¹⁰⁸

This cramped and cramping style led directly to “the want of pathos and feeling in their writings — the heart is rarely addressed, and never with much power or success.”¹⁰⁹ Bryant did not take issue with imitation in itself, but with imitation of a style whose strict and monotonous rhythms restricted emotional expression and the flow of the imagination.

Several other critical essays he wrote for the North American offered advice to would-be American poets that went considerably beyond the rather vague advice commonly given to poets. Bryant’s review of James Hillhouse’s Percy’s Masque, published in the October 1820 North American offered a lesson in writing tragic poetry. Because the tragic

¹⁰⁷[William Cullen Bryant], review of An Essay on American Poetry, by Solyman Brown, A.M., in North American Review 7, no. 2, (July 1818): 199.

¹⁰⁸ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁹ibid.

poet had to speak convincingly in his characters' voices, tragic drama demanded "a great sacrifice of the self love and vanity of authorship;" Bryant continued: "Many a flight of imagination, many an elegant refinement, which the author would be glad that the world should have an opportunity to admire, but which have no special connexion with the business of his play. . . must be rigidly excluded."¹¹⁰ The romantic "flight of imagination" was restrained by Augustan elegance and refinement. Both were to be "rigidly excluded" from the tragic drama if they had "no special connexion with the business of [the] play." The information that the play was intended to convey — that "business" of the work — became not only the organizing principle of the drama but also the primary criterion for revision, a process that, according to Bryant, demanded the loss of authorial self-consciousness.

Continuing to elaborate on the mental and emotional labor tragic drama required of its author, Bryant defined tragedy as:

a noble province of poetry, demanding great powers of invention, deep knowledge of the human heart, and a strong and manly judgment; and proud would be the triumph of him who, at this day, should overcome its difficulties, and take his place by the side of those great and ancient masters of the drama, whose race seems to have passed away from amongst us, like that of the giants who lived before the flood. It were glorious to succeed — it is not dishonourable, however, to have failed.¹¹¹

For Bryant, tragic poetry most nearly approached the epic poetry produced by those almost superhuman "great and ancient masters;" his characterization of tragic poetry looked back nostalgically to wondrous models of masculine literary achievement. By listing the qualities that successful tragic poetry would reveal — "great powers of invention, deep knowledge of

¹¹⁰[William Cullen Bryant], review of *Percy's Masque* by [James Hillhouse], *North American Review*, 11, no. 4 (October 1820): 385.

¹¹¹ibid., 386.

the human heart, and a strong and manly judgment” — he reclaimed poetry as a masculine genre that required the coexistence of strong emotion and manly judgment.

At the same time, the extinction of those great beings meant that both epic and tragic poetry fell beyond the range of the mere men of Bryant’s time, whose attempts to emulate those literary giants were “not dishonourable, however.” Bryant’s own ambivalence about the status of the male poet in the early nineteenth century was apparent in that phrase. In a review that directly treated the mental and emotional labor that went into the creation of a tragic poem, Bryant emphasized the emotional and linguistic control the poet had to exert over narrative and characterization. However, the historical distance he drew between the “giant” epic poets and the “not dishonourable” male poets of Bryant’s time, suggested tension between the older image of the public man of letters, who heroically produced affecting and uplifting poetry, and the increasing association in the United States of the literary with the feminine.¹¹²

In a review of Henry Pickering’s poems, Bryant offered encouragement to the young poet in terms which strongly emphasized the need for effort as well as inspiration:

Should he continue to pursue the unprofitable vocation of poetry, we would exhort him never to be seduced by any feeling of lassitude to refuse its labors. Let him apply his talents to the severe tasks it imposes, and he will be sure of obtaining its rewards. No species of composition requires a more perfect abstraction of mind than the writing of poetry, nor tasks the faculties to a more intense and vigorous exertion. . . . The mighty and enduring edifices, whose remains our author has celebrated, were not built without immense toil; and all that is great and lasting in literature has been produced by strength attacking and overcoming difficulty.¹¹³

As Tremaine McDowell has indicated, Bryant himself put considerable time and effort into revising his early poems; although he did not compose many new poems in the late 1810s and early 1820s, he did revise considerably the poems he had already begun. During the

¹¹² Cf. Douglas, *Feminization*.

¹¹³ [Bryant], review of *Ruins* and *Athens*, 49. Emphasis added.

early years of their friendship, Bryant and Richard Henry Dana's letters to each other often offered suggestions for revision of each other's poetry; during his later years, Bryant was less inclined to revise his poetry, a fact that McDowell attributes to his growing confidence in himself as an established poet. It may also have reflected Bryant's own sense of not having the time he needed to attack and master a particular poem's problems. When Bryant asserted that "all that is great and lasting in literature has been produced by strength attacking and overcoming difficulty," he enjoined that labor onto would-be poets and justified his own poetic efforts.¹¹⁴

In June 1825, Bryant, by then co-editor of the New York Review, published a second review of James Hillhouse's work. This review, of Hillhouse's dramatic poem Hadad, tackled the issue of writing poetry based on biblical characters. Bryant suggested that the reverence usually granted to such characters

awes and represses the imagination. The dread of taking improper liberties with his subject, and the fear of offending the scruples of others, act as shackles upon the invention of the writer; and, amidst all these influences, there is danger that he will rest in common-places, and that his work will be tame and spiritless.¹¹⁵

Once again, Bryant used images of physical restraint to indicate imaginative limitation; in this case, the "awe" and "reverence" associated with biblical characters puts the poet at risk of creating "tame and spiritless" characters and relying too heavily on accepted common-places. Bryant also noted that the direct relationship biblical characters are described as having with "the Divine Being" made it difficult for the poet to make his characters sympathetic to readers. However, Bryant assured the would-be poet:

¹¹⁴ For an important treatment of Bryant's revision practices, see McDowell, "Bryant's Practice." On his literary friendship with Dana, see Bernard Weinstein, "Bryant and Dana: The Anatomy of a Friendship," in William Cullen Bryant and His America, 51-65; Hunter, Dana, Sr., esp. 60-65.

¹¹⁵ [William Cullen Bryant], review of Hadad, by James Hillhouse, New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine, 1, no. 1 (June 1825): 2.

These are difficulties — serious difficulties; but they are not insurmountable. They render the work of the poet arduous — not impossible. The imagination may still soar high, and the invention act vigorously, in the permitted direction; and that sympathy which we are slow to yield, may still be wrung from us by the truth and force with which his scenes and situations are brought home to our hearts. The great epic of Milton was written in defiance of the highest degree of these difficulties, yet it is the noblest poem in our language.¹¹⁶

Comforting the poet who hoped to write of biblical characters, Bryant invoked Milton's "great epic," "the noblest poem in our language," as an example of a poem which successfully fused biblical characterization with hard poetic labor reflected in the "the truth and force" revealed by the scenes and situations Milton described. Again, Bryant paired and linked the soaring imagination and the directed (but vigorous) invention; again, the imagination and the heart were to be checked by the "permitted direction" within which the invention is allowed to move.

Did Hillhouse's labor approach the noble efforts of Milton? Bryant spoke favorably of Hillhouse's negotiation of the difficulties Bryant had described:

Whatever constraint these difficulties may have put upon his invention, he has certainly contrived with great art to remove all appearance of embarrassment from the conduct of the fable, and has constructed his plot, and sketched his characters, with all the felicity and apparent freedom of one who was dealing with a subject, which he was at liberty to mould into any shape that might suit his fancy.¹¹⁷

Bryant went on to compare Hadad to Hillhouse's earlier volume, Percy's Masque, in terms that referred back to Bryant's own review:

Every thing about [Hadad] is better calculated to command and fix the attention, the incidents are more varied and striking, and where there is declamation, it is at least spirited declamation. . . . [I]here is a deeper infusion of passion — the soul of the drama. The diction, also, though preserving throughout the same character of manliness and vigor, which characterizes the former work, is yet pruned from its defects, and rendered more unaffected, flexible, and idiomatic.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ibid., 3.

¹¹⁷ibid., 4. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ibid. Emphasis added.

In a review intended to bestow praise, Bryant's conclusion was phrased in remarkably negative terms; stating his pleasure in finding "so few opportunities to censure," Bryant continued:

This is not a book in which a few striking and powerful passages appear amidst a waste of surrounding feebleness, like green oases in an African desert. Here are no unfinished characters, no gaps nor obscurities in the plot, no puerilities of language or of sentiment. Every page bears the mark of unusual talent strenuously and successfully exerted. Into almost every work of taste, there will unavoidably creep, in the course of the composition, extravagances, weaknesses, and inconsistencies, and imperfect or languid passages will be produced in moments of lassitude. These our author has resolutely blotted out, and has come before the public with a present worthy of himself and of them — with the fruits of his strength, and his skill, and his happiest inspiration.¹¹⁹

The hard labor Bryant had enjoined upon Hillhouse had brought forward these "fruits of [Hillhouse's] strength; by resolutely blotting out blemishes in his work, Hillhouse had produced a poem which to Bryant revealed strength, skill, and inspiration in a poem whose praises, for whatever reason, Bryant seemed able to sing only in strangely negative terms. Having searched the poem thoroughly for flaws, he presented it to its readers with an itemized checklist of possible flaws whose absences he could vouch for.

Finally, in his review in the March 1826 New York Review of the poem James Gates Percival delivered to the Connecticut Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in September 1825, Bryant waxed Romantically on the virtues of Percival's diction. Noting that critics had faulted Percival's heavy use of ornament and his tendency to lose track of his subject, Bryant continued:

To us there is something exceedingly delightful in the reckless intoxication with which this author surrenders himself to the enchantment of that multitude of glorious and beautiful images that come crowding upon his mind, and that infinity of analogies and relations between natural objects, and again between these and the

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 12-13. Emphasis added.

moral world, which seem to lie before him wherever he turns his eyes. The writings of no poet seem to be more the involuntary overflowings of his mind.¹²⁰

Bryant connected his own delight with Percival's poetry to the apparent effortless of Percival's composition. The poem itself dealt with a subject familiar to Bryant, and the first of the many extracts from the poem included in the review contained this passage from the poem's beginning:

Of Mind, and its mysterious agencies,
And most of all, its high creative Power,
In fashioning the elements of things
To loftier images, than have on earth
Or in the sky their home — that come to us
In the still visitation of a dream,
Or rise in light before us when we muse;
Or at the bidding of the mightier take
Fixed residence in fitly sounding verse,
... — of these, and all
That wake in us our better thoughts, and lead
The spirit to the enduring and sublime,
It is my purpose now to hold awhile
Seemly discourse, and with befitting words
Clothe the conceptions I have sought to frame.¹²¹

In a review of a poem that directly addressed the circumstances of artistic and literary creation, Bryant expressed the delight he felt in reading Percival's poetry, and urged Americans to patronize American as well as British poetry. Besides his implicit agreement with critics who found Percival's poetry too ornamental, the only reference Bryant made to the active creation of poetry would be his comment that "we cannot quite assent to the position which the author seems to lay down, that a good poet is, of course, good for

¹²⁰[William Cullen Bryant], review of Poem, delivered before the Connecticut Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, September 13, 1825, by James G. Percival, New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine, 2, no. 4 (March 1826): 245.

¹²¹James Gates Percival, Poem, quoted in [Bryant], review of Poem, 246.

nothing else than to write poetry.”¹²² By March 1826 Bryant was beginning to realize that he himself would have to be good for more than writing poetry.

The emphasis Bryant placed on manly and vigorous intellectual and emotional strength in these reviews suggested that the creation of poetry required its creators to cultivate a particular state of mind and heart. In the fourth and last of his lectures on poetry, which focused on the necessary balance between imitation and originality, Bryant implied that the poet was to devote considerable effort to learning and applying the externally determined “rules” of the genre through extensive reading of ancient and modern poetry. Whereas in his earlier reviews, Bryant had emphasized the mental labor that had gone into the creation of great works and urged to adopt a similar work ethic, the imitation of that hard work onto the would-be poet, by 1826 Bryant had come to focus more on how reading great poetry could affect the development of the would-be poet’s faculties. By 1826, Bryant had begun to focus his critical energies on the reception of poetry more than its creation.

THE MEANING OF RECEPTION

The publication of his poems in the North American Review and in his friend Richard Henry Dana, Sr.’s short-lived Idle Man journal (1820-1821) brought Bryant into contact with other men who were deeply interested in the cause of American letters and who were working to reconcile their literary and economic interests. His new literary friends provided him with advice and moral support when he was asked to compose and recite an original poem before the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society in August 1821. When Bryant arrived in Boston that month, Dana insisted that Bryant allow Dana and his other North

¹²²ibid., 247.

American colleagues to help him publish a volume of poetry. This small volume, containing only nine poems, began with Bryant's Phi Beta Kappa poem "The Ages," included "Green River" and "To a Waterfowl," and concluded, appropriately, with the final significant revision of "Thanatopsis" with its powerful new conclusion, finalized after Peter Bryant's death. This volume, giving Bryant's name to poems that had been printed anonymously, brought Bryant a reputation as a poet whose unaffected images revealed his own promise and the promise of an American poetry.

When Bryant returned to his new wife in Great Barrington after presenting "The Ages," he assigned Willard Phillips the responsibility of distributing copies of the volume and keeping the related accounts.¹²³ In his letters Phillips continually stressed that Bryant should expect no real income from the book's sales, but would gain a significant literary reputation from it; in February 1822 he wrote to Bryant that

For want of that pushing which a good thing [deems?], your book will not sell so well as it deserved. But as far as reputation is concerned . . . you have nothing to complain of, and this was the ground I presume of all your substantial calculation on the subject.¹²⁴

Himself a lawyer juggling his literary interests with the demands of his profession, Phillips showed strong sympathy with Bryant's particular position and attempted to offer him advice based on his own experience. In one remarkable letter, Phillips wrote to Bryant:

I hardly know whether to wish you may go on or not. If you cultivate poetry it will be very likely to affect your profession. But then, it is a sad thing to have a talent and spend all one's life in smothering it. . . . I do not believe there is an absolute incompatibility between business and literature.¹²⁵

¹²³In a memorandum to Messrs. Hilliard and Metcalf, publishers of the North American and of Bryant's Poems, Bryant wrote: "I have made Willard Phillips Esq. of Boston my agent to superintend the publication and sale of my poems which are now in your press. — You will therefore observe his directions, concerning the work, and deliver to him or to such persons as he shall order the whole impression or any number of copies." Bryant to Hilliard and Metcalf, Boston, MA, 4 September 1821, in Letters, 1:110.

¹²⁴Willard Phillips to Bryant, Boston, MA, 17 February, 1822, BG Papers.

¹²⁵Willard Phillips to Bryant, Boston, MA, 3 October 1821, BG Papers. At the end of this meditation Phillips states, "I will not write to you in this sort again," and prays that Bryant will regard him with confidence and affection.

In this passage, Phillips warned Bryant about the dangers a business environment could pose to his poetic sensibilities. Phillips urged Bryant to be “punctual and exact, and interested in the affairs of his employers” in spite of the intellectual inferiority of those employers; by comporting himself dutifully as a lawyer and businessman, Bryant would earn for himself evenings and Sundays for literature. Phillips’ comment that “[p]eople who devote themselves. . . to any pursuit of taste are apt to lose their promptness and shrewdness, and what is worse their sense of obligation in business” stressed behavior Bryant should avoid. Phillips advised Bryant to perform his legal duties in such a way as to convince his employers that he was a dedicated lawyer while secretly “hold[ing] an ascendancy over this world’s people” and resisting their power.

As Bryant’s Poems sold, Phillips implored Bryant not to let his poetry lapse and repeatedly suggested that he publish a larger volume when the 1821 Poems sold out. Phillips went so far as to write to Richard and Henry D. Sedgwick, in New York, to ask them to encourage Bryant to publish a larger volume as well:

I have told Bryant repeatedly that he ought to write something more that with these poems, would make a small volume fit for binding. I wish you would enjoin the same thing upon him if you think it right, for I am apprehensive that he grows careless of poetry, and will let his talent sleep.¹²⁶

Publicly, Phillips had in fact “pushed” Bryant’s Poems by publishing a favorable review of it in the North American’s October 1821 number. In the second paragraph of the review, Phillips effused:

There is running through the whole of this little collection, a strain of pure and high sentiment, that expands and lifts up the soul and brings it nearer to the source of moral beauty. . . . There is every where a simple and delicate portraiture of the subtle and ever vanishing beauties of nature, . . . which none but minds the most susceptible can seize, and no other than a writer of great genius, can body forth in words. . . . [T]here are wrought into the composition a luminous philosophy and

¹²⁶Phillips to R. and H. D. Sedgwick, Boston, MA, 25 March 1824, BG Papers.

deep reflection, that make the objects as sensible to the understanding, as they are splendid to the imagination.”¹²⁷

Both Bryant and Phillips feared that this glowing tribute to a collection of nine poems, in Phillips’ words, “a friendly, rather than a fair article, and some, with Mr. Walsh, thought it an extravagant eulogium.”¹²⁸

About Phillips’ impassioned review, Bryant wrote to Dana asking him to thank Phillip for his “elegant but partial review,” adding:

Your partiality for my book makes you too severe upon the public because of its unpopularity. There is nothing about [“The Ages”] that would be likely to catch the public favour. A didactic subject, an unusual stanza, a deliberate avoidance of that balanced monotony and jingle that many ears are tickled with, — all these are sadly in its way, — and for aught I know a hundred other things. So I have made my mind up not to be disappointed if it should not be generally much thought of; the approbation of a few whose judgment I value most, as it was much beyond what I had expected, so it is enough in all reason to content me.¹²⁹

Bryant affected resignation to his unpopularity and assumed that Dana would share in or understand that resignation; Phillips earnestly hoped that Bryant would not fall under the power of those men around him. All three men understood such resignation to be a positive sign of the man of letters’ essential disinterestedness. Bryant claimed to anticipate public rejection of his poetry and professed his satisfaction with the praise of the few “whose judgment I value most.” At a deeper level, Bryant could claim that his friends (those “few”) rather than he himself had actively worked to publish those poems and to make his work part of the public domain, first, by publishing his poetry (a process instigated by Bryant’s

¹²⁷[Willard Phillips], review of *Poems* by William Cullen Bryant in *North American Review* 8 (October 1821): 380-381. Emphasis added.

¹²⁸Phillips to Bryant, Boston, MA, 5 May 1823, BG Papers. Robert Walsh was a particular bête noire of Bryant’s; later, his literary review, the *American Quarterly Review*, would publish negative reviews of Bryant’s poetry in 1832 and 1836.

¹²⁹Bryant to Dana, Great Barrington, MA, 21 November 1821, in *Letters*, 1:118. “The Ages” was written in the Spenserian stanza, and Bryant had run into difficulty while composing the poem. He would write to Dana at the end of July 1821 that his delay in answering a letter from Dana was partially due to “the composition of my poem, which I find a harder task than I expected,— owing partly to the difficulty of the stanza I have chosen;— the labour has gone near to make me sick.” Bryant to Dana, Great Barrington, MA, 30 July 1821, in *Letters*, 1:106.

father) and second, by arranging to publish his collected poems. While he did not resist the publication of his poetry, he had not actively sought to publish a collection of his poetry and so could claim — to himself as well as to his friends — that he had not expected more than the praise of a limited and knowledgeable few.¹³⁰

The publication of this volume had private and public ramifications for Bryant. His friendship with New York politician and man of letters Gulian Verplanck began in late 1821 when Verplanck forwarded Bryant a positive review he had written for the *New York American*; Richard Henry Dana, Sr. had forwarded Bryant's *Poems* to Verplanck. In 1828 Verplanck and Bryant, along with their mutual friend and former co-editor of the *New York Review*, magazine editor Robert Sands, would collaborate in the creation of a literary annual called *The Talisman*; the three men created a fictional "author" named Francis Herbert and styled the three annuals they produced (in 1828, 1829, and 1830) as a journal of Herbert's

¹³⁰In a review of Bryant's 1832 *Poems*, William Snelling made a similar connection between the low taste of the masses and Bryant's higher-minded poetry:

We do not believe that he will ever be the favorite of the multitude. His spirit delights not in broils and bloodshed. His lines are never mysterious or horrible. He is an honest man, and will have nothing to say to corsairs or moss-troopers. He has not blazed upon the literary atmosphere like a comet; every man cannot be a Shakspeare or a Byron. . . . The mighty, but placid stream does not strike the imagination like the roaring cataract. . . . we contemplate this immensity of the universe, and the attributes of the spiritual world, with effort. Bryant does not address the feelings or sympathies of common readers. He communes not with others, but himself. His poetry is entirely spiritual. Hence it will not be esteemed by the unthinking; but it will charm those for whom it was written,—men of sound judgment and cultivated taste.

[William Snelling], review of *Poems* by William Cullen Bryant, in *North American Review* 34 (April 1832), 503, 513-514. Timothy Morris has correctly noted that this extremely ambivalent review carries the seeds of later nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics' rejection of Bryant for precisely the emotional control and moralism for which he was praised during the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Timothy Morris, "Bryant and the American Poetic Tradition," *American Transcendental Quarterly* n.s., 8, no. 1 (March 1994): 53-70.

British reviews of Bryant's poetry, some of which had been published in a collection of American poems published for British readers, had spoken favorably of Bryant's poetry: "Mr. Bryant . . . possesses more imagination and greater powers. We shall give one of his pieces ["Thanatopsis"] entire, as a just tribute to a very pleasing genius." Review of *Specimens of the American Poets*, [ed. Henry Roscoe], *Literary Gazette* 6 (May 1822): 307-308.

travel around the world. Bryant and Sands remained close friends until Sands' untimely death in 1832; all three men would be active participants in the New York arts community.¹³¹

The volume was also favorably noticed in the United States Literary Gazette's first number, published April 1, 1824, which juxtaposed Bryant's professional status against his habit of careful revision:

Our national fashion of doing every thing, is, to despatch the matter in hand, rather rapidly than thoroughly. A young man, therefore, toiling with persevering care upon a few pieces of poetry written in the intervals of professional exertion, is quite a strange sight. The poetry in this volume, is strongly marked with every characteristic which could be impressed upon it, by the most watchful, laborious, and repeated revision. . . . No valuable result can repay slight efforts, for every great thing must 'be born of great endeavours; — and this is as true of poetry as of all other things. A fortunate accident may throw into a poet's head, or upon his paper, some bright thoughts or happy lines; but it is not thus those things are written, over which time has no power.¹³²

Even prior to that review, the United States Literary Gazette had already offered significant encouragement to the young poet. In December 1823, its editor Theophilus Parsons had contacted Bryant with an offer to pay for poems submitted to the new Literary Gazette.

Wrote Parsons:

The terms [Cummings and Hilliard, publishers] offer enable me to make pecuniary compensation for whatever assistance I may need; most of the best writers in Boston and it's [sic] vicinity have promised me their aid, and I am very anxious that the work should have, in some measure, the support of your talents.

If you can confer on me this great favour, will you have the goodness to inform me, how much money I may have the pleasure of sending you for ten or twenty pieces of poetry. . . in the course of the ensuing year.

. . . I venture to hope that an arrangement will be made with you, which will secure to us a supply of Poetry; an article not very readily formed on this side of the water.¹³³

¹³¹Brown, Bryant, 164-166, 182, 208-210; Godwin, Life, 236-250; Bryant II, "Bryant: The Middle Years," ff.; Bryant II's dissertation emphasizes the cultural fellowship Bryant found after his move to New York and discusses at length how his friendships linked with his various institutional affiliations. I am still hoping to find a copy of Verplanck's review of the 1821 Poems.

¹³² Review of Poems, by William Cullen Bryant, in United States Literary Gazette, 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1824): 8. Emphasis added.

¹³³Theophilus Parsons to Bryant, Taunton, MA, 19 December 1823, BG Papers.

As Edward Channing had implied that Bryant's contributions to the North American would help the cause of American literature, so Parsons suggested that contributions to his gazette would contribute to poetic promise "on this side of the water." Parsons, however, was willing to pay for evidence of that promise. And Bryant, whose wife Frances would give birth to their first child in January 1822, was all too aware of poetry's limitations as an income-producing activity.¹³⁴

Bryant's response to Parsons showed an attentiveness to terminology that reflected the sensibilities of both poet and lawyer:

The proposal contained in [your letter] is of too flattering a nature not to be accepted, at the same time that my circumstances do not permit me to decline the pecuniary compensation you offer.

As to the amount of this compensation, I am not sufficiently acquainted with the price which literary wares bear in market to form any judgment. If I were to say that I leave [it] wholly to your generosity, I should show myself destitute of that quality — for you might then be induced to give too much through fear of giving too little. I will not therefore leave it to be settled exactly in that way. You say that you are offered terms which put it in your power to pay for what assistance you want, and that you have engaged the support of some of the best writers in Boston and its vicinity. Let the compensation you allow me be proportioned to what you allow others, and such as the terms offered you by your publishers enable you easily to make, and whatever it may be, I shall be entirely satisfied.¹³⁵

Bryant's hesitance to put a price on his poetry reflected his embrace of the traditional position of the public man of letters: his writings were to be free gifts given towards the greater good of the nation. By noting that he was "not sufficiently acquainted with the price which literary wares bear in market," and worrying about Parsons' excessive generosity, Bryant preserved his disinterestedness; the final sentence indicated, however, that he was willing to accept what his fellow writers — "the best writers in Boston" — were willing to accept. Parsons rather than Bryant brought up the ticklish matter of payment; in his

¹³⁴Brown, Bryant, 75-77, 107.

¹³⁵Bryant to Parsons, Great Barrington, MA, 29 December 1823, in Letters, 1:148-149. Emphasis in original.

response Bryant allowed the entire process of the commodification of his poetry to stay in Parsons' hands while subtly indicating his willingness to be paid.

With the encouragement and the income offered by Parsons — which Parsons set at two hundred dollars a year for an average of one hundred lines a month — Bryant began his most prolific period of writing, producing two or three poems a month between 1824 and 1825. Bryant described his financial arrangement with Parsons to Dana in terms which underscored the tensions he felt between his legal and literary endeavors:

You enquire whether I have written any thing except what I furnished to Parsons — Nothing at all. I made an engagement with him with a view, in the first place, to earn something in addition to the emoluments of my profession which as you may suppose are not very ample, and in the second place to keep my hand in, for I was very near discontinuing entirely the writing of verses.¹³⁶

Still, Bryant was concerned that his poetry would not do well in a literary marketplace; in the same letter, he complained:

The only poems that have any currency at present are of a narrative kind — light stories in which love is a principal ingredient. . . . Nobody writes epic and nobody reads didactic poems; and as for dramatic poems they are out of the question. In this uncertainty what is to be done? It is a great misfortune to write what every body calls frivolous, and a still greater to write what nobody can read.¹³⁷

The question was rhetorical; Bryant had already explained to Dana his reasons for not beginning the long poem Dana had been urging him to write:

. . . a project of that sort would be apt to make me abstracted, impatient of business, and forgetful of my professional engagements — and my literary experience has

¹³⁶ Bryant to Richard Henry Dana, Sr., Great Barrington, MA, 8 July 1824, in Letters, 1:157. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁷ ibid., 1:158. In a draft of this letter, Bryant wrote “Nobody writes epic ~~poems~~ — & nobody reads didactic poems yet if ~~a poet~~ makes any other he is ~~criticized~~ censured for wasting his powers on frivolous subjects — In this uncertainty how shall a poor poet know what to do? It is a great misfortune to write what every body sneers at and a still greater to write what nobody can read.” [strikeouts his] In the final version of this letter Bryant omitted the passage about “wasting powers” and inserted the word “poor” in front of “poet.” Bryant to Dana, Great Barrington, MA, 1 July 1824, BG Papers.

taught me that it is to my profession alone that I can look for the steady means of supplying the wants of the day.¹³⁸

A “poor” poet was to maintain an income-producing position and be grateful for whatever money he did earn for his poetry.

However, by late 1824 Bryant had become so frustrated with the conflict and mental drudgery he associated with legal work, along with his declining income, that he began to consider giving up his practice. Bryant knew himself well; the more he concentrated on poetry writing, the more he resented his legal work. In December 1824 Bryant wrote to his friend Charles Sedgwick, himself a lawyer in Lenox, Massachusetts, that he was “fixed in [his] determination to leave this beggarly profession.”¹³⁹

Sedgwick’s reply was sympathetic but concerned; he urged caution rather than haste:

The Law is a hag, I know, wearing the wrinkled visage of antiquity, towards which you can feel no complacency tho’ it comes to us fraught with the pretended wisdom of the ages, it wears an ugly drapery of forms, and the principles of justice and the simple perceptions of truth are so involved in the clouds of mystical learning and nonsense that the finest mind must needs grope in obscurity and be clogged with difficulties . . . The end indeed may be good, and success certain and eminence too, but the process is perplexing and the way not pleasant I feel a great interest, that you should prove, that yr. genius which delights the world, can surmount the barriers of the least inviting and most laborious ~~pursuits~~ professions. . . If I had yr mind and a very prevailing desire for literary occupations, I should run the hazard of indulging it. . .¹⁴⁰

The word “pursuits,” struck out in Sedgwick’s manuscript, suggests a tension between the practices of law and poetry and between law and letters as gentlemanly pursuits. Since the lawyer, to Sedgwick, proceeded in obscurity and difficulty and was forced to resort to unpleasant tricks, he had lost his gentlemanly status, status Sedgwick seemed to want Bryant

¹³⁸ibid., 157. In a draft of this letter Bryant wrote: “it is to my profession alone that I can look for the steady supply though not an abundant supply means of supplying the wants of the day.” [strikeouts his] Bryant to Dana, Great Barrington, MA, 1 July 1824, in BG Papers.

¹³⁹Bryant to Charles Sedgwick, Great Barrington, MA, 21 December 1824, in *Letters*, 1:166.

¹⁴⁰Charles Sedgwick to Bryant, [Lenox, MA?], 5 November 1824, BG Papers. Emphasis added. Strikeout in original.

to restore through his continuing ability to write poetry in spite of his professional responsibilities as a lawyer. Sedgwick did perceive literature and legal work to be mutually exclusive; but he also believed that Bryant's "genius" would permit him to "surmount [that] barrier" of exclusiveness.

Bryant, however, had less confidence than Sedgwick did about the strength of his genius. He appealed to Charles' brother Henry, who lived in New York, for advice. Henry Sedgwick urged him to come to New York. Bryant's response (unrecovered) crossed in the mail with Henry Sedgwick's second letter, which suggested that Bryant consider a editorial position with a journal being set up in connection with the new Athenaeum. Bryant left his practice and his wife and child (temporarily) in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in February 1825, took up residence in a New York boarding house, and began his career as a literary editor.

A NOBLE OCCUPATION

By March 1825, with the Sedgwick brothers' assistance, Bryant had secured a position as co-editor of the New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine. The Athenaeum, founded in 1824 and dedicated to generalized adult education, was indeed, as Bryant would report to his wife, "all the rage."¹⁴¹ The backers of the New York Review hoped that a journal connected with the Athenaeum would thrive. Bryant's salary had been fixed at one thousand dollars a year, twice what his legal practice in Great Barrington had come to be.

¹⁴¹Bryant to Frances F. Bryant, New York, NY, 21 February 1825, in Letters, 1:174.

By the end of May 1825, the first number of the New York Review was ready to be sent out to its approximately six hundred subscribers at the rate of six dollars a year.¹⁴²

From the beginning, much of the writing in the review was done by Sands and Bryant. Able to offer only a dollar per page for prose contributions, the editors had to rely on friends and interested colleagues for reviews and original essays; high-quality original poetry, for which they could pay nothing, was even more difficult to come by, although the first number contained Fitz-Greene Halleck's "Marco Bozzaris," which would become one of his best-known poems. Having gratefully received Bryant's poetic contributions to his Idle Man, Richard Henry Dana gave several poems to his friend's review. Bryant published twelve of his own poems in the review, but, as literary scholars have noted, his offerings were uneven; responsible for almost a quarter of the writing (roughly three hundred pages) in the New York Review, Bryant exhausted his poetic manuscripts and was compelled to publish several unrevised juvenile poems, including the derivative poem "Chorus of Ghosts" he had discarded years earlier after completing the superior "Thanatopsis" on the same theme, and "Stanzas," the early version of "I Cannot Forget with What Early Devotion."¹⁴³

By October 1826, arrangements had been made for the financially struggling New York Review to merge with Boston's United States Literary Gazette in an attempt to bolster the sagging fortunes of the two magazines and perhaps offer the Boston-based North American Review some competition. The United States Review was hampered by an awkward and complicated co-editorship, with two editors in separate locations, Bryant in New York and at first, James Carter, and then Charles Folsom in Boston. Theoretically this

¹⁴²In early June Bryant wrote to his wife: "Our subscription list is going on pretty well — we have already about 500 in the city—and 100 in the Country, besides the Boston subscribers, of whom no return has yet been made.—" Bryant to Frances F. Bryant, New York, NY, 3 June 1825, in Letters, 1:186. See also Bryant II, "Bryant: The Middle Years."

¹⁴³Bryant had usually published his poetry under the initial "B."; he signed "Chorus of Ghosts" "Z.Z." Bryant II, "Bryant: The Middle Years," 23.

division of labor was to help make the United States Review a magazine with national as well as regional appeal; practically, the split editorship led to conflicts due to clumsy communications. The merger also meant a serious pay cut for Bryant, who went from the one thousand dollars a year he had been making at the New York Review to five hundred a year plus partial ownership of the United States Review. Although he had been promised a salary increase contingent on improved subscribership; subscriptions never went up significantly, and the United States Review's last number appeared in October 1827. By then Bryant had taken a temporary position at the New York Evening Post. He would write in early 1828 to Dana about his position at the Post:

I am a small proprietor in the establishment, and am a gainer by the arrangement. It will afford me a comfortable livelihood after I have paid for the 8th. part which is the amount of my share. I do not like politics any better than you do — but they get only my mornings — and you know politics and a bellyfull [sic] are better than poetry and starvation.¹⁴⁴

After the failure of the two reviews Bryant never again thought of earning a living from his literary pursuits; though he continued to write, he had come to understand that poetic composition was best pursued as a hobby or avocation.¹⁴⁵

Bryant's move to New York, however, brought him a permanent place in the nascent literary and arts community of the city through his friendships with Robert and Henry Sedgwick. He was almost immediately brought into James Fenimore Cooper's Bread and Cheese Club, where he encountered a wide range of artists, politicians, and assorted intellectuals, including Gulian Verplanck, Asher Durand, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and Samuel F. B. Morse. As co-editor of the United States Review, Bryant published Morse's (anonymous) review of the National Academy of Design's 1827 exhibition. Morse was then president of

¹⁴⁴Bryant to Dana, New York, NY, 16 February 1828, in Letters, 1:262.

¹⁴⁵Brown, Bryant, 149-159; Godwin, Life, 206-140; Allan Nevins, The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism (New York, 1922; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 121-138.

the Academy, which had been formed in opposition to New York's American Academy of the Fine Arts by artists who wanted to encourage the creation, general display, and patronization of contemporary and distinctively American art. Bryant's continuing association with the National Academy of Design brought him into the Sketch Club, a collection of artists and writers who, beginning in 1829, gathered at regular intervals for impromptu drawing and writing.¹⁴⁶

As editor of the New York Review and its successor, the United States Review, Bryant occupied a position of some authority regarding literature in particular and the arts in general; through his own reviews and those written by his co-editors or by generous friends, Bryant could exert some control over his journal's reception of and contributions to the nation's developing aesthetic culture. As a poet, Bryant's 1821 Poems had been favorably received by American critics, and the appearance of his poems in several anthologies under his name had contributed to his reputation as an established American poet. When he gave a series of lectures on poetry at the New York Athenaeum in early 1826, he appeared to his audience as both established poet and as critic.

Bryant's poetic theory, though hardly comprehensive, appeared most clearly in his critical reviews and in these lectures on poetry. Like his critical essays, the lectures blended Bryant's own awareness of the labor that went into the creation of poetry with his sense of the role the poet and his work could play in American culture. Directed towards a broad public audience, Bryant's lectures on poetry defended poetry as a American genre by outlining the benefits poetry could provide its readers. In other words, he sought to create a

¹⁴⁶On the National Academy of Design and the Sketch Club, see Neil Harris, The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790-1860 (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 96-99, 115, 270; James T. Callow, Kindred Spirits: Knickerbocker Writers and American Artists, 1807-1855, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 12-32, 62-81, and 11-12 for a brief treatment of the Bread and Cheese Club. On Bryant's participation in these organizations, see Bryant II, "Bryant: The Middle Years," 170-209; Callow, Kindred Spirits, esp. 62-81; Brown, Bryant, 136-137, 144; Godwin, Life, 1:208, 224-225, 236-237.

demand for poetry. While the primary focus of the lectures was on poetry itself, Bryant also directed attention to the poet. Poet and reader were to work together: to deserve acclaim, a poet had to produce poetry that would offer readers mental and moral exercise. If Bryant's lectures were intended to legitimate the poet's work, in the lectures themselves poetic labor was less evident than it had been in Bryant's critical reviews.

In his first lecture, titled, "On the Nature of Poetry," Bryant asserted that poetry should address the imagination, the emotions, and the understanding. "There is no question," wrote Bryant, that one principle office of poetry is to excite the imagination, but this is not its sole, nor perhaps its chief, province; another of its ends is to touch the heart."¹⁴⁷ He reproached critics who "made poetry to consist solely in the exercise of the imagination [and praised] "passages of mere imagery, with the least possible infusion of human emotion," adding, "I do not know by what authority these gentlemen take the term poetry from the people, and thus limit its meaning."¹⁴⁸ Bryant asserted a kind of aesthetic democracy based on the universal appeal of emotional affect. He sided with his listeners ("the people") against those critics who would limit the definition of poetry by demanding that it eliminate rather than express feeling, a stance which echoed Alison's condemnation of artists who favored form over emotional expression. Bryant used his own authority as poet and critic to take issue with these critics and to assert the value of emotional poetry. Bryant then declared:

In its ordinary acceptation, it has, in all ages and all countries, included something more. . . . The most beautiful poetry is that which takes the strongest hold of the feelings, and, if it is really the most beautiful, then it is poetry in the highest sense. . . . The truth is, that poetry which does not find its way to the heart is scarcely deserving of the name; it may be brilliant and ingenious, but it soon wearies the attention.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Bryant, "Lecture First," in Godwin, ed., Prose Works, 1:8.

¹⁴⁸*ibid.*, 1:18.

¹⁴⁹*ibid.*, 1:8-9.

By isolating other critics' ideas about "pure poetry" and making them seem historically contingent (and boring), Bryant identified himself as a critic who favored the emotionally charged "ordinary" definition of "the most beautiful poetry" which transcended time and place. By 1826, the connection Bryant had drawn in an earlier essay between overattentiveness to form, lack of emotional impact, and mental exhaustion had translated into a more positive and Romantic understanding of what poetry should be: content and meaning should determine form and diction; poetry should always address and reflect strong emotion.

However, Bryant's lectures revealed quite clearly that his quasi-Romantic embrace of emotional expressiveness was limited. If Bryant celebrated strong emotion as a "sure guide" to poetic merit, he also implied that not all emotions were suitable for poetic expression:

There are exercises of the imagination, it must be confessed, of too gross and sordid a nature to be comprised within the confines of any divine art — revelings of the fancy amid the images of base appetites and petty and ridiculous passions. These are the hidden sins of the heart, that lurk in its darkest recesses, where shame and the opinion of men cannot come to drive them out, and which pollute and debase it the more because they work in secrecy and leisure.¹⁵⁰

Against these "gross and sordid" mental exercises, "base appetites," "petty and ridiculous passions," and "hidden sins of the heart," Bryant argued for the innocence of Poetry, the reading of which could "create imaginative habits that may lead us to regard [such emotions and thoughts] with contempt and disgust." In a passage that celebrated the moral benefits of reading poetry, Bryant continued:

Poetry is well fitted for this office. It has no community with degradation, nor with things that degrade. It utters nothing that cannot be spoken without shame. Into the window of his bosom who relishes its pleasure, all the world may freely look. The tastes from which it springs, the sentiments it awakens, the objects on which it

¹⁵⁰ Bryant, "Lecture Second: On the Value and Uses of Poetry," in Godwin, ed., Prose Works, 1:16. Emphasis added.

dwells with fondness, and which it labors to communicate to mankind, are related to the best and most universal sympathies of our nature.¹⁵¹

In this long passage Bryant echoed much of the prescriptive literature aimed at young men and women during the antebellum decades, following a strain of thought common in literature aimed at young men going off to work in the rapidly expanding cities. Just as the ministers and moralists who produced this literature offered their particular texts and institutions (churches, mercantile associations, young men's associations) as sources of right thinking, Bryant offered his own brand of literature — poetry — as a model of right feeling as well as right thinking.¹⁵² Poetry would perform all of the mental and emotional tasks Bryant described — or inspire the reader to perform those exercises. The poet himself, however, was obscured by Bryant's reification of his product. If Wordsworth had similarly reified Poetry, Wordsworth had also incorporated a mentally active Poet into his "Preface" and sought to define both poet and poetry. Bryant's poet receded throughout the 1826 lectures, perceptible only through the poetry he had created. The creative process itself had moved offstage.

After qualifying the emotional expressiveness of poetry, Bryant went on to celebrate and contain the active imagination. In his first lecture, Bryant asserted:

The imagination is the most active and the least susceptible of fatigue of all the faculties of the human mind; its more intense exercise is tremendous, and sometimes unsettles; its repose is only a gentle sort of activity; nor am I certain that it is ever quite unemployed, for even in our sleep it is still awake and busy, and amuses itself with fabricating our dreams. To this restless faculty — which is unsatisfied when the whole of its work is done to its hands, and which is ever wandering from the combination of ideas directly presented to it to other combinations of its own — it is the office of poetry to furnish the exercise in which it delights. Poetry is that art

¹⁵¹ibid., 1:16.

¹⁵²On prescriptive literature aimed at the preservation of young men in the cities, see Halttunen, Confidence Men, esp. 1-55; Horlick, Country Boys and Merchant Princes; Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class; Mary P. Ryan, The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830 To 1860, (New York: The Institute for Research in History, Haworth Press, 1982); Cawelti, Apostles; Wyllie, Self-Made Man; Boyer, Urban Masses and Moral Order, 108-120.

which selects and arranges the symbols of thought in such a manner as to excite it the most powerfully and delightfully.¹⁵³

Bryant's sentences, clauses piling on top of clauses, echoed the restlessness and perpetual activity of the imagination. The ambivalent language he used to describe the imagination in this passage appeared again in the second lecture:

We cannot eradicate the imagination, but we may cultivate and regulate it; we cannot keep it from continual action, but we can give it a salutary direction. Certainly it is a noble occupation to shape the creations of the mind into perfect forms according to those laws which man learns from observing the works of his Maker.¹⁵⁴

Bryant offered poetry as a form of controlled thought and feeling that could rule an unruly but uneradicable mental faculty. Indeed, Bryant would declare that “[i]t is the dominion of poetry over the feelings and passions of men that gives it its most important bearing upon the virtue and the welfare of society.”¹⁵⁵ The creation of poetry was “a noble occupation” defined by “the shap[ing] of the creations of the mind into perfect form” according to external laws; if properly drawn, however, poetry rather than the poet will do the work of cultivating and regulating the imagination as well as the heart.

Feeling and imagination would work together in the mind of the reader under the influence of good poetry; the understanding, then, was the mental faculty that would discern and register the moral lessons to be learned from the poetry. Bryant's treatment of the effect poetry could have on the understanding was one of the rare moments in these lectures where the poet appeared as an active — although just barely — presence. Describing what the creation of poetry required from the mind of the poet himself, Bryant stated:

To write fine poetry requires intellectual faculties of the highest order, and among these, not the least important, is the faculty of reason. Poetry is the worst mask in the world behind which folly and stupidity could attempt to hide their features. Fitter, safer, and more congenial to them is the solemn discussion of unprofitable

¹⁵³Bryant, “Lecture First,” in Godwin, ed., Prose Works, 1:6-7.

¹⁵⁴*ibid.*, 1:15-16. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁵*ibid.*, 1:16.

questions. Any obtuseness of apprehension or incapacity for drawing conclusions, which shows a deficiency or want of cultivation in the reasoning power, is sure to expose the unfortunate poet to contempt and ridicule.¹⁵⁶

Poetry, suggested Bryant, delivered wisdom to its reader in a way that built on reasoning in a particularly beautiful and exhilarating way:

Remember that [poetry] does not concern itself with abstract reasonings, nor with any course of investigation that fatigues the mind. Nor is it merely didactic; but this does not prevent it from teaching truths which the mind instinctively acknowledges. . . . [P]oetry [does not] refuse to carry on a sort of process of reasoning by deducing one truth from another. Her demonstrations differ, however, from ordinary ones by requiring that each step should be in itself beautiful or striking, and that they all should carry the mind to the final conclusion without the consciousness of labor.¹⁵⁷

In other words, the experience of reading a poem should make clear something the reader already knew and would acknowledge in response to the poem; at the same time, the reader was to respond emotionally and without awareness of any mental labor on his part. The poet, in turn, was responsible for creating poetry which would evoke those known-but-unknown truths without requiring effort from the reader. Although the reader's imagination was, according to Bryant, "by no means passive [and would pursue] the path which the poet only points out, and [would shape] its visions from the scenes and allusions which he gives," the poet was, nevertheless, responsible for creating the scenes and illusions in such a way as to make that path easily apparent and effortlessly followable.

Although Bryant commented that the reader's ability to improve himself mentally and aesthetically through poetry depended on "the strength and cultivation of that faculty [the imagination]," his suggestion that reading poetry was a valuable way of cultivating the imagination implicitly argued for the utility of poetry. Yet in these lectures Bryant emphasized the useful effects of poetry and kept discussion of the creation of poetry to a

¹⁵⁶Bryant, "Lecture First," in Godwin, ed., in Prose Works, 1:11.

¹⁵⁷*ibid.*, 1:11-12.

minimum. If Bryant appeared to have embraced a Romantic conception of spontaneous composition qualified by necessary revision, in these lectures Romantic spontaneity actually helped to conceal rather than spotlight the creative powers and abilities of the poet.

Bryant's fourth lecture treated the vexed problems of imitation and originality in American poetry, and thus focused much more closely on the actual writing of poetry than had the other three lectures. Bryant described the excesses that plagued young poets who sought to write originally in essentially emotional terms:

Poets have often been willing to purchase the praise of [originality] at the sacrifice of what is better. They have been led, by their overeagerness to attain it, into puerile conceits, into extravagant vagaries of imagination, into overstrained exaggerations of passion, into mawkish and childish simplicity. It has given birth to outrages upon moral principle, upon decency, upon common sense, it has produced, in short, irregularities and affectations of every kind.¹⁵⁸

By describing an ideal poetry that would express strong and manly emotion (as opposed to the "puling effeminacy of the cockney school") while delimiting the range of emotions expressed to the "healthful" and uplifting feelings, Bryant in effect defended the institution-in-process of American poetry for its ability to substitute wholesome mental activity for degenerate thoughts and feelings.

Bryant's third lecture, however, almost completely obscured the physical existence of the poet. In one remarkable passage in his third lecture, which treated the issue of a specifically American poetry, he dismissed the economic issues of poetic creation he himself was all too aware of by 1826:

[I]f [poetry] shall be chosen and pursued with the characteristic ardor of our countrymen, what can prevent its being brought to the same degree of perfection here as in other countries? Not the want of encouragement surely, for the literary man needs but little to stimulate his exertions, and with that little his exertions are undoubtedly greater. Who would think of fattening a race-horse? Complaints of the poverty of poets are as old as their art, but I never heard that they wrote the worse

¹⁵⁸Bryant, "Lecture Fourth: On Originality and Imitation," in Godwin, ed., in *Prose Works*, 1:36.

verses for it. It is enough, probably, to call forth their most vigorous efforts, that poetry is admired and honored by their countrymen.¹⁵⁹

Bryant's glib insistence that low pay never produced poor verses justified a view of poetry that characterized its value in terms of moral service to American readers. By publicly declaring poetry's use value to lie in its moral service, Bryant effectively de-commodified poetry at almost precisely the moment in his life when receiving something approximating a family wage for his poetry would have allowed him to identify himself primarily as a man of belles lettres.

Ironically, Bryant's friends and admirers throughout the 1820s and 1830s expressed concern about the poems he was not writing. Richard Henry Dana repeatedly urged Bryant to begin work on a long poem; Willard Phillips wrote anxiously to the Sedgwicks imploring them to pressure Bryant to continue with his poetry. Bryant's move to New York in 1825 had been an attempt to shape the course of his life towards the literary. His confidence bolstered by the reputation and an expanding circle of literary friendships, Bryant left a profession that provided him with a declining income and which he found frustrating and mentally limiting. His various career changes during the 1820s were a series of attempts to find a position that would provide him with an income sufficient for himself and his young family without unfitting his mind for poetic creation. However, the Evening Post position was only a partial resolution of the tensions Bryant felt between public service, economic need, and the desire to write. By the end of the 1820s, for Bryant poetry writing had become essentially avocational and separate from (if not exactly in opposition to) his journalistic work. The letter he wrote to Horatio Greenough from Pisa in 1835 suggested Bryant's continuing awareness of the distinctiveness of the mental work involved in creating poetry.

¹⁵⁹Bryant, "Lecture Third: On Poetry in its Relation to Our Age and Country," in Godwin, ed., in Prose Works, 1:33. Emphasis added.

Although he continued to write popular poetry for the rest of his life, by the time he left with his family for an extended trip to Europe in 1834, his most poetically productive years were behind him.

Bryant remained active in the New York arts community throughout his life and gave particular support to organizations aimed at the display and distribution of American art. Along with his continuing poetic production, these activities constituted for Bryant a kind of aesthetically oriented citizenship — as editor of a prominent newspaper and as an established poet, Bryant could and did lend his name in the support of both political and aesthetic causes. His support for aesthetic causes, though, was based on the service the arts could perform for the American audience. Even as he called for Americans to patronize American arts and letters, Bryant contributed to the mystification of the labor involved in aesthetic production. Emphasizing the cultural benefits stemming from a finished product, Bryant effectively reified Poetry into a force operating separately from the creating poet.

EPILOGUE

In early 1836 Bryant had to cut his trip to Europe short due to his partner William Leggett's serious illness and consequent mismanagement of the Evening Post. After his return to New York in 1836, Bryant knew that he was committed to the position of a political journalist, and understood all too clearly that his professional responsibilities would affect his ability to write outstanding poetry. In May 1836 Bryant wrote Richard Henry Dana a long and overdue letter; responding to Dana's apparent lack of enthusiasm about a teaching position he had lined up for the winter:

Here I am who have been chained to the oar these twenty years, drudging in two wrangling professions one after the other; — and it astonishes me to hear a man of

your tastes talk of the misery of being obliged to point out the beauties of the English poets. As to the effects of analysis it is doubtless just as you say, but there is a pleasure annexed to it, that of the discovery of truth. I have often wished that I could tell why I am pleased with this or that fine passage or poem. I feel its beauty immediately, but I am often puzzled in giving the reason for liking it. I know very little in fact of the express laws of poetry; if I have succeeded at all it is as those succeed in music who learn it by the ear and not by scientific instruction. For this reason I have a sort of reverence for him who does for me what I am so little competent to do for myself, that is who points out the sources of my delight in the fine things I read.¹⁶⁰

In twenty years the young man eager to balance poetry and profession had become a man so burned out by “two wrangling professions” that he no longer had faith in his ability to grasp poetic beauty. Several years later Emerson wrote to Frederic Henry Hedge about a visit with Bryant:

He is so free of all pretension so manly & simple that I like him well & . . . ignore his politics. But he suffers . . . manifestly from want of culture plainly has no time for books or thoughts but must welter all day in the foaming foolishness of newspapers. Therefore he stares & rubs his eyes when you speak of the beauty which he once worshipped daily; and now talks of poetry being for young men & women & for the aged: but men in middle life do not know it.¹⁶¹

In February 1837 Bryant wrote to Dana, apologetically describing the emotional and economic demands of his newspaper work:

You cannot imagine how difficult it is to make the world go right. The expense of conducting printing and publishing a daily paper [has] vastly increased lately and there is no increase in the rate of advertisements &c to make it up. I should be very glad of an opportunity to attempt something in the way I like best and am perhaps fittest for; but here I am a draft horse harnessed to the wain of a daily paper. I have so much to do with my legs and hoofs, struggling and pulling and kicking, that if there is any thing of the Pegasus in me I am too much exhausted to use my wings. I would very gladly withdraw from this occupation if I could do so, and be certain of a moderate subsistence — for with my habits and taste a very little would suffice. I

¹⁶⁰Bryant to Dana, New York, NY, 31 May 1836, in Letters, 2:26-27.

¹⁶¹Ralph Waldo Emerson to Frederic Henry Hedge, New York, NY, 12 April 1838, in The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 7, 1807-1844, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 302-303. Similarly, in May 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller that when he had seen Bryant in New York, “his poetry seems exterminated from the soil not a violet left – the field stiff all over with thistles & teazles of politics.” Ralph Waldo Emerson to Margaret Fuller, Concord, MA, May 4, 1838, in The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 6 vols., ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 2:129-130.

am growing I fear more discontented and impatient than I ought to be at the lot which has fallen to me.¹⁶²

Robert Ferguson has argued that Bryant's understanding of journalism as a valid public forum for the man of letters weakened Bryant's poetry by permitting him to separate his poetry from his public service. These letters to Dana, however, suggest that Bryant's separation of poetry and journalism was a physical necessity similar to the distinctions he drew between poetry and law as a young man. The distinctions were necessary because the genres or spheres of activity were distinct from each other; but experience had taught Bryant that he could not live by literature alone.¹⁶³

The private pain Bryant confided in his friend Dana must be set alongside his public statements about poetic usefulness. By resisting the commodification of poetry, Bryant had painted himself into a corner; bowed down by the demands of the newspaper, he was unable to work on his poems as he had as a younger man. His editorial duties made it difficult for him to expend the effort needed to create and finish a poem. Yet by emphasizing the services provided by a finished poem, Bryant had publicly contradicted his own early awareness of the work and care involved in poetic composition. He had in a way erased his own labor and sentenced himself to the production of the almost narcotizing "effortless" and moralistic poetry Ferguson and other twentieth-century critics have accused him of writing. Importantly, Bryant remains best known for his early poems — "Thanatopsis," "The Waterfowl" — the poetry into which he himself had put the most labor. The declining quality of Bryant's poetry during his long editorial career, set against the lasting reputation his early poems brought him, ultimately reveals the very real problems of time management

¹⁶²Bryant to Dana, New York, NY, 27 February, 1837, in Letters, 2:64. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶³Ferguson, Law and Letters, 173-195; see also Nevins, Evening Post, 139-165.

and economic viability faced by a man who wanted to be a poet in the early nineteenth century.¹⁶⁴

Bryant's resistance to supporting pay for poets hinged on his understanding of poetry as the product of gentlemen whose interests lay in the cultivation of a virtuous American readership and not in the more selfish (but alluring) achievements of wealth or fame. During his lifetime Bryant became one of the nation's best-known poets; yet his income, his influence, and ultimately his historical reputation came from his association with the Evening Post; unlike Longfellow, Bryant would never make enough from his poetry to justify leaving his "day job." The depression he fell into during the national depression of 1837 took a toll on the man both spiritually and physically. In an 1852 sketch of Bryant with Daniel Webster and Washington Irving, Bryant, eleven years younger than the other two men, looked the oldest, was in reality eleven years younger than the other two men. Bryant's reputation as genteel poet was sustained by hard labor in a field which provided him only limited happiness.¹⁶⁵

At the same time that Emerson was registering his disappointment that "[Bryant's] poetry seems exterminated from the soil not a violet left," he was formulating his Divinity School Address and cultivating a friendship with an intense young poet-philosopher named Jones Very. Very had been brought to Emerson's attention by fellow Salem resident Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who had heard his lecture "Epic Poetry" at the Salem Lyceum and encouraged Emerson to engage him for the Concord Lyceum as well. Very would seem to Emerson to embody many of the qualities he called for in his dreamed-of poet-priest who would rejuvenate Christianity through new revelation and "acquaint men at first hand with

¹⁶⁴Ferguson, Law and Letters, 173-195; Morris, "Bryant and American Poetic Tradition."

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Wilson, Figures of Speech, 79. The figure in Wilson's volume is dated 1852, but within the text Wilson identifies the date as 1842.

the Deity.”¹⁶⁶ Like Bryant, Very embraced an understanding of poetic production which ultimately valued the finished poem over the poet’s efforts; like Bryant, Very assigned high cultural and moral value to the transmissive powers of poetry. However, Very’s denial of poetic effort emerged from his staunch belief that his mind had become possessed by God’s will and that he had become a will-less vehicle for God’s word; Very assigned no conscious labor to the poet’s mind because he believed his own poetry to be spontaneously composed, a gift given by the grace of God as a means of transmitting the word of God. Salvation for his reader, not fame or wealth, would be Very’s primary goal; like Bryant, Very would not actively seek compensation for his poetry.

¹⁶⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838,” in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte, The Library of America, (New York: The Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), 75-92.

Chapter 3

“Half Insane under the Infinitude of His Thought”: The Poetic Vocation of Jones Very

On a Sunday morning in September 1838, Jones Very came to call on his friend Elizabeth Palmer Peabody at her home in Salem, Massachusetts. Peabody noted a difference in his demeanor, an impression quickly confirmed by his actions: Very placed his hand on her head, proclaimed, “I come to baptize you with the Holy Ghost & with fire,”¹⁶⁷ and prayed over her. As Peabody described the encounter:

When he had done. . . he said, — with a slight uneasy misgiving said, How do you feel? I replied gently, “I feel no change” — “But you will” — said he hurriedly — “I am the Second Coming — Give me a Bible”. . . . He went to the table where [the Bible] was and turned to Christ’s prophecy of the Second Coming — and read it ending with the words, “This day is this fulfilled in your hearing” —¹⁶⁸

Peabody responded to this announcement with a silence she characterized as “respectful even tenderly so.”¹⁶⁹ As she would find out later that day, her reactions to Very’s pronouncements were considerably milder than the responses of several of the town’s ministers who had also received Very. Baptist minister Lucius Bolles had had him thrown bodily out of his house. Charles Upham, one of the town’s Unitarian ministers, had threatened to send Very to an insane asylum. Harvard president Josiah Quincy had insisted

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody to William P. Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in Letters of Elizabeth Peabody: American Renaissance Woman, ed. Bruce Ronda (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 406. The title is from Emerson’s essay “The Oversoul:” “The great distinction between teachers sacred or literary,—between poets like Herbert, and poets like Pope,—between philosophers like Spinoza, Kant, and Coleridge, and philosophers like Locke, Paley, Mackintosh, and Stewart,—between men of the world, who are reckoned accomplished talkers, and here and there a fervent mystic, prophesying, half insane under the infinitude of his thought,—is, that one class speak from within, or from experience, as parties and possessors of the fact; and the other class, from without, as spectators merely, or perhaps as acquainted with the fact on the evidence of third persons.” [emphasis in original] Although Very is not mentioned by name in “The Oversoul,” he almost certainly was the “mystic . . . half insane under the infinitude of his thought” that Emerson had in mind; the passage in “The Oversoul” corresponds directly to a passage in Emerson’s journal which named Very specifically. Emerson, “The Oversoul,” Essays, First Series, reprint in Essays and Lectures, 395; Ralph Waldo Emerson, 25 November [1838], The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. William H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1970), 7:157. Hereafter I will refer to this edition of Emerson’s journals as JMN.

¹⁶⁸ Peabody to Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in Letters, 406.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*

on Very's return to Salem after Very, then a Greek tutor at Harvard, had interrupted the lesson he was conducting by suddenly screaming, "Flee to the mountains, for the end of all things is at hand!"¹⁷⁰ After Very paid a second visit to Elizabeth Peabody that same Sunday night, Upham made sure that Very was removed to the McLean Insane Asylum, a private institution in Charlestown. Peabody would write that before Very left her house that night, "[H]e unfolded a monstrous folio sheet of paper, on which were four double columns of sonnets — which he said 'the Spirit had enabled' him to write and these he left with me to read as the utterances of the Holy Ghost."¹⁷¹

After a month in McLean, Very was released, not considered cured but judged to be of no harm to himself or others.¹⁷² During his stay at McLean, Very reportedly composed one or two sonnets a day; indeed, the months between fall 1838 and spring 1840 constituted his most poetically productive period. As he would write to a colleague, he understood his sonnets to be transcriptions of the messages God was entrusting to him, and toward that end he published them as he wrote them in the Salem Observer, at a rate of roughly six per

¹⁷⁰ In his review of James Freeman Clarke's 1886 edition of Very's poetry, Poems and Essays, G. Bradford, Jr., quoted a letter from one of Very's former students: "Early in the second year of [Very's] service as Greek tutor, he showed symptoms of the mental exaltation which once startled his class with the apocalyptic cry,— 'Flee to the mountains, for the end of all things is at hand!'" G. Bradford, Jr., review of Poems and Essays, by Jones Very, Unitarian Review 27, no. 2 (February 1887): 111n.

¹⁷¹ Peabody to Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in Letters, 406; see Warner Berthoff, "Jones Very: New England Mystic," Boston Public Library Quarterly 2, no. (January 1950): 63-76; Edwin Gittleman, Jones Very: The Effective Years, 1833-1840 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 189-192, 215-231; Alfred Rosa, Salem, Transcendentalism, and Hawthorne (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), 99-107; Helen R. Deese, introduction to Jones Very: The Complete Poems, ed. Helen R. Deese (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), xxxv-l.

¹⁷² Very's December 29, 1838 letter to the Reverend Henry W. Bellows makes it clear that Very went to McLean against his will. Very told Bellows that "... I was moved entirely by the Spirit within me to declare to all that the coming of Christ was at hand, and that which I was led to do caused [me to] be placed contrary to my will at the Asylum." Jones Very to Reverend Henry W. Bellows, Salem, MA, 29 December 1838, reprinted in Poems, lvii. Several letters from Mary and Sophia Peabody, published by Helen Deese, also indicate that Very had been held against his will and that he feared being sent back to the asylum. Helen R. Deese, "The Peabody Family and the Jones Very 'Insanity': Two Letters of Mary Peabody," Harvard Library Bulletin 35, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 218-229.

week.¹⁷³ As a body, the sonnets describe the path that Very's own religious experiences had taken, through three basic stages of spiritual birth, prayer, and a second birth into union with God.¹⁷⁴ Very understood the sonnets that he produced during his religious crisis to be the products of a mind — his — that had been profoundly altered as the result of conscious, willed mental effort.

Toward the beginning of his senior year at Harvard, Very had become concerned about his spiritual health. He resolved to control his physical desires through concentrated mental effort, working to make heart and mind submit entirely to the will of God. Blending the Unitarian belief in gradual and conscious intellectual progress toward salvation with more traditional Calvinist emphases on election and preparation, Very came to believe that the gap between God and man could be narrowed virtually to the point of closure through the cultivation of submissiveness to God's will — a "willed will-lessness"¹⁷⁵ that Very, in the autumn of 1838, believed that he had accomplished. Very's blending of active and passive thought — his willing away of self-will — can be seen as a variation on Calvinist beliefs about preparation and grace; at the same time, they also reflected his interest in and exposure to Romantic aesthetic thought during his years at Harvard. Very's friendship with his rhetoric professor, Edward T. Channing, former editor of Boston's North American Review, introduced him to the aesthetically inclined Unitarianism espoused by Channing and his brother, William Ellery Channing. During his student years, Very recorded in his commonplace book passages from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Goethe, among

¹⁷³ Helen R. Deese, "The Presumptuous Task of Editing the 'Holy Spirit': The Jones Very Edition," Documentary Editing 11, no. 1 (March 1989): 5-9.

¹⁷⁴ Here I am drawing from Harry L. Jones' dissertation; Jones analyzes this internal progression in terms suggested by Evelyn Underhill's work on mysticism. Harry Lawrence Jones, "Symbolism in the Mystical Poetry of Jones Very" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1967); see also Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1961).

¹⁷⁵ Nathan Lyons attributes this useful phrase to Anthony Herbold. Nathan Lyons, "Selected Poems by Jones Very," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1963), 23.

others, texts that Professor Channing may have recommended to the young man. Very set Romantic ideas about intuition and inspiration within the Unitarian concept of self-culture, which linked salvation to the careful cultivation of mind, heart, and soul.¹⁷⁶

Edward Channing's teachings may also have suggested to Very that, by helping to organize and direct information gained from reading, literary production could contribute significantly to the cultivation of mind and soul.¹⁷⁷ Essentially, Very's program of willed willlessness began as a means of keeping mind and heart free from immoral thoughts and feelings. By consciously willing himself to think (or not to think) in a particular direction, Very echoed the wealth of prescriptive literature aimed at young men in the antebellum decades, which counseled a range of mental activities or strategies — prayer, reflection, reading — that would substitute wholesome and uplifting thought for the dangerous fancies so easily stirred up in young men's minds. More elaborate intellectually than the innocent amusements, programs of reading, or church attendance the ministers and moralists who produced this literature counseled, Very's project ultimately pushed him to the formulation of a particular interpretation of Protestant theology: he would come to believe that salvation

¹⁷⁶ On Very's religious beliefs, see Yvor Winters, "Jones Very and R. W. Emerson: Aspects of New England Mysticism," in Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1938), 125-146; William Irving Bartlett, Jones Very: Emerson's "Brave Saint", (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942); Berthoff, "Jones Very," 63-76; Paschal Reeves, "The Making of a Mystic: A Reconsideration of the Life of Jones Very" Essex Institute Historical Collections 103, no. 1 (January 1967): 10-13; Gittleman, Very, 12-14, 16-17, 22, 79-92; Lyons, "Selected Poems;" Carl Dennis, "Correspondence in Very's Nature Poetry," New England Quarterly 43, no. 2 (June 1970): 250-273; Lawrence Buell, Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973); David Robinson, "Jones Very, The Transcendentalists, and the Unitarian Tradition" Harvard Theological Review 68, no. 2 (April 1975): 103-125; David Robinson, "The Exemplary Self and the Transcendent Self in the Poetry of Jones Very," ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance 24 (4th Quarter 1978): 206-214; James Levernier, "Calvinism and Transcendentalism in the Poetry of Jones Very," ESQ 24, no. 1 (1st Quarter 1978): 30-41; Phyllis Cole, "Jones Very's 'Epistles to the Unborn,'" in Studies in the American Renaissance, 1982, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne Press, 1982), 169-183; David Seed, "Alone with God and Nature: The Poetry of Jones Very and Frederick Goddard Tuckerman," in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision Press, 1985), 166-193; Deese, introduction, Poems. Very's religious beliefs are not easily categorized; I am most sympathetic to Robinson's, Levernier's, and Deese's accounts for their emphasis on 'Channing Unitarianism's' effect on Very.

¹⁷⁷ See Edward T. Channing, Lectures Read to the Seniors at Harvard College (1856) (Boston: 1856; reprint, ed. Charlotte Downey, American Linguistics, 1700-1900, Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1997).

lay in the giving up of what the individual most treasured or desired in order to be wholly subject to God's will. In a sense, Very would push the moralists' calls for the substitution of 'good' thoughts and feelings for 'bad' ones to an unusual but logical end.¹⁷⁸

Very's Harvard education provided him with intellectual tools for understanding and expressing his own mental experiences. His own belief that the deliberate cultivation of willlessness had brought his mind into complete harmony with God's will provided him with, in effect, not only a specific message to convey — the promise of eternal life to those willing to submit — but also with an intellectualized model of conversion which he would transmit to others through his sonnets. Yet during his "effective years,"¹⁷⁹ Very believed his sonnets to be transcriptions of the Word of God, and himself merely a transcriber; in 1841 Emerson recorded in his journal that Very had told a mutual acquaintance that "[Very] valued his poems not because they were his, but because they were not."¹⁸⁰ If Very represented the logical extreme of spontaneous composition, his stance was as much due to his identification of his poems as the products of a mystical bond with God as it was to his embrace of Romantic aesthetic thought. Very took his justification for putting time and energy into the production of poetry from the highest authority possible: God told him to do it.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ On the cultivation of virtuous thought and behavior as a barrier against temptation and vice, see Halttunen, *Confidence Men*; Ryan, *Cradle*; Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*; Houghton, *Victorian Frame*, esp. 218-262. Cf. also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, esp. 135-169. For specific treatments of the mental strategies involved in the achievement of antebellum middle-class masculinity in the United States, see also Leverenz, *Manhood*. Additionally, for provocative treatments of multiple models of Victorian masculinity, particularly in relation to aesthetic production, see Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*; Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*.

¹⁷⁹ Very wrote poetry for all of his life; the tail end of his "effective years," as Gittleman has titled them, is difficult to pinpoint exactly because actual dates of composition from fall of 1838 through 1841 are not all known. Generally it is considered that by 1840 Very's mania/religious fervor had faded; he had himself stated that he expected the period to last only about a year, and by 1841 his poems lose the edge they had during that time period. In this chapter I am most concerned with Very's emerging sense of poetic vocation, and consequently have focused on Very's Harvard career during which he developed his own sense of himself as a poet and writer, and on the following "effective years" in which he produced what are generally considered to be his best poems. See Gittleman, *Very*, 360-374.

¹⁸⁰ Emerson, [September] 1841, *JMN*, 8:52.

¹⁸¹ Deese, "Presumptuous Task;" Deese, "Introduction," *Poems*; Dennis, "Correspondence"; Robinson, "Exemplary Self." Cf. Adams, *Dandies*, for an analysis of the ambiguous cultural authority represented by the

Very's assertions that his sonnets were of divine origin would initially fascinate and then irritate Ralph Waldo Emerson. The two men became friends after Very delivered his lecture "Epic Poetry" at the Concord Lyceum in the spring of 1838. After receiving two sonnets from Very the following November, Emerson offered to help Very publish a volume of his essays and poems. Very's resistance to editorial correction presented Emerson with what Emerson had claimed to want: a man who identified his poetry as solely the felt expression of indwelling soul. But Emerson, when confronted with just such a poet, found himself struggling with Very over the poetry's lack of polish. The tension between the two men resulted in Emerson's reluctance to promote the book after its publication, and the dissipation of their friendship in the early 1840s. The basic conflict between Emerson and Very hinged on which aspects of literary production required the most mental effort: the different emphasis each man placed on preparation in their religious thought translated into different conceptions of literary labor. If the two men shared common beliefs about the value of inspiration, they differed more sharply in their beliefs about composition and revision.

If Very's unwillingness to submit the products of his inspired thought to the external strictures of grammar and spelling grated on Emerson, Emerson's annoyance itself is revealing. Emerson's own work contributed to an ideal of poetry and of poetic composition that separated the work of composition from the finished product. Very's self-identification as a poet hinged on the utter given-ness of his poetry — its existence as the Word of God, rather than as Very's words. Emerson's frustration with Very's unwillingness to revise or polish his poems suggests limitations inherent in the Romantic idea of spontaneous composition: the poet and his labor ultimately disappear behind his unaccountably

figure of the male prophet in Victorian England and the ways in which male artists sought to draw on that authority to justify lives dedicated to essentially intellectual labor.

conceived and composed poem. If Very's acutely felt sense of Christian mission both drove and legitimated his poetic efforts, Very's exaltation of his poetry as the Word of God involved, ultimately, the erasing of the material processes — the hand holding the pen, the pen marking the paper — of poetic labor in favor of the less tangible processes attributed to the poet's mind.¹⁸²

"A WRITER'S PREPARATION"

When he arrived in Cambridge in 1833, Jones Very had made a significant break from family tradition by becoming the first Very male to go to college rather than to sea. Hard work as both student and tutor in Henry K. Oliver's college preparatory school in Salem had allowed him to enter Harvard as a sophomore at the age of twenty. During his years as a Harvard student, Very was befriended by Edward T. Channing, Harvard's Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. Under the guidance of Channing, Very familiarized himself with English poetry while reading extensively in contemporary British and continental Romantic literature. Aware of Very's literary interests, Channing introduced the young man to several of his literary friends, including Richard Henry Dana, Sr., who shared Channing's and Very's keen interest in the works of Shakespeare. Channing also

¹⁸² Most treatments of Very's life pay significant attention to his relationship with Emerson. See particularly Carlos Baker, "Emerson and Jones Very," *New England Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (March 1934): 90-99; Winters, "Very and Emerson;" Deese, "Introduction," *Poems*; Sarah Turner Clayton, "The Angelic Sins of Jones Very," (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1993), esp. 23-160. For Emerson's portrayal of the poet-priest as a specifically literary figure, see Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, as well as Emerson's own texts *Nature*, "Divinity School Address," and "The Poet" in *Essays, Second Series*. Emerson, *Nature*, reprint in *Essays and Lectures*, 5-49; Emerson, "Divinity School Address;" Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays, Second Series*, reprint in *Essays and Lectures*, 445-468.

frequently allowed Very to submit original poetry in place of a regularly assigned class theme.¹⁸³

But Channing's influence on Very may have run deeper. A rhetorician who stressed simplicity and precision in language, Channing believed that diligent and extensive reading and frequent composition were the best preparations for oratory and writing. Refuting the suggestion that books rendered the mind "indolent and self-indulgent," Channing argued:

[A] man makes what he reads his own. . . . It exercised his mind and received a character from it. . . . [I]t is not copied as a brilliant passage from his common-place book; but it springs up in connection with his own thoughts, and becomes so intimately a part of them that he does not suspect that he is indebted for it to another.¹⁸⁴

The mind able to assimilate external reading with such apparent effortlessness was a mind that had been carefully and diligently educated — one that had been "exercised" by encounters with many books. Ease of perception was in fact the product of the "hard work and profound study" Channing described as the "profession" of the student.¹⁸⁵

Urging his students to keep a journal of their readings, Channing believed that the habit of methodical writing would not only exercise the mind, but could also help to focus and organize a floundering student's thoughts:

[L]et [the student] once preserve, in the best words he has at command, some one idea which flits before him, and immediately a neighboring thought shall come to the light, and then others with ever-multiplying relations and an ever-increasing distinctness. He might have this idea floating about in his mind for hours as a

¹⁸³ Gittleman, *Very*, 22-36; Bartlett, *Very*, 25-39. By 1833, Harvard had undergone significant academic reforms which had generally encouraged professors to cultivate more direct and familiar relationships with their students. As a larger number of elective courses were opened to undergraduates, faculty members increasingly replaced traditional recitation sessions with lectures; additionally, faculty members were encouraged to view themselves as role models and mentors to their students and, toward that end, to mingle with them socially. See Ronald Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard and the Boston Upper Class, 1800-1870* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 61-72; Bernard Bailyn, "Why Kirkland Failed," in *Glimpses of the Harvard Past*, ed. Bernard Bailyn et al., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 19-44. In 1840 Dana would send his close friend William Cullen Bryant a copy of Very's *Essays and Poems* and in the accompanying letter, suggest that Very's friendship with Emerson was responsible for Very's apparent madness. Deese, introduction, *Poems*, xxvii.

¹⁸⁴ Edward T. Channing, "A Writer's Preparation," *Lectures*, 199.

¹⁸⁵ Channing, "Habits of Reading," *Lectures*, 204-205.

subject of meditation or reverie, without any adequate conception of its bearings; but now, in a fixed, visible form, it seems to put his mind in order, and prepare it for manful enterprises which it had shrunk from before.¹⁸⁶

As the student in the passage put pen to paper, he became able to organize his thoughts with “ever-increasing distinctness;” the resulting physical product of this effort, a “fixed, visible form,” would serve to “put [the] mind in order” — order required for the “manful enterprises” for which Harvard prepared its students. The act of writing balanced the reader’s cultivated receptivity against the actively ordering process of composition itself.

Channing’s insistence on mental cultivation grew out of his commitment to Unitarianism, which stressed gradual movement toward salvation based on rational education of the mind, soul, and heart. Drawing on Scottish common-sense faculty-based psychology, American Unitarians believed that the mind contained a God-given moral sense, or conscience, which, when exercised properly, would restrain and direct the passions. Liberal Unitarians assigned considerably more value to aesthetic perception and production than their more orthodox brethren. Scottish associationist thought also assigned value to literary productions based on their ability to convey affecting and morally uplifting material to the reader. Careful and discriminating reading would exercise and educate the reader’s moral sense. Aesthetic activity, in other words, was of value both as a means of expressing elevating meaning and of preparing the mind to receive and produce further sentiments.¹⁸⁷

The figurative language involved in poetry could in itself exercise the faculties. In a lecture defending the use of metaphor in oratory and literature alike, Channing observed that: “We owe to [the metaphor] an invigorating exercise of our minds in the analysis

¹⁸⁶ Channing, “Clearness of Expression and Thought,” *Lectures*, 240-241.

¹⁸⁷ William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance*, Yale Historical Publications, Miscellany 71 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959; reprint, New York: Archon Books, 1972), 1-21; Martin, *Instructed Vision*; Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*, esp. 174-204; Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 23-54; Philip F. Gura, “The Transcendentalists and Language: The Unitarian Exegetical Background,” in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1979, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 1-16.

required to discern the true points of analogy or resemblance which justify the use of the metaphor at all.”¹⁸⁸ Channing drew the following portrait of a writer’s selection of an appropriate figure of speech:

If a man uses a figure heartily and properly, it will be as indispensable to his full communication of his meaning as any form of speech ever can be. He did not go out of his way for it. He did not spend time in shaping and setting it. It came of its own will to incorporate itself with his thought; and being with him the most natural expression, he would do harm by adopting another.¹⁸⁹

The author received the figure, which “incorporate[d] itself with his thought” and manifested itself in the author’s work. The overall implication of Edward Channing’s lectures was that a well-read, well-exercised mind would generate such imagery rather than actively form it: the words, the metaphors, the figures “came of [their] own will” to a suitably furnished mind. What appeared to be intuitive creation was actually the result of careful mental preparation. In his lecture “A Writer’s Preparation” — a title carrying its own Calvinist resonances — Channing acknowledged that the mind’s creative processes were essentially inexplicable and concluded that teachers of rhetoric could only hope “that more was taught than forms and proprieties, and that they led the mind to feel that there was some bond between the forms and proprieties and its own action.”¹⁹⁰ Channing’s acknowledgment of the inexplicably creative powers of the cultivated mind echoed the associationist aesthetic of the Scottish realists while also resonating with Wordsworth’s characterization of the poet as a man whose mind both received and created.¹⁹¹

Throughout his Harvard education, the enterprise — “manful” or not — with which Very was most concerned was poetry. Very had arrived at Harvard a published poet, having

¹⁸⁸ Channing, “Using Words for Ornament,” *Lectures*, 253-254.

¹⁸⁹ Channing, “Using Words,” *Lectures*, 252-253.

¹⁹⁰ Channing, “Writer’s Preparation,” *Lectures*, 186-187.

¹⁹¹ Significantly, Wordsworth himself acknowledged in the “Preface” that “an accurate taste in poetry, and in all the other arts, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition.” Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Poems*, 1:890. Emphasis in original.

seen two of his poems printed in the Salem Observer during the summer of 1833; he would publish eight poems in the Harvard magazine Harvardiana as well as several poems in The Knickerbocker and in the Western Messenger. He would publish poetry in the Salem newspapers for the rest of his life; indeed, the Observer created a poets' column just for his effusions.¹⁹² Channing's willingness to accept verse in place of assigned prose also suggests that he encouraged the young man's poetic aspirations.¹⁹³ The reading Very noted and occasionally expounded upon in his commonplace book, begun in 1834, showed Very in the process of preparing a poet's mind. In his Scrap Book Very balanced the more conservative Scottish thinkers with newer Romantic texts; it contained passages from Archibald Alison, Hugh Blair, and the Edinburgh Review alongside excerpts from Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, Lamartine, Goethe, and Novalis. His prizewinning Bowdoin essays (1835 and 1836) were the culmination of this effort: Very took in ideas, stamped them with his own impress, and produced the Harvard essays that would become his essay/lecture "Epic Poetry," Very's strongest prose statement of his own sense of poetic and religious vocation.

In 1835¹⁹⁴, a passage from Wordsworth's "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads prompted Very into a rare, extended statement on poetic vocation and composition which revealed Very's own understanding of the desire to write poetry as an urge or aspiration placed in the poet by the Creator Himself. In response to the following selection from the "Preface":

The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a

¹⁹² Deese, "Presumptuous Task," 7. This did not necessarily mean that the Observer's editor thought it was brilliant poetry; it may have meant that the editor estimated it to be good enough to print in a newspaper column. Had the editors of the North American Review still been accepting original poetry in 1833, it is doubtful that they would have published these poems; indeed, it seems to have been understood that newspaper poetry could be and often was not as good as the poetry published in the reviews or in a volume.

¹⁹³ Gittleman, Very, 40-48, 51-58, 72-82, 85-92.

¹⁹⁴ Gittleman has loosely dated Very's commonplace book entries. Very himself very infrequently dated his commonplace book entries, making it difficult to know when exactly he had read something. Gittleman, Very, passim.

natural philosopher, but as a Man. Except this one restriction, there is not object standing between the Poet and the image of things; between this, & the Biographer & Historian there are a thousand.¹⁹⁵

Very wrote, incorporating Wordsworth's own words into his reaction:

The true Poet is in my opinion under no restriction whatever. The belief that the object of a poet is to please seems to belong to that class of errors which men often fall into by taking for granted that which they have thought could not be questioned. Nature does not assume [sic] a more beautiful form under the plastic influence of his mind merely because he wishes to give "immediate pleasure to a human Being &c" but because his soul has been framed that it cannot act upon anything without stamping it with its own impress,-- without turning what it sees around it

"Into a substance glorious as her own,
Yea with her own incorporated, by power
Capacious and serene."

What is it that makes us

"Fools of Nature
So horridly to shake our dispositions
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?"¹⁹⁶

What is it but a greater disproportion between his own mind & what he sees around him that lads him to fairer creations. True it is that a poet may write to please others, to acquire wealth, fame and earthly prosperity but this does not prove that their [sic] may not be a higher motive, a something within him which prompts him to awaken in man a consciousness of his high destiny by exhibiting the almost creative power of the human mind when exerted on Nature.

He cannot if he would look upon Nature without feeling the union which exists between it & his own mind.¹⁹⁷

Very's response revealed the direction of his own thoughts. Clearly he embraced a Romantic subjectivity – the soul when it acts on anything must "stamp... with its own impress" – while at the same time implicitly suggesting that this very subjectivity had been placed in the soul by its divine Framer. If man worked to mold nature into beautiful forms, he did so because he had been so created. Both the goal (poetic creation) and the means for accomplishing that goal had been placed in the human mind by its Creator.

¹⁹⁵ Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads, quoted in Jones Very, Scrap Book, 50, Jones Very Papers, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA.

¹⁹⁶ The lines from Wordsworth that Very cited in this statement were taken from a passage from The Excursion that Very had transcribed on an earlier page. Very, Scrap Book, 49-50.

¹⁹⁷ Very, Scrap Book, 50-51.

According to Very, poetic composition, engaged in for earthly reasons, could also be motivated by higher motives over which the poet had no direct control and which worked by “exhibiting the almost creative power of the human mind.”¹⁹⁸ Very’s embrace of Romantic subjectivity and emotional sincerity were based on his belief that God had created the mind and soul of man in such a way as to exhibit that subjectivity and sincerity. If, as Very suggested, a poet “cannot if he would look upon Nature without feeling the union which exists between it and his own mind,” then conceivably the poet also could not keep himself from composing poetry which would attempt to express that union. The perception of natural beauty would lead to a spontaneous sense of union with God’s created Nature and to a parallel urge to produce poetry that would exhibit or embody that “almost creative power” of the human mind. God gave both the desire and the ability to write poetry.

Very’s Harvard training and his own careful reading had prepared him for original writing. Very’s two prize-winning essays, “The Practical Application in this Life, by Men as Social and Intellectual Beings, of the Certainty of Future State” (1835) and “What Reasons Are There for Not Expecting Another Great Epic Poem?,” (1836) reflected his continuing interest in the influence of Christianity on the mind of the poet. In these essays, Very asserted that Christianity, by turning the mind of the poet inward toward the examination of his own spiritual workings, had most strongly shaped the history of poetry. In “Practical Application,” Very argued that Christianity’s promise of eternal life had rendered the ancients’ desires for earthly fame obsolete. By urging a “higher destiny” onto modern man, Christianity demanded that the modern author “develop the beauty and sublimity of the world of thought — to rise from that which is seen and temporal to that, which is unseen

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* Emphasis added.

and eternal.”¹⁹⁹ Very’s argument hinged on the evolution of the human mind itself; he asserted:

As the mind advances, a stronger sympathy with the inner man of the heart is more and more felt, and becomes more and more the characteristic of literature. In the expanded mind and cultivated affections, a new interest is awakened, dramatic poetry succeeds the epic. . . . For as the mind expands and the moral power is developed, the mightiest conflicts are born within.²⁰⁰ [emph. Very’s]

By promising eternal life after death, Christianity so altered man’s perception of time and space that the finite spaces and times portrayed in epic poetry became irrelevant. Man was temporally and spatially bounded; God was not; through His promise of eternal life, God offered the knowledge of that spatial and temporal infinity to man. Man’s advancement towards the state of mind brought by this knowledge would be revealed most clearly by the development of motivations nobler than glory and fame. Very asserted:

[Man] is animated by a nobler aim; he wishes not to subdue, to crush the spirit of man — but to elevate it to a consciousness of its own worth, to awaken it in those high aspirations, which he feels within himself. He needs no mighty physical power to effect this — no sword, no sceptre. He seizes the quill[], the mere toy of a child; and stamps on the glowing page the copy of his own mind, his ‘thoughts that wander through eternity,’ and sends them forth, wherever the winds of heaven blow, or its light penetrates, the winged messengers of his pleasure.²⁰¹

Creative pleasure translated into noble motivation; the glory-seeking ancient hero had evolved into a cerebral Romantic figure whose hands wielded a pen rather than a sword and who would “seize” and “stamp on the glowing page” thoughts meant to move readers to recognition of their own higher consciousness(es). Lamenting the paucity of modern writers “by whom man is held up, not as a mere creature of clay, but as an immortal

¹⁹⁹ Jones Very, “The Practical Application in this Life, by Men as Social and Intellectual Beings, of the Certainty of a Future State,” in Harvard University, Bowdoin Prize Dissertations, 6 (1835-1839), no. 2, p. 7, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA.

²⁰⁰ Jones Very, “What Reasons Are There for Not Expecting Another Great Epic Poem?,” Harvard University, Bowdoin Prize Dissertations 6 (1835-1839), Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, no. 4, p. 13; this passage also appears in Very, “Epic Poetry,” in Poems by Jones Very, ed. William P. Andrews (Boston: 1883), 8-9.

²⁰¹ Very, “Practical Application,” pp. 18-19. This passage also appears in Very, “Epic Poetry,” 21-22.

spirit,”²⁰² Very implicitly called on writers to stamp on their pages their own awareness of how the Christian promise of immortality could bring men a higher knowledge of themselves and their destinies. In these essays, and the lecture they would become, “Epic Poetry,” Very blended a Romantic call for the poet’s self-conscious exploration of his heart — “[t]o stir the secret depths of our hearts, writers must have penetrated deeply into their own”²⁰³ — with the suggestion that the modern version of the epic might be the description of the writer’s own internal conflicts and his struggles toward Christian belief. Very argued for a Christian aesthetic that would enlist the Romantic poet in its service.

WILLED WILL-LESSNESS

Young Jones Very had grown up largely outside of Salem’s religious institutions. In letters to Emerson and, later, to William P. Andrews, Elizabeth Peabody suggested that Very’s mother, widowed when Very was a mere boy, had a reputation for having “more than doubts of another world and of the existence of God”²⁰⁴ and being “long at war with the world for Atheism’s sake”²⁰⁵ in addition to being “at odds with the existing state of society — a disciple of Fanny Wright[.]”²⁰⁶ Very’s biographers do not agree on Lydia Very’s character. William Bartlett portrays her as an upstanding and resolute woman who mislaid her marriage certificate, who prayed for forgiveness when she opposed her husband’s wish that young Jones go to sea, and who resorted to the phrase “The Lord giveth and the Lord

²⁰² Very, “Practical Application,” 21.

²⁰³ Very, “What Reasons,” 42; Very, “Epic Poetry,” *Poems*, ed. Andrews, 23.

²⁰⁴ Peabody to Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in *Letters*, 406.

²⁰⁵ Peabody to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Salem, MA, 3 December 1838, in *Letters*, 219.

²⁰⁶ Peabody to Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in *Letters*, 406.

taketh away” when her husband died.²⁰⁷ Edward Gittleman portrays her as an atheistic, controlling, possessive woman determined to bind her son to her at all costs. Gittleman’s otherwise perceptive biography consistently portrays the young man’s development as the psychological struggle of a young man attempting to access a divine Father who would replace his own lost father and defeat his domineering mother. While Gittleman makes valuable points about Very’s religious and aesthetic development (particularly in his analysis of Very’s commonplace books), his analysis reduces too much of Very’s own active intellectual efforts to order thought and feeling to a struggle to escape his mother’s influence.²⁰⁸ And yet, Gittleman’s psychological portrait of Very’s preparation for his ‘effective years’ raises an important issue: a young man of Very’s era who grew up outside of any institutionalized religious practice might well have had an unusual reaction to the Unitarian environs of Harvard, where he was required to attend chapel twice a day. Regardless of the degree of Lydia Very’s religious beliefs (or lack thereof), Very remained outside of Salem’s religious community until 1836, when he joined the (Unitarian) North Church; he would join the Harvard church in 1837.²⁰⁹

Following his graduation from Harvard in 1836, Very resolved to enter Harvard’s Divinity School; a position as Greek tutor provided him with the means of staying in Cambridge. As a tutor, he attended faculty meetings regularly and seems to have performed

²⁰⁷ Bartlett, *Very*, 13.

²⁰⁸ Gittleman, *Very*, 9-11. Gittleman’s treatment of the young Very’s home life suggests that Lydia Very took the demands of what later historians would identify as a “cult of true womanhood” to eccentric extremes. Gittleman takes material pertaining to Lydia Very’s garden from her daughter Lydia’s account *An Old-Fashioned Garden*; the material on Lydia Very’s religious beliefs (“‘severe experience of life,’ ‘at odds with the existing state of society,’ and ‘pretensions and conventions of religion’) from Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s 1880 letter to William P. Andrews and the memoir Andrews produced of Very for his edition of Very’s poems; otherwise, Gittleman identifies as his primary source for his account of Lydia Very as “Bartlett’s report of interviews conducted with elderly Salem residents in 1937, Bartlett 16-17, 121.” Gittleman, *Very*, 379n.

²⁰⁹ Gittleman, *Very*. On Salem’s religious community, see Rosa, *Salem*, esp. 24-27. See “Form of Admission to the Church in Harvard University,” Harvard University Archives, reprinted in [Kenneth Cameron, ed.], *Emerson Society Quarterly* 14 (I Quarter 1959): 18. According to this document, Very presented himself for admission to the Harvard church on May 17, 1837.

his academic duties adequately. He also acquired a reputation for being especially given to moralizing in the classroom and for showing an earnest concern for the state of his students' souls. One student wrote to his father describing Very's instruction:

We are not to consider our bodies as our own, Mr. Very tells us, but as given us by God to be subservient to our souls; that is to say, to the influence of the spirit of God in us; and this is manifested in the conscience, which is His voice speaking in us. . . . Study is not to be a mechanical performance, but a duty imposed on us by the will of God, to render us better and happier. . .²¹⁰

The mental effort involved in study itself could be directed toward the student's moral and religious welfare.²¹¹

Very's students received the intellectual fruit of Very's own, more personal religious project. By autumn 1835, the beginning of his senior year at Harvard, Very had become concerned about the state of his spiritual health. If his reading had convinced him that the mind, and more specifically, the imagination, contained both active and passive faculties, he had also concluded from his understanding of Scottish common-sense and Romantic aesthetics that a carefully cultivated mind could at once receive, contain, direct, and control externally and internally derived thoughts and feelings. If the imagination were positively identified as a God-given, God-defined, and God-driven faculty, then both the cultivation

²¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, Jr., to Samuel Johnson, Sr., Cambridge, MA, [14] September 1838, reprinted in Gittleman, Very, 184-185.

²¹¹ Elizabeth Peabody also noted Very's concern for his students in her 1880 letter to William P. Andrews: "[T]o his Greek class [Very] was in the habit of preaching — in so interesting a manner that the students felt it a great privilege that he always invited two or three to walk with him every day to 'Sweet Auburn' [Mount Auburn Cemetery] — for he always spoke of the deepest spiritual subjects and in the most devout tone — yet so free from cant as to command their reverence[.] This was a wonderful proof of power I think — for young men in college will not stand any sanctimony." Peabody to Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in Letters, 405. See Story, Forging; Bailyn, "Kirkland," for discussion of changing relationships between students and faculty during the late 1820s and 1830s. James Boyden, one of Very's Greek students in the fall of 1838, described Very's Greek class on September 6th, 1838, this way: ". . . we went to Very, where we were sure to get a moral lecture, averaging from fifteen to twenty minutes extent." [emphasis in original] James Boyden, typescript from Diary, 27 August - 10 September 1838, Boyden Papers, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA. For Very's attendance at Harvard faculty meetings, see Records of the Faculty or Immediate Government of Harvard College, 11, 2 August 1829 - 15 July 1840, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, passim.

and the exercise of that faculty could be directed toward the preservation of spiritual health.²¹²

Very had specific concerns about his spiritual health. According to a fellow student, Very was known at Harvard not only for his arrogant beliefs about himself as a poet, but also for his passion; in an account of a visit Very made to him in January 1839, Samuel Gray Ward recalled:

When we were in college . . . [he] had been quite indifferent to me. I had regarded him as a laborious drudge. There was an ungracefulness about him — yet it was a solemn, not-to-be-trifled-with awkwardness. He seemed to me to be intensely self-conscious. After a-while I began to hear strange stories of him from others. At first that he considered himself born for a great poet; to restore epic poetry. Then of unbridled passions overcome by monkish austerity and self denial. [~~But he was so given to women~~] that he had made himself a law not to speak (or look at women, I forget which).²¹³

As he would tell Elizabeth Peabody, Very's "difficulty" was his "love of beauty,"²¹⁴ in its tangible expression in the physical forms of women. The progress of Very's aesthetic and religious thought, shown in his commonplace book and in his poetry, suggests that he was working to channel that love of beauty into more abstract and more suitably Christian ends. Very sublimated his love for the physical beauty of women into a more spiritualized appreciation which manifested itself in the content and form of poetry. The very act of writing poetry helped him process physical passion into "higher" and essentially aesthetic thought.

Very's sonnet "Beauty" stands as an example of just this transfiguration. By serving as material for poetic composition, the perception of physical beauty became an abstract, spiritual experience. Written in September 1837, during Very's tenure as Greek tutor and

²¹² Gittleman, *Very*, 82-95.

²¹³ Samuel Gray Ward, "Account of a Visit from Jones Very in 1839," *Massachusetts Historical Society Miscellany*, 6 (December 1960): 3. Strikeout in original.

²¹⁴ Peabody to Lidian Emerson, Salem, MA, December 1838, in *Letters*, 222. Emphasis in original.

divinity student at Harvard, the poem's opening octave appeared to address a beautiful young woman:

I gazed upon thy face—and beating life,
Once stilled its sleepless pulses in my breast,
And every thought whose being was a strife
Each in his silent chamber sank to rest;
I was not, save it were a thought of thee,
The world was but a spot where thou hadst trod,
From every star thy glance seemed fixed on me,
Almost I loved thee better than my God.²¹⁵

The sense of union with God ultimately preserved the narrator's aesthetic sensibility by imbuing beauty with a higher and more numinous meaning. Rather than rooting out that sensibility by opening himself to the "Divine" fountain, the narrator was able to justify his intense aesthetic sensitivity by transmuting his love of Beauty (physical and intellectual) into what he characterized as "a holier thought," and then turned that thought to a different form of physical activity: the recording of that process of sublimation in the poem. The process of composition itself worked to sublimate the dangerous physical emotions into the tightly controlled form of the sonnet.²¹⁶

"Beauty" displayed Very in the process of transforming his love of beauty — in the physical and abstract senses alike — into the worship of Beauty in an abstract and spiritualized form. At the same time, "Beauty" can also be read as an essentially instructive or didactic poem. By describing the narrator's mastery of his weakness for feminine beauty, the sonnet also implicitly offered the narrator's solution of his not uncommon problem as a panacea for similarly affected readers. By imbuing beauty with a higher and more numinous Christian meaning, the poem "Beauty" offered a resolution of the problem of sexual and

²¹⁵ Jones Very, "Beauty," *Poems*, 58.

²¹⁶ For analysis of the significance of sublimation in the history of aesthetics and of poetry in particular, see Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), 157-176. See also Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*.

aesthetic desire which permitted the readers to retain their aesthetic sensibilities while remaining morally irreproachable. A young man could read the sonnet, experience or empathize with the emotions expressed, and, by participating in the act of sublimation that the poem both described and represented, suppress his own dangerous physical desires — all while engaging in the relatively harmless activity of reading a poem.²¹⁷

Additionally, the fact that “Beauty” was in sonnet form is in itself significant. The very rigidity of the form at once contained the otherwise irrepressible sentiment while expressing and then purifying it. If the sonnet form became a device for sublimation, it was also the result of a consciously learned mental process that ultimately served to shape and order Very’s increasingly disorderly thought. Just as the ordering act of sonnet composition helped to distance Very from the moral, emotional, and even intellectual dangers embodied by women, so would it help to contain the rapid and disordered thoughts Very experienced during his months of religious crisis. By the time Very’s mind altered in September 1838, the craft and requirements of sonnet-making may have helped him to order and express what he believed to be happening to him. During a period of what must have been great mental (if not biological) stress, consciously or not, Very’s mind continued to order thought and experience using the sonnet form.²¹⁸

To Very, the events of September 1838 — his outburst in class, his removal to McLean — were the culmination and product of what he would refer to as the “change of

²¹⁷ See Harris, Artist in American Society; Stein, Ruskin, for general treatments of the prescribed connections between aesthetic reception and moral uplift.

²¹⁸ Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 55-58; Stuart Curran, Poetic Form and British Romanticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29-55; Paul Oppenheimer, The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-40; Paul Fussell, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1978), 124; see also Sandra L. Bermann, The Sonnet over Time, especially for her suggestion that the sonnet form in itself can be seen as a kind of poetic apprenticeship or study for a longer, more complex, more ‘complete’ poem. Sandra L. Bermann, The Sonnet over Time: A Study in the Sonnets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Baudelaire, University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature, number 63 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), esp. 148-149.

heart²¹⁹ he had felt during his senior year at Harvard. Very would describe this mental change in the following way, in his letter to the Reverend Henry W. Bellows:

I felt within me a new will It seemed like my old will only it was to the good—it was not a feeling of my own but a sensible will that was not my own. Accompanying this was another feeling as it were a consciousness which seemed to say—“That which creates you creates also that which you see or him to whom you speak” These two consciousness [sic] as I may call them continued with me two or three weeks and went as they came imperceptably [sic].²²⁰

Explaining his behavior at Harvard as the result of the movement of the Spirit within him, Very mentioned his stay at McLean and indicated that while held at McLean, “under the influence of the Spirit my usual manner retur[n]ed in all things save that I now obey it as my natural impulse.”²²¹ The mind that produced the prodigious number of sonnets Very composed between 1838 and 1840 had been profoundly changed by Very’s certainty that God’s will — that “sensible will that was not [his] own” — stood alongside Very’s own disarmed will.

Very treated his own essentially intellectual conversion experience as a model for other conversions. His letter to Bellows may have been intended to suggest that Bellows should cultivate similar thoughts. Additionally, three undated “Epistles to the Unborn,” written by Very and later found in Emerson’s papers, may also have been intended as a conversion narrative, meant to inspire a change of mind in Emerson himself or in the readers of the essays and poems Emerson helped Very to publish in 1839. In these “Epistles,” Very took the reader through the three stages of a conversion experience — involving two separate spiritual rebirths — while stressing his own role as guide and teacher. The first birth would be a willed move away from the weaknesses of the “unnatural”

²¹⁹ Very to Bellows, *Poems*, lvii. Emphasis in original.

²²⁰ *ibid.*

²²¹ *ibid.*

physical body (“the body of desire or enjoyment”²²²) toward a more “natural” mental and spiritual state, the complete openness to the will and direction of God. The second birth would come through prayer, which would culminate in the believer’s becoming a “quickenings spirit,”²²³ responsible (as Very believed he was) for guiding others through these stages. Prayer was, in effect, the active cultivation of passivity to God’s will. In the third epistle, “On Miracles,” Very suggested that prayer and guidance came from sources which seemed to be external to man but which were in reality coming from God’s influence as seated within the soul of every man:

Instead of understanding that the person who speaks to you is external to the you he addresses from within; you transfer this power to an external influence over your visible bodies as you call them and believe that these are to be raised by him after their decay, not knowing that to him who speaks the you to which he is sent to speak is always the body to be raised. . . . He who speaks is external to you; he speaks to you from without; but it is outward from within and so exerts an external influence over you.²²⁴ [emph. in original]

In this complicated passage, Very drew on the blend of aesthetic theory and Christian theory he had absorbed at Harvard. He powerfully fused Christian humility with Romantic subjectivity, and, ironically, Romantic egoism: that active cultivation of will-lessness converted receptivity to God’s external influence into fusion with God. As Very claimed in his letter to Bellows, God had placed his own will in Very’s mind, alongside Very’s own disarmed will. God’s external influence was internalized and embodied in the intellectual and physical being of Very himself.

Very’s sonnet, “The New Birth,” written in September 1838, described his “change of mind” in terms of a change in the pace and speed of thought itself:

‘Tis a new life;— thoughts move not as they did,
With slow uncertain steps across my mind;

²²² *ibid.*

²²³ Jones Very, “An Epistle on Prayer,” reprinted in Cole, “Epistles,” 177.

²²⁴ *ibid.*, 179.

In thronging haste fast pressing on they bid
 The portals open to the viewless wind,
 That comes not save when dust is laid....
 The crown of pride that gilds each mortal brow,
 And from before man's vision melting fade
 The heavens and earth; -- their walls are falling now.
 Fast crowding on, each thought asks utterance strong;
 Storm-lifted waves swift rushing to the shore,
 On from the sea they send their shouts along,
 Back through the cave-worn rocks their thunders roar;
 And I, a child of God by Christ made free,
 Start from death's slumbers to eternity.²²⁵

Attempting to put into words the increasing speed of his thoughts, Very in this sonnet attributed active movement to thought. A thought, a completely abstract entity, is capable of moving or being moved across space (“across [his] mind”) and across time (the contrast between “slow uncertain steps” and “[i]n thronging haste fast pressing on”). Additionally, the “walls” of heavens and earth fall, suggesting the changes in spatial and temporal perception Very had attributed to Christianity in “Epic Poetry” and its earlier drafts. While this sonnet can quite easily be read as an indicator of mental illness — as reflecting the onset of a manic or schizophrenic episode — Very himself understood this change as having been effected by God’s literal penetration into Very’s mind. To Very such a ‘change of mind,’ paralleling his “change of heart,” indicated that his efforts to subjugate his own willful thoughts had been successful. The will of God had entered his mind and would direct his thoughts and emotions to move in particular directions and at particular times.²²⁶ As an

²²⁵ Jones Very, “The New Birth,” *Poems*, 64. “The New Birth” was published in the Salem *Observer* on 27 October 1838, and was included in Jones Very, *Essays and Poems*, [ed. Ralph W. Emerson], (Boston: Little and Brown, 1839; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972).

²²⁶ Berthoff, “Jones Very,” Deese, “Introduction,” *Poems*; Clayton, “Angelic Sins.” Clayton’s dissertation focuses on audience reception of the various editions of Very’s poetry. The issue of his possible/attributioned madness always makes itself known in any criticism of Very’s life and/or works. Some see his poetic and ministerial career as interrupted—detrimentally—by a spell of mental illness; others have found ways to address the issue of his possible mental illness and work it into their analyses of his life and works. Eve LaPlante has hazarded a diagnosis of temporal-lobe epilepsy in her article “The Riddle of TLE,” *Atlantic* 262, no. 11 (November 1988): 31-35.

illustration of the state of Very's mind, "The New Birth" gives a compact and (relatively) coherent description of moving thought: thought in motion, and thought that drives.

Very's belief that he had successfully achieved a state of openness to the will of God was a variation on the Unitarian emphasis on mental cultivation and self-improvement; at the same time some witnesses compared his message and behavior with George Fox's Quakerism.²²⁷ Very's beliefs did build on an older Calvinist emphasis on election in his assumption of gaps existing between God and man and between the regenerate and the unregenerate, which could, nevertheless, be bridged by conscious and deliberate work toward submission. As suggested by Very's "Epistles," conscious and directed effort had allowed Very to internalize the external voice of God. The end effect of such effort, for Very, led to a particularly literary conception of election, embodied by Very's nature poems. The successful convert would enjoy a specially formed ability to 'read' the book of Nature, a position that echoed the Transcendentalists' belief in God's immanence in Nature while also relating to more orthodox beliefs about man's more limited ability to understand and interpret God's revelation, as revealed in scripture or in God's designed Nature. While Very did, I believe, understand his special knowledge of Nature and of God's will to be essentially intuitive, the knowledge and the process of that intuition were God-given. Additionally,

²²⁷ James Freeman Clarke would place Very in company with Fox in his introduction to the Very sonnets Clarke published in the Western Messenger: "[S]o have many other earnest souls, who spurned the worldly and mean thoughts and practices of those about them, who longed for an introduction of a brighter day into the darkness of time: reformers and enthusiastic philanthropists, Wesleys, Penns, Foxes, been called delirious by their own age, and been deified by the following one." [James Freeman Clarke], "Religious Sonnets," Western Messenger 6, no. 5 (March 1839): 309. More negatively, Elizabeth Peabody would remark to Emerson that "These impulses from above I think are never sound minded—the insanity of Quakers— (which is very frequent under my observation) always grows out of it— or rather begins in it. — I wonder whether some thing might not be written by a believer in the doctrine of Spirituality — which would show the difference between trusting the Soul & giving up one's mind to these individual illuminations." [emphasis in original] Peabody to Emerson, [Concord, MA], 24 September 1838, in Letters, 208-209. George Moore wrote in his diary: "[V]ery appears to do very much as Geo[rge] Fox is represented to have done, and to have very similar views. It is almost fearful to look upon him, and see his deep earnestness, exhibited in his face, and to hear the tremulous tones of voice as he utters himself — and at the same time to think that he is fully possessed with this great idea that the Spirit is revealing itself in him." Moore, "Diary," quoted in Gittleman, Very, 191.

Very understood his own intuitions to have been earned by his own considerable mental effort. If, as he would insist to Emerson, his poems were divinely inspired, if not divinely produced, that very spontaneity of production — of reception, inspiration, and composition — was the end result of Very's own intellectual and religious preparation. His sonnets were the products of a mind Very had worked to change.²²⁸

A good deal of Very's post-"rebirth" poetry focused on the messages he felt newly qualified to "read" in the book of Nature. In "The Violet," Very offered a decoding of the violet's message for the benefit of readers whose unregenerate eyes were unable to "scan" its meaning. The violet became a text that Very alone could interpret; the sonnet enacted the special "reading" ability Very believed that his changed mind had acquired. Speaking "to" the violet rather than to the reader, Very explained unregenerate man to the violet:

Without fixed root he cannot trust like thee
The rain will know the appointed hour to fall,
But fears lest sun or shower may hurtful be,
And would delay or speed them with his call;
Nor trust like thee when wintry winds blow cold,
Whose shrinking form the withered leaves enfold.²²⁹

Very attributed trusting faith in God to the violet, and, implicitly, to himself as well, by suggesting that he and the violet shared the sense of having a "fixed root" allowing them to trust that God would properly direct the elements and the continuing cycles of seasonal time. The tension between movement and stillness, the injunction toward humility, the faith that God would continue to order and manage time and space are all Very commonplaces.

²²⁸ Winters, "Very and Emerson;" Berthoff, "Jones Very;" Lyons, "Selected Poems;" Dennis, "Correspondence;" Anthony Herbold, "Nature as Concept and Technique in the Poetry of Jones Very," *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967): 244-259; Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*; Levernier, "Calvinism and Transcendentalism"; Cole, "Epistles;" Seed, "Alone with God and Nature," 166-179; Robinson, "Exemplary Self;" Deese, introduction, *Poems*, xxix-xxxv. See also Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*; Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 29-45, 69-73.

²²⁹ Very, "Violet," *Poems*, 74.

In this poem, they are presented as wisdom Very shared with the violet, and as knowledge Very had earned through hard mental effort.

The organic process of plant growth and development was a Romantic commonplace, often used to represent the human mind or the mind's creative processes. Plant imagery also provided Very with an ideal vehicle for his central motional paradox of a being whose active growth was couched or housed in a physical form that appeared to remain motionless; the growth of a plant paralleled the development of the human soul, whose growth would not necessarily manifest itself in dramatic bodily change or movement.

Very's "The 'Trees of Life'" strikingly illustrated this paradox. The octave of the poem explicitly carried a mission statement that juxtaposed the message of eternal life with a description of Very's own sense of poetic vocation. Actual trees appear in the poem at the beginning of the third quatrain:

The trees that grow along thy living stream,
And from its springs refreshment ever drink,
Forever glittering in thy morning beam
They bend them o'er the river's grassy bank,²³⁰

with the concluding couplet being: "And as more high and wide their branches grow/They look more fair within the depths below."²³¹ The "Trees of Life" are humans who have opened their minds properly to God's message of eternal life, put forth in the first quatrains; man should receive his nourishment from God's "living stream" as a tree along the banks of a river takes nourishment from that river. Nourished, the trees grow, ascending toward the heavens. But trees do not follow paths or set out on journeys; trees accept the sustenance provided them by the stream and grow higher and wider while remaining rooted alongside the water. The concluding couplet also draws a connection between natural imagery and

²³⁰ Very, "Trees of Life," *Poems*, 75.

²³¹ *ibid.*

beauty: the stream nourishes the trees and reflects their heightened beauty, an achievement arising from their passive reception of the nourishing water. Having accepted the sustaining water, the trees grow, and grow more beautiful, but their spatial and aesthetic development are all attributable to the beneficent stream.

The first two quatrains of “Trees of Life” portray Very himself as a poet, in terms that stress the active and the passive in his own compositional practice. Lines five and six (“Nor words nor measured sounds have I to find,/But in them both my soul doth ever flow;”) imply that it is not up to Very to “find” the words or “measured sounds” that constitute poetry, but for him simply to receive them. “Finding” as an activity combines active and passive behavior: in finding, one actively looks for an object that he believes to have already been put somewhere; “finding” differs significantly from “making” in that one can “make” something entirely new, where “finding” implies that something has already been made and now only needs to be found. The specific religious meaning Very assigned to his cultivated receptivity made the circumstances of composition an integral part of his mission. Very understood the poetry to “flow” in or through his mind and soul, and to be found rather than consciously made.

Believing himself to have experienced the second rebirth, the attainment of spiritual maturity, Very believed that he was responsible for conveying the Word of God to others so that they could begin their own spiritual journey. The events of September 1838 — his classroom breakdown, his removal to Salem and then to McLean — might have suggested that poetry was, overall, a safer means of communicating his particular Christian message than preaching was. Reports of Very’s attempts to preach his revelations to others suggest that he appeared, at the least, incoherent, and at the most, blasphemous, to listeners. Elizabeth Peabody’s accounts of Very’s attempt to convert her indicates that she found his

ministrations unconvincing.²³² Yet, though she considered Very to be insane, Peabody urged Emerson to consider publishing Very's sonnets and essays, to be accompanied by "an account of his states—a psychological autobiography."²³³ Additionally, several letters from Mary and Sophia Peabody to Elizabeth (who in November 1838 was in Boston), described the efforts the Peabody family made to convince Very to stop his extemporaneous preaching, while also recounting the praise the Peabodys bestowed on Very's emotionally and aesthetically affecting poetry.²³⁴ In a letter to her sister Elizabeth, written on November 24, 1838, Mary Peabody wrote:

Poor Very came to tea with his eyes full of tears & his face & brow flushed – I saw something was the matter -- & I began to tell him how beautiful his sonnets were & how much we enjoyed them -- & that I hoped he would write more – He said . . . [John Brazer and Josiah Quincy] wished to send him away on a voyage or somewhere where they could not hear him or let him be heard.²³⁵

Sophia Peabody wrote a shorter version of the same encounter to Elizabeth in a letter that included an indication of Very's hopes for his sonnets: "We told him of our enjoyment of his sonnets. He smiled, and said that, unless we thought them beautiful because we also heard the Voice in reading them, they would be of no avail. . . . When I am altogether true to the light I have, I shall be in the heaven where the angelic Very now is."²³⁶ In these letters Very appeared as an emotionally vulnerable and angelic being, perhaps too sensitive to others' opinions of him; in contrast, Elizabeth Peabody portrayed Very's mother as "a tiger

²³² Peabody wrote to Emerson: ". . . I suppose it is water on the brain — It was probably produced by intense application. He was superintending the Greek class— out of wh. He has got a vast deal of studying— & he has the idea of a great moral responsibility— which arose I suppose from his success in awakening the sentiment of duty in others. — Besides he has been a year or more in his divinity studies, & writing besides." Peabody to Emerson, [Concord, MA] 24 September 1838, in *Letters*, 208.

²³³ Peabody to Emerson, Salem, MA, 3 December 1838, in *Letters*, 220. Emerson had already thought of this and had written to Very in November making just this suggestion.

²³⁴ Gittleman, *Very*, 232-234.

²³⁵ Mary Peabody to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Salem, MA, 24 November 1838, reprinted in Deese, "Two Letters," 223.

²³⁶ Sophia Peabody to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Salem, MA, [n.d.] in Deese, "Two Letters," 227.

of a woman”²³⁷ who vehemently defended her son’s strange beliefs but who could not be trusted to keep him safe from hostile ministers.

In the face of the persecution Very experienced in Cambridge and in Salem, sonnets might have seemed to be a safer medium than personal confrontation. As suggested in his letter to Bellows, Very did send copies of his sonnets with letters or in place of letters to a variety of correspondents: the overlap between the private epistle and an emotionally and religiously charged sonnet suggests that Very viewed his sonnets as a means of carrying particular messages to their readers. Elizabeth Peabody recalled “[Very] entirely repudiated the role of a proselytizer—His whole duty was to utter the words given him by the Holy Spirit—he was not responsible for their effect or non-effect upon others.”²³⁸ In his letter to Bellows, Very stated simply, “As I hear of the word I publish in the form of sonnets in the Observer a paper in Salem and will send you such copies as I may not otherwise be directed to dispose of if you should so ask in your return.”²³⁹ Very’s remark to Bellows — “[I] will send you such copies as I may not otherwise be directed to dispose of. . .” — suggests both Very’s lack of control over the sonnets’ production and distribution and his perception of them as the primary means of spreading his (or His) word.

The power Very imputed to his inspired words clearly echoed the Logos of John; Very’s embrace of the Logos also justified his use of literature to carry his message. Very opened his sonnet “The Charge” with a quatrain that linked birthing words with a powerful and fearsome voice that urged humility as well as spiritual movement:

I speak to you in the word that gave you birth
 Fear not I call you to attend my voice
 Walk humbly on the path lies through the earth

²³⁷ Peabody to Emerson, Salem, MA, 3 December 1838, *Letters*, 218.

²³⁸ Peabody to William P. Andrews, Concord, MA, 12 November 1880, in *Letters*, 408.

²³⁹ Very to Bellows, lviii.

But thou shalt in the latter day rejoice²⁴⁰

In “The Warrior,” the narrator identified himself:

I am of Him who gives the quickening spirit born
And wield forever wield [sic] the conquering word
Its power shall beat in atoms mountain high
And through the parting sea shall lead me dry.²⁴¹

Here Very spoke as both Christ and Very; having undergone the change of heart and mind required for salvation, Very understood himself as being “of Him,” and, as Phyllis Cole has suggested, as having become another Christ, the achievement of Christhood for all who received the Word being the goal of Veryism.²⁴² In Very’s most aggressive ‘voiced’ sonnets, those which directly commanded the reader to listen to and absorb the Word, Very’s identity blurred with God’s. This gesture, however unconscious, at once obscured Very’s own voice and exalted it to divine status, forming the ultimate justification for literary production: the fusion of one’s own words with the Word of God itself would match the fusion of one’s own identity with the being of God Himself.

Very’s sonnets repeatedly underscored his sense of utter humility while also suggesting the power to be found in that humility. When Very wrote, in “Humility:”

Oh humble me! I cannot bide the joy
That in my Savior’s presence ever flows;
May I be lowly, lest it may destroy
The peace his childlike spirit ever knows;²⁴³

the meaning was equivocal and multidirectional: did he proclaim his humility, did he offer it to readers as proof of a successful conversion, or did he fear the resurgence of his own willfulness and call on God to humble him? The second quatrain assigned speech to God (“Thee”) and a passive role to Very himself. Yet in the poem Very stood beside God, and,

²⁴⁰ Jones Very, “The Charge,” *Poems*, 130.

²⁴¹ Jones Very, “The Warrior,” *Poems*, 138.

²⁴² Cole, “Epistles.”

²⁴³ Very, “Humility,” *Poems*, 124

in spite of the humility he claimed and urged upon himself, Very drew attention to himself as the humble servant of God.

While assuming or taking on the creative power attributed to the Romantic poet, Very sought through his own poetry to return that creative power back into the hands of God by working to form his mind in acquiescence to God's will. This intellectual maneuver also powerfully justified Very's own personal desire to produce poetry: while ostensibly serving as God's mouthpiece, Very entered his own most creative period of composition, and produced a body of poetry that illustrated his own intellectual and emotional experiences. That his mission ultimately failed to produce any convert (beyond, possibly, the missionary's own mother) does not detract from the literary results of that mission: not merely a large body of poetry that appeared in a small number of periodicals, but also an identification of poetic mission which underscored the usefulness of poetic form. Very's sonnets carried emotionally affecting and, in this case, controversial material within a tightly controlled and self-justifying form.

EMERSON'S POET-PRIEST

In November 1838, Very sent two sonnets — "Enoch" and "In Him We Live and Move" — to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Very had visited Emerson in Concord that October, immediately after his release from McLean, bringing with him his essay "Hamlet," which he had finished at the asylum. Very's visit to Emerson in October 1838 was the continuation of a friendship which had begun earlier that year when, at Elizabeth Peabody's urging, Emerson had helped arrange for Very to deliver "Epic Poetry" at the Concord Lyceum in April 1838. During his brief stay in Concord, Very dined with the Emerson family and attended a

meeting of the Transcendental Club. By the autumn of 1838, Emerson had been made aware of Very's mental state by Elizabeth Peabody, who had relayed to him that the conservative clergy in Salem considered the Transcendentalists — Emerson in particular — responsible for Very's condition.²⁴⁴ Emerson, however, was inclined to judge Very's condition for himself, and praised his two essays on Shakespeare in a letter to Margaret Fuller which indicated his understanding of Very's condition:

Very has been here himself lately & staid a few days confounding us all with the question — whether he was insane? At first sight & speech, you would certainly pronounce him so. Talk with him a few hours and you will think all insane but he. Monomania or mono Sania he is a very remarkable person & though his mind is not in a natural & probably not in a permanent state, he is a treasure of a companion.²⁴⁵

Emerson was preparing his Divinity School Address when his path crossed with Very's. In the process of formulating his concept of the poet-priest whose essentially intuitive theology would restore the Unitarian church, Emerson must have found Very's prose works particularly engaging. The essays were the literary products of a spiritually inclined mind, organized along the unifying lines of Very's particularly strong emphasis on the promise of eternal life. The Shakespeare essays, written under Very's belief that his will had come to be congruent with the will of God, seemed to fulfill Emerson's requirements for the office of the poet-priest. Having not yet been exposed to Very's poetry, Emerson saw Very as another man whose religious thought also pointed toward the need for poet-priests. The two men seemed to agree on what was needed to revitalize the Unitarian Church: the infusion of soul, of intense individual experience. By this, neither man meant the emotional enthusiasm seen in the evangelical movements sweeping the moderate and orthodox Christian denominations, but the more intellectualized and aesthetic "enthusiasm"

²⁴⁴ Peabody to Emerson, [Concord, MA], 24 September 1838, in Letters, 208-209; Peabody to Emerson, [Salem, MA], 20 October 1838, in Letters, 215-217. Emphasis in original.

²⁴⁵ Emerson to Margaret Fuller, Concord, MA, November 9, 1838, Letters, 2:173.

or feeling urged by liberal Unitarians. Emerson and Very could agree that “[h]e who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. . . The man who renounces himself, comes to himself;”²⁴⁶ Very, however, staying closer to Calvinist tradition, understood self-renunciation to require considerably more work than Emerson did.²⁴⁷

The paradox of self-discovery through self-renunciation is a Christian commonplace. It also echoes the Romantic “spiral” described by M. H. Abrams, characterized first, by the move away from a state of innocence into adult thought and reason, and second, by a willed and conscious return to a childlike state of thought and feeling. That return was only apparent, however, seen as a forward movement which incorporated childlike thought processes into adult thought, rather than merely replicating childish thought. The distinction between the child’s unconscious appreciation of and effortless entry into Nature and the adult’s consciously chosen return to such unconsciousness related particularly to the processes of poetic inspiration and composition. If Romantic theorists contrasted a childish and natural openness to nature and inspiration to the adult’s “unnatural,” childlike yet willed openness, the analogy also had obvious Christian connotations: the Gospels of the New Testament depicted Jesus blessing children and declaring their humility and receptivity as conditions for entering the kingdom of heaven.²⁴⁸ In “Shakespeare” and “Hamlet” Very drew on both concepts: his references to pure, open thought echoed Christian

²⁴⁶ Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” Complete Works, vol. 1, Nature, Addresses and Lectures, 122.

²⁴⁷ Buell, Literary Transcendentalism.

²⁴⁸ Schiller’s distinction between the naïve and sentimental poet clearly drew on this pattern; Wordsworth’s characterization of the Poet as a man at once acutely receptive and powerfully creative in his “Preface” to the Lyrical Ballads also carried a similar theme. Closer to home, Emerson developed a similar theme in Nature, writing, “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other, who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.” Emerson, Nature, 10. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 379-383, 411-415; Friedrich Schiller, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, in Essays, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, (New York: Continuum, 1993), 179-260; Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads. See also Matthew 18:1-14, 19:13-15; Mark 9:35-37, 10:13-16; Luke 9:46-48, 18:15-17.

commonplaces of childlike innocence and self-renunciation, while also echoing Romantic beliefs about intuition and inspiration.²⁴⁹

Like his poetry, Very's two Shakespeare essays were the results of his "changed" mind. By offering a different method of reading — reading while remaining always conscious of the time- and space-altering certainty of eternal life — Very outlined a particular interpretation of Shakespeare's life and poetic work which affirmed and upheld Very's own religious and aesthetic thought. Throughout the essay "Shakespeare," Very worked to redirect the reader's vision of Shakespeare as a consciously writing man towards an image of Shakespeare as a mind rendered uniquely open to the influences of Nature and God by virtue of his constant awareness of existence. Because, as he claimed, Shakespeare's mind had the innocence and natural receptivity of a child's mind, Very argued that readers should describe Shakespeare's life and work as they might describe a child's activities: "To Shakespeare's whole life we might apply the same language that we do in speaking of the frolics of a child, — how full he is of life! . . . With the ever-surprised mind of a child, he was always transformed into the object he saw."²⁵⁰ Although Very repeatedly referred to the natural mental receptivity of childhood as an ideal state of mind, by the end of the essay it was clear that conscious effort to recover that receptivity was preferable to simply having it.

²⁴⁹ On Very's Shakespeare essays, see Berthoff, "Jones Very;" Sanford E. Marovitz, "Emerson's Shakespeare: From Scorn to Apotheosis [sic]," in *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed. Joel Myerson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 137-144, 154. Marovitz argues that Very's essays exerted considerable influence on Emerson, encouraging him to think about Shakespeare in more religious terms than he had previously, and suggesting to him Shakespeare's fatal flaw, the lack of a Christian conscience, shown by the unconsciousness of his literary production. By working his critical powers on Shakespeare, Very followed the Romantic turn towards Renaissance figures, a move seen most clearly in Coleridge, the Schlegels, Lamb, and others, as well as by American writers, including Richard Henry Dana, Sr., and eventually Emerson himself, who would include Shakespeare in his collection of *Representative Men* (published 1850). See Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), esp. 1-21; Curran, *Poetic Form*, 14-28. The essays may also have reflected a turn back to Very's own boyhood: according to his biographers, when Very was compelled to leave school in 1827 to work in a Salem auction room, he found a copy of Shakespeare's works among a lot, which, after carefully reading, he traded for a few college preparatory books. In a sense, in these essays, Very returned to one of his earliest influences. Gittleman, *Very*, 12-14.

²⁵⁰ Very, "Shakespeare," *Poems*, ed. Andrews, 39.

Stated Very: “The mind which of its own inborn force is natural, is innocent; but that which has been permitted to become so, is virtuous. To minds in both of these states does universality belong; in the one, it is that of the child; in the other, that of manhood.”²⁵¹

To choose to return to that natural, more passive state was to choose to cultivate a particular state of mind. That state of mind, however similar to the innocent mind of childhood, was also markedly different precisely because it was chosen and then deliberately worked towards; it was not so much a regressive move towards childish patterns of thought as it was a move towards childlike thought and receptivity — in other words, a willed innocence as opposed to mere regression. The distinction Very drew between Shakespeare’s unconscious openness to God and His works and the conscious, cultivated openness he urged upon modern poets echoed Very’s own mental project: by the time he completed this essay, Very had come to believe that his own deliberate efforts to manipulate or suppress his will had been successful. Very wrote as a man who had achieved the state of mind he urged onto his readers.²⁵²

According to Very, Shakespeare as a poet himself embodied openness to God’s will without being conscious of that openness. By arguing that modern writers could and would speak most profoundly by conscious cultivation of that openness to God, Very subtly exalted his own position as critic (and as poet) by virtue of his own belief that he had achieved a conscious unconsciousness — a belief which also placed Very on a slightly higher level aesthetically than Shakespeare himself. The particular mode of reading and of writing which Very espoused in these essays fused Christian humility with Romantic subjectivity and egoism: after all, what could be a more powerful support for one’s own subjective position than the belief that that position was actually provided (and thus shared) by God Himself?

²⁵¹ Very, “Shakespeare,” Poems, ed. Andrews, 36.

²⁵² Cf. Schiller, “Naïve and Sentimental,” Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism.

For Very, by autumn of 1838, poetic composition was the result and the product of a period of intense mental effort bent on the conscious eradication of his own will. Effortless composition came as the result of considerable and difficult mental effort directed at altering the structure of the mind: the sonnets were gifts from God. For Emerson, the sonnets were sonnets, the products of Jones Very's mind, regardless of the condition of that mind. As his letters indicate, Emerson believed that Very was only partially incapacitated. Indeed, Emerson seemed to think that the particular twist of Very's mind added to his text aesthetically as well as religiously; he wrote to Margaret Fuller that "the Essay ["Shakespeare"] is a noble production: not consecutive, filled with one thought; but that so deep & true & illustrated so happily & even grandly."²⁵³ Emerson's understanding of Very's sonnets as human and not divine products, however, suggests that Emerson questioned Very's more extreme religious beliefs. Very arguably regarded him as a potential convert, perhaps especially so, in light of Very's semi-sympathetic reading of Nature shortly after its publication and his possible presence at Emerson's address to the Divinity School.²⁵⁴ Clearly the letter that accompanied the "Shakespeare" essay suggested that Very hoped that Emerson would be affected by the essay and by the words Very would speak to him during his upcoming visit. Yet neither the sonnets nor the essay nor his own words brought Emerson near a conversion to Veryism.

At the beginning of their friendship, Emerson had not identified Very as a poet, seeing him rather as a man who like himself was deeply interested in poetry as an essentially religious subject. In early November 1838, however, Emerson received clippings of the two sonnets, "Enoch," and "In Him We Live and Move," as published in the Salem Observer, from Very. On November 18, Emerson wrote to thank Very for the poems:

²⁵³ Emerson to Fuller, Concord, MA, 28 and 29 September 1838, in Letters, ed. Rusk., 2:165.

²⁵⁴ Gittleman, Very, 121-131.

I love them & read them to all who have ears to hear. Do not, I beg you, let a whisper or sigh of the muse go unattended to or unrecorded. The sentiment which inspires your poetry is so deep & true, & the expression so simple, that I am sure you will find your audience very large as soon as the verses first take air & get abroad. . . . [Y]ou must after a little more writing — collect your prose & verse in a volume and make the bookseller give you bread for the same. And let me help you with some of my recent experience in the matter.²⁵⁵

The postscript to the letter revealed just how editorially inclined Emerson was toward Very's poetry; at the end of a glowing letter, Emerson added, "Let me suggest the alteration of the word 'Jewish' (patriarch) in the sonnet on Enoch. The country of Enoch I suppose cannot very well be settled though I should think 'Syrian' would not be too great a licence. But Jewish is an alibi, and another whe<re>n."²⁵⁶ After receiving Very's clippings, Emerson saw Very anew, as a published poet. And he was interested in what he saw. Yet the two men's purposes were different. As Emerson indicates in the letter, his primary interest lay in getting good sonnets out to the public, and possibly earning "bread" through publication. Very's interest lay in gaining a broader audience for his mission.

Very's November 30, 1838 response (addressed to "Rev. R. W. Emerson") must not have been quite the response Emerson had expected:

I was glad to hear that my stay with you was improving and that you love that which is spoken by the Word. If you love it aright in the spirit of obedience it shall be unto you given to hear and speak of the Father in Christ. . . . Every Scribe instructed in the kingdom shall bring forth as a householder new and old. That is he himself shall hear the word of the Father and anew interpret for men the old. . . . You seem desirous to hear.²⁵⁷

Very continued in this vein for another full page; on the third page of the letter, he addressed Emerson's letter:

Your delay of the manuscripts [of the Shakespeare essays] was not minded, and your care in having them copied may it be rewarded by that spirit with which they are written. . . . I should be glad to have your aid whenever it is so ordered for the

²⁵⁵ Emerson to Jones Very, Concord, MA, 18 November 1838, in *Letters*, ed. Tilton, 7:326-327.

²⁵⁶ Emerson to Very, 18 November 1838, in *Letters*, ed. Tilton, 7: 327.

²⁵⁷ Very to Emerson, Salem, MA, 30 November 1838, reprinted in Jones, "Symbolism," Appendix D, 129.

printing and disposal of that which is placed in my hands. Whenever as you say the weary ones shall hear they will demand and pay the laborer his poor pittance of bread.²⁵⁸

Very's complicated passive constructions illustrate the degree to which he felt that his actions were directed by the will of God and not his own; not only would he wait to publish the poems until "whenever it is so ordered" (the poems themselves being "that which is placed in my hands"), he even noted that Emerson's delay in sending the manuscripts "was not minded."

Very as an active subject did not appear in his own writing; yet, in this letter, Very consented, however obliquely, to publication and to assistance from Emerson.

In March 1839 Emerson wrote to Very urging him to visit in early April, when "[w]e shall. . . have a good opportunity of settling what is best in regard to an early publication of the Dissertations and sonnets and also, as far as speech can, what is best in life."²⁵⁹ By this time, however, Very appears to have shut himself up in his mother's house in Salem, writing furiously; his only reply to Emerson was "a short and somewhat Judaical note,"²⁶⁰ indicating that he could not come in April but would visit later. Very's brother Washington — who had brought Jones home to Salem after his eruption at Harvard — wrote to Emerson himself on behalf of his brother, informing Emerson that Very would not be able to visit for several months, adding that:

[Jones] says that he will send all which he has to you and that you may select from the unpublished pieces such as you think proper. He thinks it would be best to leave a subscription paper at the Cambridge bookstore, and he would prefer to have you send whatever money may accrue from it to me.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ Very to Emerson, 30 November 1838, Jones, "Symbolism," 130-131.

²⁵⁹ Emerson to Very, Concord, MA, 19 March 1839, in *Letters*, ed. Tilton, 7:336.

²⁶⁰ The letter is unrecovered. Emerson refers to the letter in a letter to Elizabeth Peabody. Emerson to Peabody, Concord, MA, 16 April 1839, in *Letters*, ed. Tilton, 7:339.

²⁶¹ Washington Very to Emerson, Salem, MA, 3 June 1839, reprinted in Jones, "Symbolism," 132.

In a postscript, Washington Very added, “[Jones] would like to have the work dedicated to Professor E. T. Channing of Cambridge as a mark of gratitude and wishes that a subscription paper may be left at Cambridge as soon as possible, as there is a class with which he is well acquainted who will soon leave the college.”²⁶² Very had not forgotten his professor’s influence, or the influence he himself had sought to be at Harvard.

Very’s dedication of the volume to Channing and Emerson’s general hesitance to promote the book after its publication suggests that the collaboration was not smooth; unfortunately, the partnership is only sparsely recorded. Elizabeth Peabody recalled later:

[Emerson selected the sonnets for publication]. . . very soon after they were written, impromptu. Now and then a metaphor would not be fully carried out, but a slight verbal connection was necessary. . . . Mr. Emerson said Mr. Very was very averse to correction — declaring that it was the utterance of the Holy Ghost. But Mr. Emerson said he said to him, — but we cannot permit the Holy Ghost to be careless (& in one instance) to talk bad grammar.²⁶³

Several comments in his journals also suggest that Emerson had found Very increasingly difficult:

What are persons but certain good or evil thoughts masquerading before me in curious frocks of flesh & blood. . . . Here is Simeon the Stylite, or John of Patmos in the shape of Jones Very, religion for religion’s sake, religion divorced, detached from man, from the world, from science & art; grim, unmarried, insulated, accusing; yet true in itself, & speaking things in every word. The lie is in the detachment; and ↑when he is ↓ in the room with other persons, speech stops as if there were a corpse in the apartment.²⁶⁴

While throughout the passage Emerson seemed to want to treat Very as an intellectual entity (as a “good or evil thought” who merely wore flesh and blood), he eventually came to a damning physical image: Very as a corpse whose presence stopped all conversation.

²⁶² *ibid.*

²⁶³ Peabody to Andrews, 12 November 1880, in *Letters*, 409. Emphasis in original.

²⁶⁴ Emerson, 16 June 1839, *JMN*, 7:212-213.

Very left the Emerson house the next day but remained on Emerson's mind; on June 18, 1839, Emerson wrote: "The private soul ascends to transcendental virtue. Like Very, he works hard without moving hand or foot. . . ."²⁶⁵

Then, on June 21, Emerson wrote:

It may be said in defence of this practice of Composition which seems to young persons so mechanical & so uninspired that to men working in Time all literary effort must be more or less of this kind, to Byron, to Goethe, to De Stael, not less than to Scott & Southey. . . . All these verses & thoughts were as spontaneous at some time to that man as any one was. Being so, they were not his own but above him the voice <the>of simple, necessary, aboriginal Nature & coming from so narrow an experience as one mortal, they must be strictly related[,] even the farthest ends of his life, and seen at the perspective of a few ages will appear harmonious & univocal.²⁶⁶ [emph. his]

Here Emerson developed his own view of "Composition" — one which addressed at once the conflict between the spontaneity claimed by Very and asserted in the Romanticism of Byron, Goethe, de Stael, et al. and the so allegedly "mechanical and uninspired" composition entailed by conscious effort put into the finishing of a work. Composition became an activity performed on the consequences of spontaneous reception; a verse became the fossil remains of a spontaneous thought. Poetic composition became an activity involving both inspiration and "mechanical" revision; rather than asserting the superiority of one over the other, Emerson here suggested that poetry, coming from "the voice of simple, necessary, aboriginal Nature" necessarily involved both.

As Lawrence Buell has noted, the Transcendentalists' emphasis on inspiration made actual literary production difficult for writers: if literary work was seen as the product of an essentially inexplicable inspiration, literary effort became an oxymoron, and literary excellence inimitable. The Transcendentalists who achieved literary success were generally those who moved away from Emerson's conception of the poet-priest — including

²⁶⁵ Emerson, 18 June 1839, JMN, 7:216.

²⁶⁶ Emerson, 21 June 1839, JMN, 7:216-217.

Emerson himself. Emerson's collaboration with Very revealed an Emerson quite aware of the labor required in finishing a piece; indeed, the work Emerson put into the publication of his Essays (1841) at roughly the same time suggests that Emerson perhaps spoke more about intuitive literary inspiration more than he actually practiced it. When confronted by a poet who truly believed his poetry to be divinely inspired, Emerson became frustrated, and in at least one case, made changes in Very's verse without Very's permission. In the practical world of publication, the editor won; the inspired poet stood corrected.²⁶⁷

This is not to suggest that Emerson willfully or even maliciously revised Very's poetry. It is, rather, to suggest that the conflict between Emerson and Very reveals the perceived gap between inspiration and revision. Emerson's public statements about poetry — in Nature, in the Divinity School Address, in his essay/lecture "The Poet," — put forth an image of the intuitive and spontaneously composing poet that Emerson himself found inadequate and frustrating when embodied in the person of Jones Very. When Emerson grumbled in his journal, on September 28, 1839, "Also I hate Early Poems,"²⁶⁸ and, in a longer passage, written on November 28, 1839: "I do not wish to read the verses of a poetic mind but only of a poet. I do not wish to be shown early poems, or any steps of progress. I wish my poet born adult. I do not find youth or age in Shakspeare [sic], Milton, Herbert; & I dread minors."²⁶⁹ Here Emerson asserted his preference for finished poems — for worked-on poems that revealed no traces of effort, of process, or of maturing.

Similarly, when in 1841 he grumbled, in reference to aspiring poet William Ellery Jr., "E[llery]. though he has fine glances and a poetry that is like an exquisite nerve

²⁶⁷ Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 316-323; Deese, "Presumptuous Task." See also Glen M. Johnson, "Emerson's Craft of Revision: The Composition of Essays (1841)" in Studies in the American Renaissance, 1980, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, G. K. Hall: 1980), 51-72.

²⁶⁸ Emerson, [September 1839], JMN, 7:249.

²⁶⁹ Emerson, 28 November 1839, JMN, 7:316.

communicating by thrills . . . is a very imperfect artist, and, as it now seems, will never finish anything. He does not even like to distinguish between what is good, & what is not, in his verses, would fain have it all pass for good, — for the best, — & claim inspiration for the worst lines.²⁷⁰ Emerson clearly found fault with Ellery's inability to finish his poems adequately and his tendency to resort to "claim[ing] inspiration" for poor lines rather than spend effort reworking those lines.

Very's Essays and Poems appeared in the autumn of 1839. The volume did not generate significant amounts of attention, and its reviews focused on the sonnets' lack of finish.²⁷¹ Margaret Fuller published a review of the volume in the January 1840 number of the Boston Quarterly Review, writing that "in these little poems, though unfinished in style, & homely of mien, you will find an elasticity of spirit, a genuine flow of thought, & an unsought nobleness & purity almost unknown amid the self-seeking, factitious sentiment, & weak movement of our overtaught, & overambitious literature..."²⁷² Emerson himself contributed a brief and somewhat belated review of Essays and Poems in the July 1841 Dial. Emerson granted Very a benign acknowledgment of the source of his inspiration by noting that "the author, plainly a man of a pure and kindly temper, casts himself into the state of the high and transcendental obedience to the inward Spirit;" yet, Emerson concluded that the author had "apparently made up his mind to follow all its leadings, though he should be taxed with absurdity or even with insanity."²⁷³

Like Fuller, Emerson would also note the poetry's lack of polish:

²⁷⁰ Emerson, September 1841, JMN, 7:468-469. Emphasis added.

²⁷¹ The North American Review gave it the briefest of notices, only listing it as a "New Publication" in October 1839. "New Publications," North American Review, 49 (October 1839): 507. The book may have suffered from Very's association with Emerson, whose Transcendentalism made him a heretic to some; on the other hand, since Emerson did little to promote the book, his reputation may have done little for the book either way. Clayton, "Angelic Sins," 23-160; Deese, "Introduction," xxi-xxv.

²⁷² Margaret Fuller, review of Essays and Poems by Jones Very, Boston Quarterly Review 3 (January 1840): 132, quoted in Clayton, "Angelic Sins," 108. Emphasis in original.

²⁷³ [Ralph Waldo Emerson], review of Essays and Poems by Jones Very, The Dial, 2, no. 1 (July 1841): 130.

In [his religious] enthusiasm he writes most of these verses, which rather flow through him than from him. There is no composition, no elaboration, no artifice in the structure of the rhyme, no variety in the imagery; in short, no pretension to literary merit, for this would be departure from his singleness, and followed by loss of insight. He is not at liberty even to correct these unpremeditated poems for the press; but if another will publish them, he offers no objection.²⁷⁴

Given that Emerson was the editor of the volume, these were sharply ambiguous statements: did Emerson mean to praise the lack of pretension, or did he mean to suggest that the volume was hurt by that lack of pretension? “Elaboration” and “artifice” are words carrying negative connotations within Transcendentalist thought; “no variety in the imagery” is a more damning charge. Emerson’s assertion that “[pretension to literary merit] would be departure from his singleness, and followed by loss of insight” may have accurately described Very’s poetic modus operandi; Emerson’s considerably more ambivalent statement that “[h]e is not at liberty even to correct these unpremeditated poems for the press; but if another will publish them, he offers no objection,” however, suggested a real conflict between Very and Emerson, the “another” who did publish the poems. Emerson also presented Very’s very passivity — that lack of “liberty. . . to correct these unpremeditated poems” — as a liability. At the same time, the statement that “[Very] offers no objection” suggested that Emerson detected a touch of hypocrisy or insincerity in Very’s high-minded claims of divine inspiration: when publication was offered, Very “offer[ed] no objection” to correction. By insisting on the fusion of inspiration and composition, Very put himself in a no-win situation: if the poems weren’t polished, the divinity of the inspiration came into question. As Emerson would write to Elizabeth Hoar, in reference to Very’s and William Henry Channing’s poetry: “Cannot the spirit parse and spell?”²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Emerson, review of Essays and Poems, 130. Emphasis in original.

²⁷⁵ Emerson to Elizabeth Hoar, Concord, MA, 12 September 1840, in Letters, ed. Rusk, 2:331.

The book did not sell well and Very received only a small amount of money from its sales. Emerson, who had guided the book through the publication process, seemed reluctant to promote the book, waiting until 1841 to write a review of it. What correspondence remains suggests that Very and Emerson maintained a business relationship for several years after the book was published, and that Very had been hurt somewhat by Emerson's corrections of at least one of his poems; wrote Very in November 1842:

I found my poem the 'Evening Choir' altered considerably from what I had written. I do not know but in one or two cases for the better. Perhaps they were all improvements but I preferred my own lines. I do not know but I ought to submit to such changes as done by the rightful authority of an editor but I felt a little sad at the aspect of the piece.²⁷⁶

Modern critics have suggested that Emerson's influence may have harmed Very's reputation in another way. Emerson selected mainly from Very's earlier poems; by skewing his choices in this way, Emerson left out some of the more religiously and aesthetically challenging poems — in other words, he steered readers away from the sonnets that clearly blurred voices and appeared to identify Very with God or with Christ. In his brief (and anonymous) review in the *Dial*, Emerson extracted only one sonnet, "The Barberry Bush," a relatively innocuous piece. Helen Deese's impressive collection of Very's complete poems will, one hopes, undo whatever damage Emerson may initially have done to Very's oeuvre.

But Very remained on Emerson's mind. In an 1844-1845 journal entry often quoted by Very scholars, Emerson compared Very to Swedenborg; noting that in spite of his visions and accomplishments, Swedenborg remained, "after all, a poor little pragmatist Lutheran," Emerson added:

[Swedenborg] reminds me again & again of our Jones Very, who had an illumination that enabled him to excel every body in wit & to see farthest in every company & quite easily to bring the proudest to confession: & yet he could never get out of his

²⁷⁶ Very to Emerson, Salem, MA, 23 November 1842, reprinted in Jones, "Symbolism," 148.

Hebraistic phraseology & mythology, &, when all was over still remained in the thin porridge . . . or cold tea of Unitarianism.²⁷⁷

While this passage can be read as a dismissal of Very, it also carries a note of regret, a note of nostalgia for Very's earlier 'inspired' presence. Although there seems to have been a brief rapprochement between the two men in 1840, their relationship dwindled through the 1840s. Very remained a kind of stock character in Emerson's thought and writing, appearing, often in conjunction with Swedenborg, as an example of a particular configuration of religious and aesthetic thought. But not, significantly, as a poet: in an 1841 letter to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, intended to provide biographical material on Very for Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, Emerson mentioned Very's stay at McLean in his brief account of Very's literary work, and concluded, "He is now in a state of somewhat firmer health, I believe, but rarely writes any verses."²⁷⁸

Contrary to Emerson's statement to Griswold, Very continued to write poetry for the rest of his life, mainly occasional and sentimental religious poetry, but the quality of his poetic work declined considerably. Though he continued to write sonnets, his writing never again reached the level of inspiration it had during his religious crisis. Very spent the remainder of his years preaching as a supply minister in various Massachusetts towns, supported by his schoolteacher sisters until his death in 1880. His sermons suggest that he retained to a degree his old belief that he had special knowledge of God's message, but carry none of the identification with Christ and with God seen in his writings from 1838 to

²⁷⁷ Emerson, [1845-1846?], JMN, 9:339.

²⁷⁸ Emerson to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Concord, MA, 25 September 1841, in Letters, ed. Tilton, 7:472. At Emerson's request later in the same letter, Griswold did not include the information about Very's stay at McLean in his volume. See "Jones Very," Poets and Poetry of America, ed. Griswold, 392.

1840.²⁷⁹ Very's religious crisis had, in some mysterious way, given him a strong poetic voice; the cessation of his perceived union with God brought the decline of that voice.

The trajectory of the friendship between Emerson and Very is significant: if Very's sonnets rekindled Emerson's flagging interest in Very in November 1838, by November 1839 collaboration with Very had disenchanted Emerson with Very as a poet as well. Their falling out is significant, revealing different interpretations of inspiration, composition, and revision. If Very worked within a particularly configured definition of poetic creation — careful preparation followed by spontaneous and inexplicable composition — Emerson worked within a more businesslike conception of composition which admitted the necessity of revision and the distinction between spontaneous composition and a finished poem. As a poet, Very made Emerson's vision of poetic creation look downright pragmatic. The tension that developed between these two poetically inclined men reveals an Emerson frustrated by his encounter with a religiously inspired poet whose God apparently did not acknowledge Emerson's editorial authority.

And yet Emerson can hardly be put forth as a champion of the more mundane processes of revision. His treatments of *The Poet* did involve indefinable composition; in "The Poet" as well as in *Nature* and the "Divinity School Address," Emerson attributed great intellectual powers to his poets and assigns them monumental cultural tasks. His interaction with Very illustrated two of the culturally questionable extremes represented by the Romantic ideal of the poet's spontaneously conceiving mind: the aspiring poet might not only resist the finishing work involved in revision; he might also resist the cultural authority of the editor and the critic — even, as in this case, a critic as apparently

²⁷⁹ Helen R. Deese, "Selected Sermons of Jones Very," in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1984, ed., Joel Myerson, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 1-78; Jones Very, *Sermons* [1843-1868], Jones Very Poems and Sermons, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Jones Very Sermons, Jones Very Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.

sympathetic to the claims of spontaneous composition as Emerson was. By insisting that his sonnets were the words of God, Very simultaneously exalted his poetry while at the same time taking no credit for the poetry (or for the exaltation itself); under what terms could Emerson justify altering the received words of God? By expressing his hostility towards “early poems” and wishing for finished poets, Emerson confirmed that revision and polish were as vital to the creation of a finished poem as inspiration and intuition were.

POETIC CONVERSION

Very’s certainty that his mind had become uniquely passive to the will of God altered his understanding of how his mind functioned during the months between the summer of 1838 and 1840. The readings Very would perform in his literary essays on Shakespeare and on Hamlet were meant to be examples of how such a religiously inflected mind could and should express itself in literary composition. The purpose of Very’s literary composition—prose and poetry alike — was essentially the translation of the Word of God as he received it into ordered language so that it could be transmitted to readers towards the goal of individual conversion(s). Transmission was more important to Very than mere literary fame; his emphasis on transmission and reception dovetailed with the service he hoped his words would provide to American readers. Whether deliberately so or not, as David Robinson has suggested, Very’s poems were his primary means of proselytizing during these months, intended to transmit to readers and potential converts the Gospel according to Very while

also standing as examples of Very's own deeply emotional and intellectual conversion experience.²⁸⁰

By implicitly defining the value of his poetry in terms of its converting functions, Very adapted his own particular interpretation of Romantic aesthetic theory to an older model of Christian and moral service. Poetry was to reflect the poet's own deeply felt emotions and to transmit those sentiments to its readers; in Very's case, the sentiments most urgently needing to be expressed were religious. However, by proclaiming his poetry to be the unmediated Word of God, Very eliminated any hint of himself as a poet consciously working at the production of poetry, while exalting the produced poetry itself as being, literally, divinely dictated. Very's forays into Romantic poetry and thought ultimately resulted in his development of a body of poetry and prose that drew on Romantic aesthetics to vivify his version of Christian belief. If Very took Emerson's "Divinity School Address" to heart in the sense that he believed himself to be "a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost," looking to "acquaint men at first hand with the Deity," he questioned the apparent effortlessness of Emerson's communion with the Universal Being. Very believed that it took hard mental labor to prepare room for God in the mind of a man. As a poet, Very was there to tell his fellow Americans how to begin that labor.

²⁸⁰ Robinson, "Exemplary Self," 206-214; Deese, "Introduction," *Poems*; Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 312-325; Jones, "Symbolism," 41-96.

Chapter 4

“The Circumscribed Eden of His Dreams”:
Edgar Allan Poe and the Measurement of Sentiment in Antebellum Poetry

Unlike Very, Edgar Allan Poe was interested in fame and wealth, but above all, Poe wanted influence. Like Bryant and Longfellow, Poe sought to defend American poetry on terms that would create an audience for it. Poe’s path towards the cultural authority he desired was more resolutely literary than his contemporaries’: no legal training, no Harvard Divinity School, no academic post, no college beyond a semester at the University of Virginia and a brief period at West Point. In 1835, after publishing several volumes of poetry, Poe turned to journalism and spent the next ten years establishing himself as a critic who upheld tough-minded, clearly aesthetic principles and who answered to no literary clique, no Knickerbockers or Frogpondians. As he understood it, his responsibility lay in teaching American readers to identify the best poetry and to respond to it appropriately. Poe sought recognition as a critic whose identity as a poet gave him unique and authoritative critical insight into the true nature of poetry.²⁸¹

In his critical writing Poe repeatedly defined poetry as an intangible or indefinite entity, bounded by diction and prosody. This characterization provided him with a field of play at once open and circumscribed. Poe relied heavily on rational, often explicitly mathematical terms to describe and analyze literary works. But he used these terms to contain, rather than characterize, literary content and feeling. This precise language was offset by the indefinite, emotionally charged terms he ascribed to poetry, including, implicitly, his own. If critical work for Poe involved rational analysis and directed mental effort, the objects of that labor were the unfocused yearnings he attributed not only to

²⁸¹ The chapter title is from [Edgar Allan Poe], review of The Culprit Fay, by Joseph Rodman Drake, and Alnwick Castle, by Fitz-Greene Halleck, Southern Literary Messenger, (April 1836), in Works, 8:281.

poetry, but also to the circumstances of composition itself. Identifying Poetry as a specific type of affect, translated into concrete words by the mind of the poet, Poe's criticism sought to measure an entity he identified as essentially immeasurable.²⁸²

Poe understood the critic's job to be the measurement of a poem's ability to inspire emotional response in its readers. Aesthetically charged feeling was to be the chief measure of a poem's merit. Poe notoriously opposed the idea that poetry should serve primarily as a source of moral uplift; while a poem might carry moral instruction, that instruction was never to be the poem's main goal. If Poe's desired effect differed from those called for by more conventional poets and critics of his time, his broader construction of the practical value of poetry was similar to theirs: the beneficial effect that a poem, or Poetry in the abstract, could have on the mind of the reader justified its production. Yet because Poe in his reviews offered his own emotional responses to poems as the standard of measurement, the game was rigged: in order to qualify as Poetry, a poem had to inspire the Poetic Sentiment (capitalized in Poe's critical definition of it) in its readers, a test that placed as much importance on readers' cultivated sensibilities as on the poetry itself; it also strongly implied that readers' responses should attempt to match Poe's own described responses. In a sense, then, Poe hoped to teach American readers to respond to poetry as he did. Poe's critical claims thus addressed public interests while also serving his own need to wield cultural authority and to create an audience receptive to his own poetry.²⁸³

²⁸² Richards, "Poetic Attractions;" Walker, Nightingale's Burden; Walker, introduction, American Women's Poetry, xv-xliii; Ostriker, Stealing the Language.

²⁸³ Yvor Winters has argued that Poe's definition of poetry, by identifying an essentially indefinable Beauty as the proper subject matter for poetry (as opposed to mere human intellectual or emotional experience), necessarily excludes much of traditional English poetry from Poe's 'canon' of poetry, placing Coleridge, Tennyson, Moore, R. H. Horne, and Poe himself in that self-identified canon — in effect collapses the definition of poetry into one reflecting Poe's own heavily sentimental and mechanical poetry. While I agree with Winters, I would also point out how a critic's repeated invocation of a genre's essential indefinability can contribute to that critic's perceived authority: he can position himself as the person best qualified to approach a definition of poetry even as he criticizes others for positing more defined — and hence more limiting —

If for Poe criticism represented the measuring and mastering of emotionally charged poetry, in his own personal and professional life such “triumph over passion”²⁸⁴ seemed to elude Poe. His personal difficulties may have been exacerbated by the definitions of poethood and poetry he conveyed to his readers. Even as he characterized the critic as possessing a mind at once rational and sensible, Poe came to identify the true poet as a person whose mind was highly susceptible to both external and internal stimuli — a definition which subtly devalued the conscious, meticulous effort he identified with the critic. In spite of his representation of himself as an impartial critic, Poe’s actual criticism often seemed more motivated by personal rancor than by critical principles. The bleeding of personal resentments into Poe’s public productions led him into the one-sided “Longfellow war” of 1845 which Poe waged against the most popular male poet in America in the immediate wake of Poe’s own greatest literary success, “The Raven” (1845). Poe’s seemingly contradictory fascinations with versification and poetical indefiniteness provided him with the means of translating personal animosities into “objective” statements of meritlessness.

The debates during the antebellum decades over what would constitute an American literature and, more specifically, an American poetry, provided aspiring literati with opportunities to call for a distinctively American poetry while working to create niches for

definitions of poetry. I would also note that much of American poetry during the antebellum decades can be categorized as “sentimental,” a historical reality which may account for why so few antebellum American poets fall into the canon(s) established by twentieth-century critics. Yvor Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe: A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism,” in *Maule’s Curse*, 93-122. See also Richards, “Poetic Attractions.”

The copyright and plagiarism debates of this era, as Meredith McGill has suggested, hinged on this issue as well: the issue of who owned a text (the author? the reader? a book’s purchaser?) turned on key concerns about the impact of liberal market forces on aesthetic and intellectual activity in the United States. For treatments of tensions between idealistic conceptions of authorhood and the rise of the literary marketplace, see Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*; Wilson, *Figures of Speech*; Leverenz, *Manhood*; Gilmore, *American Romanticism*; Meredith McGill, “Poe’s Plagiarisms.” For treatment of literary products characterized as the bearers of disinterested service, see also Warner, *Letters*; Charvat, *Origins*. On Scottish common-sense theory, see Charvat, *Origins*; Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*; Martin, *Instructed Vision*. On Romantic theory, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*; Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*. On the fashioning of emotion, see Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*; Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

²⁸⁴ [Poe], “Anne C. Lynch,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (September 1846), in *Works*, 15:117.

themselves in that emerging field. Poe as a young man faced a common dilemma of aspiring men of letters in the United States: he desired fame, and to an extent, money, but was compelled to pursue his goal in a society that valued literature primarily for the service it could provide readers. By identifying poetry as simultaneously bound by and yet mysteriously outside of a particular set of syntactical rules, Poe presented a definition of poetry whose very flexibility and amorphousness served his own public and private ends.²⁸⁵ Ultimately, however, Poe's desired ends — fame, wealth, critical influence — were undercut by his own inability to manage his overflowing emotional difficulties. At the same time, Poe's definition of poetry as an intangible and effortless product undercut his material interests in literary production while contributing powerfully to antebellum American beliefs about poetic labor. The 'higher' responsibilities Poe assigned to poetry and to criticism effaced his own real financial and emotional needs.²⁸⁶

"IDEAS AFLOAT IN MY IMAGINATION:" INTO PRINT

²⁸⁵ For a classic treatment of Poe's disastrous attempts to balance the analytic with the emotional, see D. H. Lawrence, "Edgar Allan Poe," in Studies in Classic Literature, (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1924), 67-84; see also Allan Tate, "Our Cousin Poe," Collected Essays, (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1959), 455-471. Tate's essay also discusses Poe's lack of emotional control in gender- and age-specific terms: Poe's inability to manage his private emotions (represented by the character of Roderick Usher) keeps him a kind of permanent child who is never able to achieve true manhood.

²⁸⁶ The most comprehensive treatment of Poe's literary conflicts is Sidney Moss, Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963); see also Kenneth Silverman, Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance (New York: HarperCollins Books, 1991); Jeffrey Meyers, Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992); Arthur H. Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography, intro. Shawn Rosenheim (New York: 1941, reprinted, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); see Richards, "Poetic Attractions," esp. 32-84; Meredith McGill, "Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity," in The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 271-304, for valuable treatments of the intersection of private sentiment and public performance in Poe's career. For a thoughtful treatments of Poe's struggles to manage his authorial reputation in the literary marketplace, see Whalen, Poe and the Masses; Timothy Scherman, "The Authority Effect: Poe and the Politics of Reputation in the Pre-Industry of American Publishing," Arizona Quarterly 49, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 1-19. For important treatments of "The Raven" in relation to "The Philosophy of Composition," see Dennis Pahl, "De-composing Poe's 'Philosophy,'" Texas Studies in Literature and Language 30, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1-25; Leland S. Person, Jr., "Poe's Composition of Philosophy: Reading and Writing 'The Raven,'" Arizona Quarterly 46, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 11-13.

In the autumn of 1829, Edgar Poe presented himself to John Neal, then editor of the Portland, Maine Yankee; and Boston Literary Gazette; Poe wrote:

I am young — not yet twenty — am a poet — if deep worship of all beauty can make me one — and wish to be so in the common meaning of the word. I would give the world to embody one half the ideas afloat in my imagination (By the way, do you remember or did you ever read the exclamation of Shelley about Shakspeare ‘What a number of ideas must have been afloat before such an author could arise!’).²⁸⁷

In this letter Poe introduced himself to Neal as a poet in the making. The subjunctive phrase qualified Poe’s identity — he is a poet, “if deep worship of all beauty” were up to the task of making him into a unified, perceiving, creating subject. Poetry both was and was not an essentially ideal entity. The “ideas afloat in [Poe’s] imagination” were poems waiting to be embodied; the few ideas that he had transcribed into tangible form only began, Poe implied, to represent the fancies multiplying in his fertile brain. In this portrait of a poet’s mind, the function of the poet himself was unclear: that so many ideas remained unembodied suggested that their transcription was somehow beyond the poet’s will. Yet the passage also implied Poe’s awareness that that embodiment was necessary for success as a poet, an awareness he claimed to share with Shelley and Shakespeare. If a deep sensitivity to natural beauty, ideal and material, made a man a poet by inclination, recognition as a poet required the materialization of the poet’s fancies into a finished poem.

²⁸⁷ Edgar Allan Poe to John Neal, [Baltimore, Maryland, October - November 1829], in The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. John Ward Ostrom, 2 vols., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:32. Emphasis in original.

Poe had written to Neal to express his gratitude for Neal's printing extracts from Poe's poem "Fairyland" (originally titled "Heaven") in the September 1829 Yankee.

Introducing the passages, Neal had written:

If E. A. P. of Baltimore — whose lines about Heaven, though he professes to regard them as altogether superior to any thing in the whole range of American poetry, save two or three trifles referred to, are, though nonsense, rather exquisite nonsense — would but do himself justice, might make a beautiful and perhaps a magnificent poem. There is a good deal here to justify such a hope.²⁸⁸

Poe confessed to Neal that this praise, however faint, gave him "the very first words of encouragement I ever remember to have heard."²⁸⁹ When Neal published Poe's letter in the December 1829 Yankee, he granted Poe his first venue for the public presentation of himself as a poet. Neal also printed his own advice to the aspiring poet in a paragraph which also advertised Poe's forthcoming volume:

[W]ith all their faults, if the remainder of Al Aaraaf and Tamerlane are as good as the body of the extracts here given . . . he will deserve to stand high — very high — in the estimation of the shining brotherhood. Whether he will do so however, must depend, not so much upon his worth now in mere poetry, as upon his worth hereafter in something yet loftier and more generous — we allude to the stronger properties of the mind, to the magnanimous determination that enables a youth to endure the present, whatever the present may be, in the hope, or rather in the belief, the fixed, unwavering belief, that in the future he will find his reward.²⁹⁰

Using language that echoed the conventional imperatives pressed on young men, Neal urged the author to an effort of will, to endurance of the present "in the hope, . . . the fixed, unwavering belief, that in the future he will find his reward," without specifying what "loftier and more generous" future reward "beyond mere poetry" might be. Neal also implied that he and a "shining brotherhood" of fellow poets shared an unspoken understanding of that reward; following the extracts, Neal continued: "Having allowed our youthful writer to be

²⁸⁸ [John Neal], "To Correspondents," Yankee; and Boston Literary Gazette (September 1829), in The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849, ed. Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, (Boston, Mass. : G.K. Hall, 1987), 98.

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 32. Poe quotes Neal's statement in the letter and follows it with this statement in parentheses.

²⁹⁰ [John Neal], "Unpublished Poetry," Yankee, (December 1829), in Poe Log, 100. Emphasis in original.

heard in his own behalf, — what more can we do for the lovers of genuine poetry?

Nothing. They who are judges will not need more; and they who are not — why waste words upon them?²⁹¹

Poe's autumn 1829 letter to Neal revealed Poe's need for that sympathetic audience.

Having asserted his claim to poethood, Poe went on to address Neal directly:

I appeal to you as a man that loves the same beauty which I adore — the beauty of the natural blue sky and the sunshiny earth — there can be no tie more strong than that of brother for brother — it is not so much that they love one another as that they both love the same parent — their affections are always running in the same direction — the same channel and cannot help mingling. I am and have been from my childhood, an idler. It cannot therefore be said that

‘I left a calling for this idle trade

‘A duty broke — a father disobeyed —

for I have no father — nor mother.²⁹²

With no “real” parents to claim him as their child, Poe could more easily attach himself as a brother to Neal. Linking his idleness to his orphanhood, Poe implied that he was free to fall into the “idleness” of the poet. At the same time, by identifying himself as an orphan, Poe also portrayed himself as independent of and answerable to no external influences, familial or critical.²⁹³

²⁹¹ *ibid.* Neal's comments must have been considerably more comforting than Nathaniel Parker Willis' graphic description of his rejection of the same poem, printed in the November 1829 *American Monthly*:

It is quite exciting to lean over eagerly as the flame eats in upon the letters, and make out the imperfect sentences and trace the faint strokes in the tinder as it trembles in the ascending air of the chimney. There, for instance, goes a gilt-edged sheet which we remember was covered with some sickly rhymes on Fairyland. . . . Now it [the flame] flashes up in a broad blaze, and now it reaches a marked verse — let us see — the fire devours as we read. . . .

Burn on, good fire!

Here Willis focused on the technical details of the poem itself: its “imperfect sentences,” “faint strokes,” and “sickly rhymes,” all tangible and technical errors in the manuscript which Willis happily fed to the flame. “[T]he fire devours as we read,” wrote Willis, fusing reception of the poem with the destruction of its physical manifestation on paper. In contrast, Neal's review focused on the mind of the poet and the ability of genuine poetry to communicate its genuineness to its proper audience. [Nathaniel Parker Willis], “The Editor's Table,” *American Monthly* (November 1829), in *Poe Log*, 99. Willis and Poe would have a cordial if rather fraught relationship later in Poe's life, and Willis was among Poe's defenders after his death.

²⁹² *ibid.* The quote is from Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

²⁹³ Both Meyers' and Silverman's recent biographies of Poe have focused on how his early orphanhood affected him both emotionally and financially; overall Meyers' account presents Poe's difficulties more sympathetically, judging Allan more harshly for his inconsistent treatment and eventual abandonment of his foster son. Both see Poe caught between his yearning for sympathetic parent-figures and his desire to separate

Poe's claim of orphan status in 1829 was only partially true. Technically, he was an orphan: his biological mother, actress Eliza Poe, had died in December 1811, shortly before Edgar's third birthday. His father, the actor David Poe, had disappeared shortly before her death. After his mother's death, young Edgar Poe was taken in by John and Frances Allan, who raised the boy without ever formally adopting him. Allan was a wealthy Scottish merchant who had migrated to the United States as a teenager to clerk in his uncle William Galt's Richmond tobacco firm and went on to establish the firm of Allan and Ellis. Poe traveled with the Allans to London on firm business in June 1815 and was educated there. When the family left England in 1819 following the collapse of the London tobacco market, they were forced to rely on assistance from Galt, a circumstance which ended in 1825 when Galt died and left Allan an estate (including a house and three plantations) estimated to be worth three-quarters of a million dollars. The shame the collapse of Allan and Ellis brought the family must have been especially disturbing to a boy aware of his own uncertain status in the Allan household.²⁹⁴

himself from his parents' lower social status and Allan's materialistic values, a self-contradicting or self-destructive pattern which I suspect also drove his conflicting desires for his own literary brotherhood and for recognition as a strictly independent critic. Silverman, Poe; Meyers, Poe. For a more general treatment of Romantic treatments of orphanhood as a separation from idealized familial ties, bringing both a continuing sense of exile and an inward-looking emphasis on that separateness, see Bryan Jay Wolf, Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Painting and Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 85, 98.

Years later, in his quasi-scientific prose-poem Eureka (1848), Poe argued that all matter began in unity, was diffused by the "Divine Volition" of God, and, with the cessation of that driving will, naturally tended back towards unity. In a remarkable passage, Poe described this tendency towards (re)union in familial terms which echo this early letter to Neal:

Does not so evident a brotherhood among the atoms point to a common parentage? Does not a sympathy so omniprevalent, so ineradicable, and so thoroughly irrespective, suggest a common paternity as its source? . . . It is not any locality, either in the concrete or in the abstract, to which I suppose them bound. Nothing like location was conceived as their origin. Their source lies in the principle, Unity. This is their lost parent. This they seek always — immediately — in all directions — wherever it is even partially to be found[.]”

Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka: A Prose Poem, Green Integer, 3 (1848; reprint, Sun and Moon Press, 1997), 58, 60.

²⁹⁴ If Poe's work seems to expose contradictions within the provincial gentry, it may well have been because he had witnessed John Allan's (incomplete) and uneven metamorphosis into a Virginia planter following the collapse of his mercantile firm. The literature on Poe as Southerner and/or on Poe's position in Southern literature is considerable and dates back to the antebellum period, with Henry Timrod, later to become the

Poe's identification of himself in autumn 1829 as poet, orphan and idler, may have been related to one particular exchange with Allan earlier that year. That May, Poe wrote to Allan from Baltimore with "a request different from any I have ever yet made."²⁹⁵ Poe had visited William Wirt, a prominent Richmond attorney and author of a stirring biography of Patrick Henry, who, after reading "Al Aaraaf," recommended that Poe consider publishing the poem as a volume.²⁹⁶ Poe subsequently wrote to Philadelphia publishers Carey, Lea, and Carey, declaring: "If the poem is published, succeed or not, I am 'irrecoverably a poet.' But to your opinion I leave it[.]"²⁹⁷ Poe hoped that Allan would assume the costs of production as determined by Carey, Lea, and Carey, who were willing to publish the poem if their outlay were guaranteed; according to Poe the cost to Allan would be no more than a hundred dollars. Poe wrapped up his request with a comment that suggested Allan's resistance to a particular model of poethood: "I would remark, in conclusion that I have long given up Byron as a model — for which, I think, I deserve some credit."²⁹⁸

'poet laureate of the Confederacy,' identifying Poe as the only Southern poet to receive "his due measure of fame." Henry Timrod, "Literature in the South," Russell's Magazine 5 (August 1859), reprinted in The Essays of Henry Timrod, ed. and intro. Edd Winfield Parks, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1942), 96. For an overview of more recent literature locating Poe as a Southern author, see Teresa Goddu, Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 77-80; see also Joan Dayan, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," in American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, 179-209. For a differing position on Poe and Southern racism which also summarizes the various positions taken by critics and historians on Poe's beliefs about slavery, see Whalen, Poe and the Masses, 111-146. David Leverenz locates Poe within historians' conceptions of antebellum Southern masculinity rather than within the history of Southern literature. David Leverenz, "Poe and Gentry Virginia," in The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, 210-236. See also Robert Gray, "I Am a Virginian": Edgar Allan Poe and the South," in Edgar A. Poe: The Design of Order, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1987), 182-201; Robert D. Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic, Southern Literary Studies, ed. Louis B. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), esp. 3-34; Robert D. Jacobs, "Poe in Richmond: The Double Image," in Southern Writers: Appraisals in Our Time, ed. R. C. Simonini, Jr., Essay Reprint Series (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1961), 19-49; Silverman, Poe, 7-28. See Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1988), for the role of Scottish factors in the alteration of social and economic relationships in 18th-century Virginia.

²⁹⁵ Poe to John Allan, Baltimore, Maryland, 29 May 1829, in Letters, 1:19.

²⁹⁶ William Wirt to Edgar Allan Poe, 11 May 1829, in Poe Log, 92.

²⁹⁷ In a postscript, Poe added, "I cannot refrain from adding that M- Wirts' [sic] voice is in my favor —[.]" Poe to Isaac Lea, [Philadelphia, PA, May] 1829, in Letters, 1:18-19.

²⁹⁸ *ibid.* Emphasis in original. Meredith McGill has suggested that Poe's identification with Byron cost him, literally, his patrimony; given the fascination the figure of Byron held for young men of Poe's era, and for Southern men in particular, Poe's youthful interest in with Byron and Allan's resistance to that fascination

Allan did not grant Poe's request, and noted on Poe's letter that he had responded on the 8th of June "strongly censuring [Poe's] conduct — & refusing any aid[.]"²⁹⁹ A July 1829 letter from Poe to Allan suggests that Allan, although he had sent money, had also expressed disapproval of Poe in terms that referred to his literary dreams: thanking Allan for the money, Poe referred to Allan's "taunt" that "that men of genius ought not to apply to your aid;" Poe replied, "It is too often their necessity to want that little timely assistance which would prevent such applications."³⁰⁰ In the end the Baltimore publishers Hatch and Dunning published the volume on, as Poe reported to Allan in November 1829, "terms advantageous to me."³⁰¹ Hatch and Dunning were as able to publish Poe into poethood as well as the more prestigious Carey, Lea, and Carey could have done. Allan appears not to have assisted Poe in the publication, which may have contributed to Poe's deliberate fusion of "poet" and "orphan;" his identification of himself as "idler" may have been a response to Allan's taunts and an identification with well-known (and well-selling) "idlers" as Washington Irving's Geoffrey Crayon.³⁰²

suggest the tensions as well as the congruence between Romanticism and conceptions of masculine behavior and achievement in the antebellum United States. See McGill, "Poe's Plagiarisms," 170-171; Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55; for important treatments of Southern romanticism, see also Jacobs, "Poe in Richmond;" Michael O'Brien, "The Lineaments of Antebellum Southern Romanticism," in *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 19-33; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

²⁹⁹ *Letters*, 1:23n.

³⁰⁰ Poe to Allan, Baltimore, Maryland, 26 July 1829, in *Letters*, 1:24.

³⁰¹ Poe to Allan, Baltimore, Maryland, 18 November 1829, in *Letters*, 1:34; Thomas O. Mabbott, "Bibliographical Note," *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*, by Edgar Allan Poe, (Baltimore: 1829; reprinted, Facsimile Text Society, New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), i-iv.

³⁰² Cf. Douglas, *Feminization*, 234-240. Douglas argues that the "masculine sentimental" writer, unlike the disestablished minister, experienced no fall from a previously established position of cultural authority; such 'bachelor' authors as Irving, N. P. Willis, and Donald 'Ik Marvell' Mitchell at once drew on popular sentimental themes while also using their bachelor-writer personae to attack the very feminization of both audience and author they themselves utilized in their writing.

Adam Sweeting treats these masculine sentimental writers as the apostles of a "genteel aesthetic" of refined and leisured country life, represented by the houses and house-patterns developed by architectural theorist Andrew Jackson Downing in the 1840s and 1850s. Sweeting does not challenge Douglas' analysis of these male writers; at the same time, his book shows a number of literary men — including Irving, Mitchell,

The poem “Fairyland” appeared in the 1829 volume; its images reflect Poe’s interest in the embodiment of indefinite fancies. The opening lines of the poem described a murky, impenetrable environment whose appearance is strongly characterized by an emotional state:

Dim vales — and shadowy floods —
And cloudy-looking woods,
Whose forms we can’t discover
For the tears that drip all over.³⁰³

The tears of the narrator or the more objective “tears” of dew or rain made the forms of the woods not unseeable, but indistinct.³⁰⁴ A moon “more filmy than the rest” descended and sent its light “O’er the strange woods. . . . Over every drowsy thing” and “burie[d]” undefined creatures (“thing[s]”) and intensified the emotional quality of their rest: “how deep! O! deep! / Is the passion of their sleep!”³⁰⁵ Upon waking, the sleepers have lost the cover of the moonlight, but find the light dissevered into a shower of light, which the butterflies — earthly beings seeking the skies — bring back down to earth. This fantastical portrait of moonlight transformed into daylight drew on ethereal imagery: the filmy moon, the spirits on the wing, the labyrinth of light, the ascending butterfly. At the same time, the poem used scientific language to measure or classify these intangibles: the moon has “its

and Willis — involved in literary work within these homes, in addition to presenting Downing himself as a man whose work not only took place in the home, but involved instructing others in the creation of morally uplifting houses and household environments. See also R. Jackson Wilson’s treatment of Irving’s manipulation of multiple ‘idler’ personae to justify his move towards literary professionalism, represented by his work as both author and literary agent, and Sandra Tomc’s analysis of Willis’ manipulation of the class-based meanings attributed to idleness to present himself as a genteel amateur; in this sense, like Irving, Willis adopted the persona of an idler to mask the labor put into the development and maintenance of profitable literary careers. Sweeting, Reading Houses; Wilson, Figures of Speech, 71-113; esp. 78-80, 89-90, 109-110; Tomc, “Idle Industry.” For a more explicitly gendered analysis of the antebellum bachelor author, see Bertolini, “Fireside Chastity.”

³⁰³ Edgar Allan Poe, “Fairyland,” in Al Aaraaf, 69.

³⁰⁴ Similarly, the phrase “shadowy floods” may refer to objective bodies of water or to “floods” of tears or emotion. Cf. Richards, “Poetic Attractions.”

³⁰⁵ Poe, “Fairyland,” 70. “Filmy” is not underscored/italicized in Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven and Other Poems, intro. Thomas O. Mabbott, (New York: 1845; reprint, Publication no. 56 of the Facsimile Text Society, 1942), 85.

wide circumference;” time is measured by a “moon-dial,” and Poe classified the moon’s emotive light as a “specimen” brought to Earth by the “quivering wings” of butterflies.

In the same volume Poe published his “Sonnet — To Science,” which distinguished between science and poetry, with the narrator seemingly expressing his preference for the thought processes involved in poesy. Asking Science “why [it] preyest . . . upon the poet’s heart / Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?” the narrator outlined the dreamy meanderings Science seemed to deprive him of, asking:

How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise?
 Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
 To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
 Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?³⁰⁶

The questions in the sestet portray Science driving ethereal elements from tangible natural sites — Diana from her car, the Naiad from her flood, the Elfin from the green grass, and, in the closing two lines, the narrator’s dreams from beneath a tree. Except for the apostrophe to Science that made up the first two lines of the poem, the entire poem consists of a series of rhetorical questions posed by the narrator to Science. All of the questions posed in the sonnet (and following the apostrophe to Science that makes up the first two lines of the poem, the entire poem is a series of negative rhetorical questions: “Hast thou not . . .?” The finished sonnet ended not with a declarative affirmation of Poesy over Science, but with an unanswered or unresolved question: “Hast thou not torn . . . from me / The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?”³⁰⁷ What if the question were not rhetorical, but posed as an open question? In both poetry and prose Poe would utilize the rational language of science to analyze and bound poetic sentiment, even as he defined that sentiment as essentially immeasurable. Perhaps the “dull realities” of Science’s wings could

³⁰⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “Sonnet — To Science,” in *Complete Poems and Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Gray, intro. J. M. Dent, Everyman Library (London: Orion House, 1993), 18.

³⁰⁷ *ibid.*

be of use in realizing or concretizing the narrator's dreams, or in drawing a connection between the ethereal dream and the tangible site of its genesis. In both "Fairyland" and "Sonnet — To Science" Poe presented images which would appear in his critical discussions of poetry and poetic labor: finished poems representing the measured containment of the ineffable.³⁰⁸

The 1829 volume's version of "Fairyland" also contained a telling footnote. Poe appended a footnote reading "Plagiarism — see the works of Thomas Moore — passim — Edr" to the beginning of the line reading "Like — almost any thing."³⁰⁹ Such an identification could indicate an honest desire to acknowledge one's sources. It could be an attempt to ward off charges of plagiarism by owning up to one's borrowings. It could also be a way of demonstrating one's familiarity with a broad range of poets, or, of associating one's self with another, better known poet. All of these positions represent ways of presenting one's self as well-read and thus qualified to make judgments about poetry. This early reference anticipated the complicated uses to which Poe would put the term "plagiarism" throughout his critical career; it also suggests his interest in presenting himself as an eminently knowledgeable poet and critic. "Fairyland," praised by one early critic, literally destroyed by another, carried the seeds of several aspects of Poe's critical theory.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Quinn, *Poe*, 163-164.

³⁰⁹ Poe, "Fairyland," *Al Aaraaf*, 71. Poe revised this poem considerably for his 1831 *Poems*, but published a version much closer to this 1829 version in *The Raven*; the footnote, however, does not appear in *The Raven* version.

³¹⁰ Cf. Kenneth Dauber, "The Problem of Poe," *Georgia Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 653-654. Poe, Dauber suggests, seemed unable to distinguish his work from others' work, failing to see the possibilities of coincidence or even of influence as legitimate alternatives to outright originality or outright theft. show. Poe's ideas about poetic originality and plagiarism were considerably murkier than Dauber suggests, and I am inclined to agree with Meredith McGill's argument that Poe's attitude towards plagiarism and textual ownership were related to the development of a "reprint culture" in conjunction with the rise of American magazines during the first half of the nineteenth century, a culture in which Poe participated in no insignificant way. Nevertheless, Dauber's point that "if [Poe] would seem, on the one hand, to think that everyone else's work begins in him, yet, on the other, he in turn declares his own work begins in someone else" (653) is well taken; I would add only that the second part of this assumption — that Poe was anxious at some level to identify his own work as beginning with someone else — can also be seen as a means of building up a reputation, if not through the quality of

John Allan provided more assistance with Poe's other significant project in 1829, which would lead indirectly to the young man's third volume of poetry: Allan supported Poe's application to West Point. After a complicated admissions procedure, during which Edgar provided officials with a good deal of fabricated information, he was admitted to West Point in the spring of 1830. Poe's stay at West Point was brief; he decided against a military career and deliberately neglected his academic duties in order to be court-martialed and dismissed from the academy in the spring of 1831. However, the funding for the publication of his third volume of poetry, the 1831 Poems, came primarily out of the pockets of Poe's fellow cadets.³¹¹

Poe's third volume of poetry was prefaced by his "Letter to Mr. B — —," Poe's first public definition of poetry and its duties. The essay also laid the ground for another central theme of Poe's criticism: the critic as poet, and the poet as critic. The "Letter," as printed in the Messenger, opened with a challenge to conventional wisdom:

It has been said that a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself. This, according to your idea and mine of poetry, I feel to be false — the less poetical the critic, the less just the critique, and the converse. On this

one's own poetry, than through association with a better-known poet's work. Cf. McGill, "Poe's Plagiarisms," *passim*.

Dauber's argument differs from mine slightly, in that Dauber focuses more explicitly on Poe's tendency to create texts which obliterate origin and convention alike, and stand as their own authority. Poe's work, argues Dauber, is its own authority, but is not necessarily original, either. "[Poe's work] is a game, which, because it is not played to any purpose, is wholly constituted by its rules. It is a structure which is all — a means without, as it were, any ends." This portrayal of Poe as a writer more focused on means than their ends — or any ends, for that matter — is relevant to the larger project of my dissertation, relating particularly to my discussion of Longfellow's imperatives without objects. On the surface, especially as seen in Poe's writing about Longfellow, as I will suggest, Poe and Longfellow utilized similar means (poetry) towards different ends (Longfellow for truth, Poe for beauty), but both poets aimed ultimately to create a kind of bounded emotional response in their readers. If the nature of the response they hoped for was different, the broader mechanism — the production of affecting and uplifting poetry — was markedly similar, particularly in the ways both writers characterized and in a sense hid or disguised their ends.

³¹¹ Silverman, Poe, 47-50, 59-68. 131 of the 232 paid a dollar and a quarter to subscribe to Poe's volume. Overall the cadets were not pleased with the volume they received. Wrote one: "The book was received with a general expression of disgust. It was a puny volume, of about fifty pages, bound in boards and badly printed on coarse paper, and worse than all, it contained not one of the squibs and satires upon which his reputation at the Academy had been built up." Thomas W. Gibson, quoted in Poe Log, 118.

account, and because there are but few B— —'s in the world, I would be as much ashamed of the world's good opinion as proud of your own.³¹²

Instead, Poe argued, a true poet was capable of making a correct estimate of his own work. Since a bad poet would write a bad critique, a bad poet would judge his own work to be wonderful. But since bad poets were poor judges, a bad poet would be wrong in his high estimation of his own work. A good poet would make a good estimate, so he would believe that his poetry was good, and since good poets made good critics, he would be right. All of which proved the point, as far as Poe was concerned.

Without an external definition of “good” poetry, however, the argument breaks down — or becomes a confidence game run by a man interested in identifying his definition of good poetry with his own poetry. And this essay was the preface to a collection of Poe's own poetry. Poe's assertion of the true poet's ability to assess his own work fairly reflected Scottish common-sense assumptions that taste could be cultivated, and that a good poet, by virtue of having been exposed to art and beauty, would have an appropriately learned taste.³¹³

Yet Poe's definition of poetry also strongly echoed a key passage of Coleridge's Biographia Literaria:

A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having for its object an indefinite instead

³¹² [Edgar Allan Poe], “Letter to B— —,” Southern Literary Messenger, (July 1836), in Works, 7:xlili. Emphasis in original.

³¹³ Robert Jacobs has argued cogently for the influence Alison and other Scottish Common-Sense theorists had on Poe's critical theory and on Southern literary criticism as well. Although he acknowledges that this essentially associative theory relies on inherent class assumptions, Jacobs does not address the ghost of the genteel would-be author whose writing lives up to no definition of “true poetry”: how many people after all, after considerable exposure to art, beauty, poetry, et al., nevertheless write unmemorable or unaffecting poetry? Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic.

Joseph Wood Krutsch has argued that Poe's poetic theory tended to favor the kind of poetry he himself wrote while dismissing poets and poetry that other critics would consider indissmissible; his argument has been challenged, perhaps rightly so, but Krutsch's point is well taken: Poe's poetic theory is, I think, patterned after what he hoped his own poetry would accomplish, a kind of ideal limit that he hoped to approach, if not actually achieve. See Joseph Wood Krutsch, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 15-30; cf. Winters, “Poe.”

of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained; romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with indefinite sensations[.]³¹⁴

Though he followed Coleridge's identification of poetry as the opposite of both science and romance, Poe detoured slightly, identifying the object of poetry as "an indefinite instead of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained." Poe attached the idea of indefiniteness to poetic effect. Poetry was a painting whose meaning would yield itself to the "cursory glance" of a connoisseur, but which would remain incomprehensible to "minute inspection" or study. Coleridge "goes wrong by reason of his very profundity," Poe wrote: "He who regards [a star] directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray — while he who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below — its brilliancy and its beauty."³¹⁵ Although he recognized that Wordsworth and Coleridge were both learned "men in years," Poe acknowledged their authority while also resisting it, insisting that "learning has little to do with the imagination — intellect with the passions — or age with poetry."³¹⁶ Poetry, argued Poe, should be "passion," not "study." Criticizing but borrowing from his father poets, Poe called for his brother poets to resist the plumbing of depths and embrace simplicity, surfaces, and effortless intuition. Poetry should invite and reward the glance, and repel deeper study. Moreover, the less-inquisitive glance would render the vision of the star "— its brilliancy and its beauty" more "useful" to the viewer. Utility lay in quick and intuitive perception, not in extended study.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Poe, "Letter to B — —," in Works, 7:xlili. Compare this passage with Coleridge in Biographia Literaria: "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part." Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 317.

³¹⁵ Poe, "Letter to B — —," in Works, 7:xxxix.

³¹⁶ *ibid.*, 7:xxxix.

³¹⁷ On Poe's borrowing from Coleridge, see Jacobs, Poe, 35-50, esp. 36-38; Alexander Kern, "Coleridge and American Romanticism: The Transcendentalists and Poe," in New Approaches to Coleridge: Biographical and

Finally, the mysterious Mr. B — played an important role in this essay as the identified, but not the true audience of the “letter.” By presenting the figure of “B —” as a sensitive soul whose ideas about poetry and criticism coincided with Poe’s own, Poe implied that his ideas had a following, even as he dismissed popularity as a source of legitimacy.³¹⁸ Poe’s direction of his preface to a fictional sympathetic friend personalized a public document. B’s implied presence gave the essay a tone of literary gossip: Poe addressed Higher Issues, ranging from national literature to the ideality of poetry and the necessity of intuitive thinking, but he also took shots at Samuel Johnson’s weight and sneered at a snatch of Wordsworth’s “The Pet-Lamb” — after printing an extract from the poem, Poe snickered, “Is it sympathy for the sheep you wish to excite? I love a sheep from the bottom of my heart.”³¹⁹ The “Letter” marked Poe’s willingness to use sharp and often personally tinged criticism based on literary effect, a pattern drawn from Blackwood’s and other British journals as well as Romantic emphases on subjective and indefinite emotion. In his first critical essay, Poe’s nascent poetic theory showed the influence of both schools; his interest in determining what constituted good poetry overlapped in complicated ways with his desire to identify himself as a poet, and a good one, too.³²⁰

“THE LIMITED REALM OF HIS AUTHORITY”: POET AS CRITIC

Critical Essays, ed. Donald Sultana, Critical Studies Series (London: Vision Press, 1981), 131-133; Jonathan Bate, “Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid,” in The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland, ed. Richard Graviss and Molly Lefebvre (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1990), 254-270; Floyd Stovall, “Poe’s Debt to Coleridge,” in Edgar Poe as Poet: Essays Old and New on the Man and His Work (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), 126-174.

³¹⁸ Poe wrote: “To sum up this long rigmarole, I have, dear B —, what you no doubt perceive, for the metaphysical poets, as poets, the most sovereign contempt. That they have followers proves nothing —

The Indian prince has to his palace
More followers than a thief to the gallows.

Poe, “Letter to B —,” in Works, 7:xliii-xliv.

³¹⁹ *ibid.*, 7:xli.

³²⁰ Michael Allen, Poe and the British Magazine Tradition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic.

After publishing three volumes of poetry with only limited success, Poe, like Bryant, turned to journalism as a source of income. During the years from 1835 to 1845, Poe wrote for a number of literary magazines and newspapers, holding paid editorial positions at four journals — the Southern Literary Messenger, Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, the prestigious Graham's Magazine, and the Broadway Journal, which he would briefly own in 1845. The literary reviews Poe published in these periodicals gained him a reputation for sharp criticism based on rational analysis of a work, as opposed to the indiscriminate “puffing” of American texts Poe accused influential literary journals of doing. These attacks seemed calculated to advertise Poe as a potent source of literary authority. In his reviews of American and English poetry Poe aggressively represented himself as a critic out to rescue American readers from the clutches of biased literary cliques. At the same time, Poe was able to use these journals towards his own financial and emotional interests: he needed the money; and at another level, he needed opportunities to present himself as a discerning and (he hoped) influential critic. The emerging market orientation of antebellum American periodical publishing provided Poe with those opportunities.³²¹

Poe's connection with the Southern Literary Messenger was engineered by Baltimore novelist John Pendleton Kennedy. Kennedy had served as one of three judges for a literary contest run in 1833 by the Baltimore Saturday Visiter [sic], which offered cash prizes to the winners of a poetry and tale competition. When Poe's “A MS. Found in a Bottle” won the \$50 cash prize for best tale, Kennedy took the young man under his wing, offering both

³²¹ Allen, Poe and the British Magazine Tradition; Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic. For discussions of critics' cultural authority, see also Charvat, Origins; Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 49-54; Whalen, Poe and the Masses, 21-108. For an important treatment of cultural authority figures anxious to shore up what they perceived as slipping authority, see Halttunen, Confidence Men. On the world of antebellum periodical publishing, see Charvat, Origins; McGill, “Poe's Plagiarisms;” Charvat, Profession of Authorship; Mott, History of American Magazines; Baym, Novels, Readers, and Reviewers, esp. 13-25.

literary and financial advice and support. After Allan's death in March 1834 and the evidence of his disinheritance, however, Poe needed a more regular income, and in early 1835 Kennedy encouraged Poe to submit material to the new Richmond-based Southern Literary Messenger. Poe contributed reviews, tales, and poetry to the magazine, without pay, for several months.

When White expressed concern about Poe's lurid tale, "Berenice," which appeared in the April 1835 Messenger, Poe offered White some business advice. Appearing to agree with White, Poe admitted, "The subject is by far too horrible, and I confess that I hesitated in sending it you especially as a specimen of my capabilities." Poe went on, though, to suggest that tales "similar in nature — to Berenice"³²² could bring financial success to the magazine:

I say similar in nature. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. You may say all this is bad taste. I have my doubts about it. . . . To be appreciated you must be read, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity.³²³

Such tales, Poe suggested, arrested the reader's attention, and so could "augment the reputation of the source where they originated;" in other words, these stories would sell magazines. Poe followed this advice with a pitch which linked the Messenger's future success to his own efforts: he proposed to provide White with one story of this sort per month, each different from the others. White must have accepted Poe's judgment: from March to November 1835, the Messenger carried a number of Poe's Gothically inspired tales and parts of his unfinished play "Politian."³²⁴

³²² Poe to Thomas Willis White, [Baltimore, Maryland] [30 April 1835], in Letters, 1:57. Emphasis in original.

³²³ Poe to White, [30 April 1835], in Letters, 1:57-59.

³²⁴ "Berenice," March 1835; "Morella," April 1835; "Lion-izing. A Tale," May 1835; "Hans Phaall — A Tale," June 1835; "The Visionary — A Tale," July 1835; "Bon-Bon — A Tale," August 1835; "Loss of Breath, a tale a

Yet White hesitated to offer Poe permanent employment; in September 1835, after Poe had spent a month in Richmond and had returned to Baltimore, White expressed his concern about Poe's dissolute habits:

You have fine talents, Edgar, — and you ought to have them respected as well as yourself. Learn to respect yourself, and you will very soon find out that you are respected. Separate yourself from the bottle, and bottle companions, for ever! Tell me if you can and will do so — and let me hear that it is your fixed purpose

la Blackwood,” “King Pest the First. A Tale Containing an Allegory,” “Shadow. A Fable,” ; and “Scenes from an Unpublished Drama,” (five sections from Poe's projected blank verse tragedy, “Politian”), September 1835. The December 1835 number of the Messenger announced White's arrangement with Poe; wrote White: “[T]he intellectual department of the paper is now under the conduct of the Proprietor, assisted by a gentleman of distinguished literary talents.” Poe Log, 177; Silverman, Poe, 109-111.

Terence Whalen has correctly noted the businesslike tone Poe used in this letter; Poe presents himself as a man familiar with the business end of magazine publishing, justifying the Messenger's publication of more lurid material by the effect such stories would have on the magazine's circulation, rather than on exclusively aesthetic grounds. Whalen's point contributes to his broader argument about Poe's self-conscious adoption of various literary personae in response to the increasing encroachment of capitalist thought onto literary production; Whalen argues that Poe, through his connection with Allan, had a greater sensitivity to market concerns and, more specifically, to commerce's reliance on information as a commodity, and used that knowledge in his attempts to establish himself as a key figure in the antebellum literary world. Whalen's argument supports my sense of Poe as a critic interested (in multiple ways) in promoting an understanding of literary production and consumption calculated to advance his own position in American letters; however, Whalen deals more with fiction — Poe's own and his critical interpretation of others' prose work — than with Poe's views on poetry as a distinct genre. Whalen does note Poe's early belief that ‘high’ poetry was essentially unsalable in antebellum America, and notes Poe's hesitance to include poetry in his discussions of literary forms which could be designed or appropriated to appeal to both elite and mass audiences. Whalen accepts this division and links poetry to elite consumption and, to a lesser extent, to elite production as well without considering the ways in which Poe's identification of poetry as “unsalable” could reflect Poe's assessment of the market for poetry without implying that Poe believed that the masses, however defined, could not appreciate — or be taught to appreciate — poetry. In the course of his chapter on Poe's critical work, Whalen loses sight of a point made earlier in this chapter: that as a critic Poe sought to establish himself as the figure most able to instruct American readers in the proper identification of and response to the ‘best’ literature — as defined by him. In other words, in spite of his damning of Longfellow for Longfellow's emphasis on the morally instructive value of poetry, Poe also intended his own criticism (if not his poetry itself) to be essentially instructive, its mission being to cultivate poetic sentiment in American readers and fit them to be discerning and critical readers themselves. In other words, Poe hoped to create readers who would accept his own definition of the best poetry and thus become his own best audience. In this sense only my analysis differs from Whalen's: I believe that Poe saw the American masses as malleable and capable of being influenced. Whalen writes, perceptively, that “Poe's persistent struggle to influence the taste of the reading public was not so much a reactionary attempt to resurrect old aesthetic standards but rather an effort to institute a new order of criticism that would enable the evaluation and sorting of a new supply of literary commodities,” I would suggest that attention to the ‘high’ art of poetry and the language Poe repeatedly used to identify and ‘measure’ poetry's effect in fact allows for a broadening of Whalen's argument, by allowing for Poe's sense of the mass audience's instructibility — a concept that helps to resolve the contradictions Whalen (and Poe as well) perceived between mass and elite audiences. If, as William Charvat has argued, critics understood their job to be essentially instructive, they must have believed that their audiences required instruction. That perceived need for instruction does not necessarily mean that critics did not fear or resent their audiences. Indeed, the will to instruct can easily emerge from negative feelings towards those one believes to need instruction, and certainly the will to instruct can also easily lend itself to or emerge out of a narcissistic celebration of one's own self as the best instructor for the job. Whalen, Poe and the Masses, esp. 76-108, quote on 76; Charvat, Origins.

never to yield to temptation. . . . No man is safe who drinks before breakfast! No man can do so and attend to business properly.³²⁵

Even after granting Poe employee status in October 1835, at a salary of ten dollars a week, White resisted identifying him as an editor of the Messenger; in a letter to his friend Lucius Minor about the preface Minor was writing for the magazine's second volume, White instructed Minor to "introduce Mr. Poe's name as amongst those engaged to contribute for [the Messenger's] column — taking care not to say as editor."³²⁶

Poe's position at the Messenger was his first foray into the world of American magazine publishing; he would remain in White's employ until early 1837 when, after considerable tension between the two men, White let Poe go. Poe drifted to Philadelphia and into the orbit of William "Billy" Burton, an English actor and proprietor of the new sporting magazine Burton's Gentleman's Magazine. In the spring of 1839 Poe offered Burton his editorial services, a rather surprising gesture given the magazine's unfavorable

³²⁵ Thomas W. White to Poe, Richmond, VA, 29 September 1835, in Works, 17:20-21.

³²⁶ White to Minor, Richmond, VA, [date], reprinted in David Jackson, Poe and the Southern Literary Messenger (1934; reprinted, New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1970), 104. Silverman, Poe, 90-108.

White's specific reference to drinking would be taken up by other friends, colleagues, and enemies throughout Poe's life. Poe would frequently deny having been drunk on particular occasions and would boast on at least one occasion about successfully deluding others into believing he was merely ill. Towards the end of his life Poe would confide to several individuals that certain emotional states tended to trigger drinking. In 1848 Poe described to an admiring medical student, George Eveleth, his agonies during Virginia's long illness to an admirer, confessing:

I am constitutionally sensitive — nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity. I had indeed, nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure when I found one in the death of my wife. This I can & do endure as becomes a man — it was the horrible never-ending oscillation between hope & despair which I could not longer have endured without the total loss of reason.

Edgar Allan Poe to George Eveleth, New York, NY, 4 January 1848, in Letters, 2:356. Evidence for Poe's alcoholism (real or not) generally has been based on others' accounts and observations of Poe being drunk or recovering from a binge, and according to observers the 'cure' of Virginia's death did not last; Poe's drinking appears to have been among the reasons Sarah Helen Whitman broke her engagement with Poe. See Silverman, Poe, esp. 183-186, 192-194, 377, 386-387. Silverman's biography of Poe focuses more on Poe's lifelong grief over the loss of his mother and other mother-figures; Jeffrey Meyers' more sympathetic biography of Poe devotes more specific attention to Poe's comparatively wealthy childhood as foster son to an erratic Allan and the dismal poverty which followed the break between Poe and Allan. Meyers links Poe's bouts of drinking and depression to this ongoing poverty and suggests that Poe's biological father David Poe may have passed a tendency to alcoholism on to Poe and to Poe's brother Henry. See Meyers, Poe, esp. 3-7, 13-15, 19-20, 26-38, 47-54, 61, 189.

review of Poe's novella The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym in September 1838, but Poe was in dire financial straits. Burton took Poe on, offering him a salary of ten dollars a week initially; although Poe would be listed as co-editor with Burton on the title page of Burtons' fifth volume, relations were strained between the two men. When, in the summer of 1840, Burton either fired Poe or substantially altered the terms of his position, hostility erupted between the two men; in a letter that could have been written to Poe himself, Poe wrote to Burton:

When you address me again preserve if you can, the dignity of a gentleman. . . . You are a man of <high passions> impulses; have made yourself, in consequence, some enemies; have been in many respects ill treated by those whom you had looked upon as friends — and these things have rendered you suspicious. . .³²⁷

In contrast to his portrayal of Burton, Poe presented himself as unruffled by Burton's criticisms (which he perhaps falsely attributed to Burton): "I felt no anger at what you did — none in the world. . . . [Y]ou will find yourself puzzled in judging me by ordinary motives."³²⁸ After leaving Burton's, Poe sustained himself through freelance work until February 1841, when he took an editorial position at Graham's Magazine for an annual salary of eight hundred dollars. Although Poe left his position and was replaced by Rufus Griswold in the spring of 1842, Poe continued to submit material to Graham's.³²⁹ Graham had purchased Burton's magazine in October 1840 and merged it with his own, The Casket, to form Graham's, which would become one of the most popular national magazines of its time. Graham's circulation jumped from 5,000 to 25,000 by the end of its first year, and

³²⁷ Poe to William E. Burton, [Philadelphia, PA, 1 June 1840], in Letters, 1:130.

³²⁸ *ibid.*

³²⁹ Wrote Poe to Frederick William Thomas in May 1842: "My reason for resigning was disgust with the namby-pamby character of the Magazine—a character which it was impossible to eradicate—I allude to the contemptible pictures, fashion-plates, music and love tales. The salary, moreover, did not pay me for the labor which I was forced to bestow. With Graham who is really a very gentlemanly, although an exceedingly weak man, I had no misunderstanding." Letters, 1:198.

would boast a circulation of around 50,000 by the end of its second year.³³⁰ Since Graham exerted close control over the contents of his magazine, Poe's duties were limited primarily to writing book reviews, a situation which no doubt fed his continuing desire to establish his own magazine.³³¹

His critical reviews for all three magazines earned Poe a reputation for being a sharp and often stinging critic. While at the Messenger, Poe wrote biting reviews of several novels which he believed had been undeservedly 'puffed' by influential literary circles in Philadelphia and New York. Members of those circles counterattacked; Philadelphia Gazette editor William Gaylord Clark, brother of the New York Knickerbocker's editor Lewis Gaylord Clark, criticized Poe's treatment of Theodore Fay's novel Norman Leslie, questioning Poe's own writing ability and complaining that the Messenger critic's "affectation of eccentric sternness in criticism, without the power to back one's suit withal. . . merits the strongest reprehension."³³² In its April 1836 number, the Messenger published a special supplement carrying praise of the magazine in general and of Poe's critical style in particular. In that same number, Poe opened a review of Joseph Rodman Drake's The Culprit Fay and Fitz-Greene Halleck's Alnwick Castle by emphasizing his own desire to function independently of literary cliques and their misguided nationalistic literary standards.

³³⁰ Known for the high quality and reputation of its contributors, Graham's was able to gain a significant amount of original work from well-known authors by establishing high rates of pay corresponding to the reputation of the author. By the end of 1842 Graham's could boast original work from such luminaries as Longfellow, Lowell, Poe, Simms, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Ann S. Stephens, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper. In 1842 Graham's offered both Bryant and Longfellow fifty dollars per poem, with a guarantee of one poem purchased per month, amounting to a total of \$600 a year, the top rate for poetry in the United States at the time. Charvat, Profession of Authorship, 109. See also J. Albert Robbins, "George R. Graham, Philadelphia Publisher," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 75, no. 3 (July 1951): 278-285; Silverman, Poe, 162-164; Edward E. Chielens, ed., "Graham's Magazine," American Literary Magazines: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 156-159.

³³¹ Silverman, Poe, 142-162; Quinn, Poe, 278-304; Meyers, Poe, 107-109, 121-123, 138.

³³² William Gaylord Clark, Philadelphia Gazette, and Commercial Intelligencer, 8 April 1836, reprinted in Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 45.

In this review, Poe argued that, in the absence of specific rules governing the analysis of poetry, criticism of poetry was left to the whims of the individual critic's taste. "Who will deny that in regard to individual poems no definitive opinions can exist, so long as to Poetry in the abstract we attach no definitive idea?"³³³ Poe asked rhetorically. Stressing the universality of his standards, in this review Poe moved from a critique of American poetic criticism to an elaboration of a set of critical standards for American poetry. Poe acknowledged the ineffability of poetic sentiment. "Words cannot hem it in," he wrote:

Its intangible and purely spiritual nature refuses to be bound down within the widest horizon of mere sounds. But it is not, there, misunderstood. Very far from it. If, indeed, there be any one circle of thought distinctly and palpably marked out from amid the jarring and tumultuous chaos of human intelligence, it is that evergreen and radiant Paradise which the true poet knows, and knows alone, as the limited realm of his authority — as the circumscribed Eden of his dreams. Poesy is the sentiment of Intellectual Happiness here, and the Hope of a high Intellectual Happiness hereafter."³³⁴

Poetry, described in indefinite terms, was circumscribed rather than consciously created — "Imagination," according to Poe, was its "soul."³³⁵ Belief, intellect, and emotion fused in poetic sentiment, with belief equated with "high Intellectual Happiness" on earth and in heaven. A poem was the concrete result of the poetic sentiment's action. Yet Poe's ethereal terms alluded rather than expressed directly the role of the poet's mind, which was responsible for the containment and representation of the delicate sentiment, and for the transmission of that feeling to readers. A poem's merit lay in its ability to recreate that

³³³ [Poe], review of Culprit Fay and Alnwick Castle, Southern Literary Messenger, (April 1836), in Works, 8:280-281.

³³⁴ *ibid.*, 8:281.

³³⁵ Poe capped this assertion with a footnote containing ideas he would develop later in Eureka: Imagination is, possibly in man, a lesser degree of the creative power in God. What the Deity imagines, is, but was not before. What man imagines, is, but was also. The mind of man cannot imagine what is not. This latter point may be demonstrated. — See Les Premiers Traits de L'Erudition Universelle, par M. Le Baron de Bielfeld, 1767.

This also seems to be a response to Coleridge's identification of difference between Fancy and Imagination (which Poe would also address elsewhere). Poe, review of Culprit Fay and Alnwick Castle, 8:283.

sentiment in readers. Indeed, Poe asserted, “the only proper method of testing the merits of a poem is by measuring its capabilities of exciting the Poetic Sentiments in others.”³³⁶

When Poe turned from the abstract work of defining poetry to Drake’s and Halleck’s poems, his own emotional responses became his critical yardstick. Drake’s poem The Culprit Fay, according to Poe, could not recreate poetic sentiment in its readers, because it aroused only “a species of vague wonder at the writer’s ingenuity, and it is this indeterminate sense of wonder which passes but too frequently current for the proper presence of the Poetic power.”³³⁷ He did not find the poem uplifting; rather, as he wrote: “we plead guilty to a predominant sense of the ludicrous while occupied in the perusal of the poem before us.”³³⁸ Readers who responded to Drake’s work similarly would be those “who comprehend[ed] the character of the sentiment itself,” which, Poe added, “is finely shadowed out in that popular although vague idea so prevalent throughout all time, that a species of melancholy is inseparably connected with the higher manifestations of the beautiful.”³³⁹ Poetic Sentiment was a specific, rarefied, and melancholic emotional state above the “vague wonder” triggered by The Culprit Fay.

In the Drake-Halleck review Poe presented himself as a “practical” critic concerned with distinct rules and applications. Ironically, Poe’s pragmatic definition of poetry placed greatest emphasis on the intangible and emotional nature of poetry. His critical treatment of particular poems sought to measure their emotional effects while declaring such effects immeasurable. At the same time, by identifying poetry as essentially indefinable, Poe’s review put into play a definition of poetry so amorphous that only its creator could understand — and enforce — its principles. Significantly, along with another supplement

³³⁶ Poe, review of Culprit Fay and Alnwick Castle, 8:281.

³³⁷ *ibid.*, 8:296.

³³⁸ *ibid.*

³³⁹ *ibid.*

containing favorable comments from other newspapers, the July 1836 Messenger also printed a slightly altered version of the “Letter to B—” which had prefaced Poe’s 1831 Poems. As the preface to his own poetry, the “Letter” announced Poe’s assessment of his place alongside other prominent poets. Detached from its original relationship to Poe’s poetic work, the preface’s appearance in the magazine signaled the connection Poe perceived between poet and critic. His editorial work would draw on his understanding of himself as both creator and critic.³⁴⁰

During his affiliation with Burton’s, Poe continued to use his reviews of poetry to present himself as a discriminating critic. In an 1840 review of Thomas Moore’s Alciphron Poe took issue with Coleridge’s distinction between the fancy and the imagination, claiming instead that the distinction hinged on “the consideration of the mystic.” Adding that “we have no authority for our opinion,”³⁴¹ Poe then immediately cited Schlegel as his authority, limiting Schlegel’s influence to the meaning of the term “mystic” as referring the “under or suggestive [meaning]” of a composition which Poe also identified as the “moral of any sentiment.”³⁴² With this term Poe had a new tool for the analysis of poetry, which he believed would bear “the most rigorous tests which can be made applicable to it, and will be acknowledged as tenable by all who are themselves imaginative.”³⁴³ Those who did not agree

³⁴⁰ Joan Dayan has asserted that in Eureka, “[f]aced with the unsayable, Poe, a late-in-coming empiricist, chooses not to deny, but to define,” and that, rather than (to use her terms) “los[e] himself in a beyond vaguely determined but powerfully felt, Poe turns feeling into structure.” Joan Dayan, “The Analytic of the Dash: Poe’s Eureka,” Genre 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 439; for an extension of this argument to Poe’s fiction in general see Joan Dayan, Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. 3-79 for an extended treatment of Eureka. I suggest that this gesture, this making over or sublimation of feeling into containing form, could be seen as central to the project of poetry-making in general during the antebellum decades; Poe more than other poets may have been willing to entertain the feelings generated by that “beyond” and to attempt to convert them into ordered form.

³⁴¹ [Edgar Allan Poe], review of Alciphron by Thomas Moore, Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine (January 1840), in Works, 10:65.

³⁴² Emphasis in original. *ibid.*

³⁴³ *ibid.*

that Poe's instrument was a valuable way to evaluate poetry, lacked imagination in the first place.

To demonstrate the critical applicability of the "mystical," Poe provided a list of poems relying on underlying suggestive meaning: Aeschylus' "Prometheus Vincit," Dante's "Inferno," Cervantes' "Destruction of Numantia," Milton's "Comus," Coleridge's "Christabel," "Kubla Khan," and "Ancient Mariner," Keats' "Nightingale," and most especially, Shelley's "Sensitive Plant" and De La Motte Fouqué's "Undine." Of the last two, Poe wrote:

With each note of the lyre is heard a ghostly, and not always a distinct, but an august and soul-exalting echo. In every glimpse of beauty presented, we catch, through long and wild vistas, dim bewildering visions of a far more ethereal beauty beyond. But not so in poems which the world has always persisted in terming fanciful. Here the upper current is often exceedingly brilliant and beautiful; but then men feel that this upper current is all.³⁴⁴

Mere clarity without an undertone of indefiniteness limited a work's effectiveness. The responses he described were his, and the poems had been collected by the critic to prove his own point. The argument became circular: Poe chose these poems because they reflected his assessment of the distinction between the fancy (the "above") and the imagination (the mystic, ethereal "below"), and because they had been so chosen, they responded accordingly to the test Poe proposed.

Graham's would provide the venue for one of Poe's most important critical treatments of American poetry. In his April 1842 review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's second volume of poetry, Ballads and Other Poems (1841), Poe instructed not only his readers, but the hapless Mr. Longfellow himself, in the true aims of poetry. Poe argued that truth and beauty were fundamentally separate goals, each one requiring its own particular mode of expression:

³⁴⁴ Emphasis in original. *ibid*.

To convey ‘the true’ we are required to dismiss from the attention all inessentials. We must be perspicuous, precise, terse. We need concentration rather than expansion of mind. We must be calm, unimpassioned, unexcited — in a word, we must be in that peculiar mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. He must be blind indeed who cannot perceive the radical and chasmal difference between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation.³⁴⁵

Transmission of the truth required calmness, an absence of excitement, precision, terseness, which all added up to “that peculiar mood which. . . is the exact converse of the poetical.”

By identifying the “poetical” as the “exact converse” of “the true,” Poe used the language of logic or measurement to differentiate between two abstract “moods.” Poe went on to identify the mind’s faculties in terms which drew on phrenology and on faculty psychology, while also recalling Coleridge’s definition of the imagination as faculty:

We place taste between the intellect and the moral sense, because it is just this intermediate space which, in the mind, it occupies. It is the connecting link in the triple chain. Just as conscience, or the moral sense, recognizes duty; just as the intellect deals with truth; so it is the part of taste alone to inform us of BEAUTY. And Poesy is the handmaiden but of Taste.³⁴⁶

Elaborating on the handmaiden’s responsibilities, Poe continued:

She is not forbidden to depict — but to reason and preach, of virtue. As, of this latter, conscience recognises the obligation, so intellect teaches the expediency, while taste contents herself with displaying the beauty: waging war with vice merely on the ground of its inconsistency with fitness, harmony, proportion — in a word with *λὸ καλὸν*.³⁴⁷

Beauty and truth remained separate entities that might or might not fuse, according to the circumstances. Poetry was to oppose vice, but on the grounds of its ugliness rather than its inherent moral evil. As Poe indicated in the same review, poetry could be instructive — but instruction was to be a by-product of a poem’s effect on the reader, and not the primary or explicit goal of the poem. Poe objected to Longfellow’s work not so much for its

³⁴⁵ Poe, review of *Ballads and Other Poems* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Graham’s Magazine*, (September 1842), in *Works*, 11:70.

³⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 11:70. Compare this statement with the passage from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* cited above.

³⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 11:71.

didacticism as for Longfellow's tendency to saddle poetry with the burden of moral instruction. For Poe as well as for Longfellow, the effect a poem would have on its readers remained the primary means of determining its value.³⁴⁸

In his review of Ballads and Other Poems Poe also defined the poet's proper relationship to his environment. While the repetition of "the manifold forms and colors and sounds and sentiments amid which [the poet] exists"³⁴⁹ could be a source of pleasure, it was not poetry, according to Poe: "He who shall merely sing with whatever rapture, in however harmonious strains, or with however vivid a truth of imitation, of the sights and sounds which greet him in common with all mankind — he, we say, has yet failed to prove his divine title."³⁵⁰ Imitation or representation of natural phenomena alone could not address the broader spiritual longing which Poe associated with "the immortal essence of man's nature."³⁵¹ This "burning thirst" went beyond "mere appreciation of the beauty before us," wrote Poe:

It is a wild effort to reach the beauty above. It is a passion to be satiated by no sublunary sights, or sounds, or sentiments, and the soul thus athirst strives to allay its fever in futile efforts at creation. Inspired with a prescient ecstasy of the beauty beyond the grave, it struggles by multiform novelty of combination among the things and thoughts of Time, to anticipate some portion of that loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain solely to Eternity.³⁵²

The concrete result of this "[wild] effort, on the part of souls fittingly constituted," concluded Poe, was "what mankind have agreed to denominate Poetry."³⁵³ Here Poe emphasized the condition of the poet's mind or soul, which, when "fittingly constituted,"

³⁴⁸ Cf. Kenneth Hovey, "Critical Provincialism: Poe's Poetic Principle in Antebellum Context," American Quarterly 39, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 341-343.

³⁴⁹ *ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *ibid.*

³⁵¹ *ibid.*, 11:71-72.

³⁵² *ibid.*

³⁵³ *ibid.*

drew together a combination of intangible items (what exactly are “thoughts of Time”?) to produce poetry deserving of the name. Summarizing his position, Poe wrote:

[W]e would define in brief the Poetry of words as the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Beyond the limits of Beauty its province does not extend. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience it has only collateral relations. It has no dependence, unless incidentally, upon either Duty or Truth.³⁵⁴

The critic had spoken: not simply Beauty, but the aim to produce it would determine literary form. A poem was the concrete result of the effortful longing that beauty triggered in the souls of ‘true’ poets and, importantly, in their ideal readers.

Several years later, in his 1844 Graham’s review of Richard Horne’s poem Orion, Poe would distinguish between the “intense passion” of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall” and the “conception of pure beauty” produced by his “Oenone,” which Poe described as a “calm and intense rapture” that “as far transcends earthly passion as the holy radiance of the sun does the glimmering and feeble phosphorence of the glow-worm.”³⁵⁵ Granting the excitement of the passions triggered by the poetry of particularly stimulating poets — Poe used Byron as an example — Poe dismissed this effect from his canon of poetical response, stating that such excitement revealed only that “the majority of mankind are more susceptible of the impulses of passion than of the impressions of beauty.” The poetic sentiment was a particular and attenuated form of emotion, which Poe defined as:

[T]he sentiment of the beautiful — that divine sixth sense which is yet so faintly understood — that sense which phrenology has attempted to embody in its organ of ideality . . . that sense which speaks of God through his purest, if not his sole attribute — which proves, and which alone proves his existence.³⁵⁶

Poetry accorded with particular and attenuated emotion, a “calm and intense rapture” which suggested passion managed rather than given free rein. “Readers do exist,” asserted Poe,

³⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 11:75-76.

³⁵⁵ Poe, review of Orion by Richard Horne, Graham’s Magazine (March 1844), in Works, 11:255.

³⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 11:255-256.

who “to hearts of maddening fervor, unite, in perfection, the sentiment of the beautiful;” moreover, according to Poe, “[t]o readers such as these — and only to such as these — must be left the decision of what the true Poesy is.” And Poe then placed a paraphrased version of the definition of poesy from his 1842 review of Longfellow’s poetry in the mouth of these sensitive creatures.³⁵⁷ By 1844, Poe had come to identify the ‘poetic sentiment’ with a specifically attenuated emotionalism, and not with unbounded, irrational passion.

A poem’s value, according to Poe, was based on the amount of poetic sentiment it transmitted to its readers. Measuring that impact on the reader was the critic’s responsibility and, in his criticism, Poe presented himself as the critic best able to undertake that measurement because he was the only critic to frame the critic’s task in such a way. Poetic sentiment for Poe was the sign of a poem’s effect and also the material of poetry itself. His treatment of poetic sentiment as compositional matter, however, undercuts any labor on the poet or author, beyond the “wild effort to reach the beauty above.” Poe’s poet bounded the yearning of a soul towards eternity, he circumscribed the sentiment inspired by any number of fantastic reveries, but in Poe’s criticism, the poet rarely appeared with pen in hand putting ink onto a page. The poet’s activities remained mystified. Creation was subsumed into consumption.

³⁵⁷ *ibid.* Paraphrasing his earlier definition of ‘poesy,’ Poe wrote here:

And these [readers] — with no hesitation — will decide that the origin of Poetry lies in a thirst for wilder Beauty than Earth supplies — that Poetry itself is the imperfect effort to quench this immortal thirst by novel combinations of beautiful forms (collocations of forms) physical or spiritual, and that this thirst when even partially allayed — this sentiment when even feebly meeting response — produces emotion to which all other human emotions are vapid and insignificant.

ibid., 11:256. Terence Whalen suggests that in this passage Poe appealed to “a natural aristocracy of readers,” but that elsewhere Poe would resist such aristocracies as signs of the dangerous and unnatural influence of literary cliques. Given that the review was of a poem, Horne’s *Orion*, and that Poe explicitly related this species of ideal reader to the consumption of poetry, this passage supports Whalen’s implication that Poe separated poetry’s implied readers from the readers of fiction and my argument that Poe hoped to educate readers to achieve a particularly defined emotional response to given poems and to Poetry in general. Whalen, *Poe and the Masses*, 97.

Creative work differed from editorial work, though. If Poe assigned little conscious labor to the poet, editorial writing required more deliberate effort, and, as Terence Whalen has pointed out, on occasion Poe did link the labor involved in writing to money values.³⁵⁸ However, he did not make this case for poets, holding, like Bryant, to a model of poetry as a lofty genre theoretically above commercial goals; Poe understood early on that poetry did not sell. Critical work, with the growing commodification of the periodical press and of information in general, could more easily be linked to the business world and to money-making. Poe's various editorial positions gave him a stronger claim to cultural authority (and to income) than would a reputation as a poet with several poorly-selling volumes to his name and no identifiable day job. Yet his critical treatments of poetry underscored rather than challenged poetry's lack of monetary value. Poe did not question the fact that poetry was unsalable in antebellum America, and his critical work reinforced that unsalability by separating poetry from conscious effort.

In his review of Orion as well as in earlier reviews, Poe portrayed the creating mind as an organized collection of God-given faculties; at the same time, like the Romantics, he understood the creative process to be essentially mysterious and, in that sense, to approach if

³⁵⁸ Terence Whalen has suggested that Poe came to measure literary work in terms of the labor involved in it, citing a letter of Poe's written in 1835 that referred to "Hans Pfaall"'s having required "nearly a fortnight's work" and asked for proper compensation; Whalen also cites Poe's response to the German Van Rauber's assessment that "authors of really able productions are liberally rewarded in America" in reference to the \$6000 paid to William Prescott for his History of the Conquest of Mexico; Poe asserted that

Mr. Prescott was engaged for many years at his work, and . . . he expended for the necessary books and other materials a large sum — the compensation thus afforded him, amounting in the end to little more than any common scavenger might have earned in the same period, upon our highways.

Poe to Thomas W. White, 20 July 1835, Baltimore, Maryland, quoted in Whalen, Poe and the Masses, 51; [Poe], review of America and the American People, 1845, quoted in Whalen, Poe and the Masses, 51-52. But Poe's complaint about his own literary pay is in a private letter written to his employer and was not a public statement. Poe's more public assessment of Prescott's labor hinged not simply on the time put into the work but also on Prescott's research costs. Historical writing clearly involved both research and interpretive writing, and Poe addresses only tangentially the interpretive work done by Prescott. Whalen is right to point in addition to Poe's support for international copyright to support his argument for Poe's concern about the little money literati (esp. men) are paid. However, neither of the two examples he provides here address the issue of poetic labor. What the poet did, even for Poe who knew well a poet's need for income, remained not identifiable as remunerative labor.

not match divine creativity. In his later prose-poem Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe (1848), Poe seemed to agree that God's creative processes were not intended to be understood by man, quoting the Baron de Bielfeld's assertion that "We know absolutely nothing of the nature or essence of God: — in order to comprehend what he is, we should have to be God ourselves."³⁵⁹ Significantly, however, at this point in the text Poe returned to an earlier discussion of intuition as a form of reasoning, defining intuition as "the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression."³⁶⁰ Intuition was a form of thought based on actions of the mind which could be neither defined nor deliberately recovered; intuition was both indefinable and irreproducible thought.

Poe suggested that intuitive rather than inductive or deductive thought would allow man to begin to perceive God's intentions. The man willing to place faith in his own intuitive thought could see God as a fellow creator, whose creative activities included the forming of man's faculties and the granting of the gift of intuition. Eureka was written in Poe's voice, not God's; if, as Joan Dayan has suggested, Poe in Eureka spoke like a radical Calvinist, distinguishing between an unknowable God and an unknowing man, Poe's

³⁵⁹ Poe, Eureka, 38. Joan Dayan has argued that in Eureka Poe most clearly showed his affinity with Locke and early Edwards; all three emphasized the radical unknowability of God's ways and the limited mind of man. Dayan sees Eureka as the culmination of a literary career intended to oppose liberal Christian (and especially Transcendental) beliefs that man could comprehend the will and mind of God; instead, according to Dayan, Poe believed that the Divine Volition could in fact make the impossible possible. By arguing this position, Dayan locates Poe in relation to the intellectual history of his time, suggesting that his resistance to the "Frogpondians" was due not so much to their perceived dominance of the American literary scene or marketplace as to their corruption of Calvinist thought. Such an argument dovetails with Ann Douglas' work in interesting and productive ways. However, Dayan only tangentially relates her analysis to other aspects of Poe's life, such as his personal relationships with other literati, especially women writers; surely his correspondence with Sarah Helen Whitman and others reveals a level of paranoia and vindictiveness which cannot be traced solely to concerns about linguistic epistemology. Dayan, Fables of Mind, 3-79. See also Joan Dayan, "Poe, Locke and Kant," in Poe and His Times: The Artist and His Milieu, ed. and intro. Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV (Baltimore: Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1990), 30-44.

³⁶⁰ Poe, Eureka, 39. Emphasis in original.

description of intuition as a form of hidden thought suggested that the workings of the human mind — as created by God — also lay beyond the comprehension and the will of man. Poetic response corresponded to intuitive thought, carrying a mysterious logic which only the most sensitive critic (perhaps one who was himself a poet) could determine and follow.³⁶¹

³⁶¹ Cf. Silverman, *Poe*, Appendix 7, 531-534; see also Dayan, “Analytic of the Dash.” Eliza Richards argues that in *Eureka* Poe fuses the more masculine genre of scientific and philosophical writing with the feminine emotionality of sentimental poetry; Richards reads *Eureka*, correctly I think, as an attempt, on the one hand, to masculinize poetry and, on the other, to establish a model of scientific discourse which, by virtue of its attention to intuitive as well as inductive and deductive thought, would be more comprehensive than the most rational-minded scientific discourse. Richards, “Poetic Attractions,” 76-84.

“THE DIRECT RATIO OF THE POETIC SENTIMENT”: THE GOAL OF CRITICAL
AUTHORITY

After leaving his position at Graham’s in 1842, Poe renewed earlier efforts to establish a magazine of his own. Poe’s editorial positions at the Messenger, Burton’s, and Graham’s had given him valuable experience in the day-to-day business of periodical publishing. Poe’s desire to establish his own journal was a desire to establish and exert authority in his own name and with a measure of freedom from market pressures. Poe hoped to set himself up as both critical authority and as his own “Capital Reader,” Terence Whalen’s term for the publishing industry’s projected reader (in some cases an actual reader hired by a firm) willing to pay for the privilege of reading an author’s printed work. The trick, however, lay in acquiring financial backing; in other words, in order to start his own magazine, Poe had to find an investor or investors willing to bankroll the project. Poe needed a “Capital Reader” to call his own.³⁶²

After his break with Burton in 1840, Poe had published a prospectus for his Penn Magazine in the Philadelphia Saturday Courier for June 13, 1840, with an announcement that the new magazine would appear on January 1, 1841. Poe determined that his magazine, “where one mind alone has the general direction of the undertaking,” (that was, his own) would contribute to the cause of American literature by fostering

a criticism self-sustained, guiding itself only by the purest rules of Art; analyzing and urging these rules as it applies them; holding itself aloof from all personal bias; acknowledging no fear save that of outraging the right; yielding no point either to the vanity of the author, or to the assumptions of antique prejudice, or to the involute

³⁶² Whalen distinguishes between the “Ideal Reader,” usually an educated reader capable of appreciating high literary effusions, the “Feared Reader,” a member of the ignorant masses, and the “Capital Reader” who was ultimately responsible for the actual material production of an author’s book. In other words, whether a real or a projected person, the Capital Reader’s yea or nay determined whether a book would be published at all; without a Capital Reader’s thumbs up, there would be no book for an Ideal Reader to take to heart or for a Feared Reader to misinterpret. Whalen, Poe and the Masses, esp. 9-11.

and anonymous cant of the Quarterlies, or to the arrogance of those organized cliques which, hanging like nightmares upon American literature, manufacture, at the nod of our principal booksellers, a pseudo-public-opinion by wholesale.³⁶³

Poe held to his belief that literature should aim first to please rather than instruct, claiming that his magazine would “leave in better hands the task of instruction upon all matters of very grave moment,” stating that the Penn’s purpose would be, instead, “to please . . . through means of versatility, originality, and pungency.”³⁶⁴ Yet Poe also attributed instructive value to his magazine, through that independent critical stance, designed to preserve American readers from the “organized cliques” who joined with booksellers to “manufacture” a public opinion which would stifle the desires of actual American readers.

Poe’s hopes for the magazine reflected both national and personal interests. Poe wrote to distant cousin William Poe that “[i]f I fully succeed in my purposes I will not fail to produce some lasting effect upon the growing literature of the country, while I establish for myself individually a name which that country ‘will not willingly let die.’³⁶⁵ Poe sent similar letters, often on the back of the prospectus, to a number of other acquaintances, friends, and potential contributors, including his early benefactor John P. Kennedy, whom Poe asked for a contribution in order to gain “the countenance of those who stand well in the social not less than in the literary world.”³⁶⁶ To Robert Conrad Poe indicated his more personal reasons for wishing to establish his own magazine, complaining: “So far I have not only labored solely for the benefit of others (receiving for myself a miserable pittance) but have been forced to model my thoughts at the will of men whose imbecility was evident to all but

³⁶³ Emphasis in original. Edgar A. Poe, Prospectus of the Penn Magazine, a Monthly Literary Journal, reprinted in Quinn, Poe, 307.

³⁶⁴ Emphasis in original. *ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Poe to William Poe, Philadelphia, PA, [14] August 1840, in Letters, 1:140.

³⁶⁶ Poe to John P. Kennedy, Philadelphia, PA, 31 December 1840, in Letters, 1:151. No response or contribution from Kennedy is known to exist.

themselves.”³⁶⁷ By identifying himself with the “all” who perceived the “imbecility” of his former employers, Poe reinforced his own sense of superiority and underscored his own hoped-for position of cultural authority.

But the Penn never came into being. Although he failed to put out a number as scheduled on January 1, 1841, Poe still continued to work towards publication the following summer. Bank crashes and subsequent depression in Philadelphia, Poe claimed, ultimately caused the project to be, “scotched, not killed.”³⁶⁸ In early 1843, Poe changed the projected magazine’s title to The Stylus, to eliminate the regional implications inherent in the first name, and once again issued copies of his prospectus to friends and acquaintances and into public circulation. This time, however, Poe gained a backer: Thomas C. Clarke, publisher of the Philadelphia Saturday Museum. Gloating to his friend Frederick W. Thomas, Poe wrote, on the back of a Stylus prospectus:

I have managed, at last, to secure, I think, the great object — a partner possessing ample capital, and, at the same time, so little self-esteem, as to allow me entire control of the editorial conduct. He gives me, also, a half interest, and is to furnish funds for the all the business operations — I agreeing to supply, for the first year, the literary matter. This will puzzle me no little, but I must do my best — write as much as possible myself, under my own name and pseudonyms, and hope for the casual aid of my friends, until the first stage of infancy is surpassed.³⁶⁹

Poe’s cynicism reflected, perhaps, his awareness of the ways of the literary world and his willingness to use those means to gain what he identified as an independent critical stance. Plans for the Stylus fell through after Poe’s disastrous trip to Washington, DC in March to see about gaining a government appointment and to collect subscriptions for the magazine. Disappointed over not receiving the appointment, Poe fell into drinking. With assistance from friends, he returned to Philadelphia and passed off the episode to Clarke as the result

³⁶⁷ Poe to Robert T. Conrad, Philadelphia, PA, 22 January 1841, in Letters, 1:154.

³⁶⁸ Poe to Joseph Evans Snodgrass, Philadelphia, PA, 1 April 1841, in Letters, 1:157-158.

³⁶⁹ Poe to Frederick W. Thomas, Philadelphia, PA, 25 February 1843, in Letters, 1:223-225.

of illness rather than alcohol. Pleading financial difficulties of his own (and probably put off by Poe's drinking), Clarke pulled out. Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell in June 1843 of the project's collapse: "alas! my Magazine scheme has exploded — or, at least, I have been deprived, through the imbecility, or rather through the idiocy of my partner, of all means of prosecuting it for the present. Under better auspices I may resume it next year."³⁷⁰ Though Poe would continue to discuss the project with correspondents, the Stylus was never realized.³⁷¹

As Lewis Simpson has suggested, Poe's desire to establish a magazine of his own may have reflected his desire, as a journalist outside of the Boston-centered model of high literary production, to impose an order on American literature which would circumvent the New England 'clerisy's' hold on national letters.³⁷² However, both the Penn and the Stylus projects also represented Poe's desire to formulate a literary clique of his own. A year after the March 1843 collapse of James Russell Lowell's short-lived magazine The Pioneer, which had published several items by Poe, Poe sent Lowell a plan for a magazine that would organize an elite group of American literati into a kind of fraternal editorial board.

Generally, wrote Poe to Lowell,

We want . . . a well-founded Monthly Journal. . . to control and so give tone to, our Letters. . . . Its chief aims should be Independence, Truth, Originality. . . . It should have nothing to do with Agents or Agencies. Such a Magazine might be made to exercise a prodigious influence, and would be a source of vast wealth to its proprietors.³⁷³

Poe then went on to outline the terms of the "coalition" of authors he thought would be best able to order American literature:

³⁷⁰ Poe to James R. Lowell, Philadelphia, PA, 20 June 1843, in Letters, 1:234.

³⁷¹ Silverman, Poe, 191-195.

³⁷² Lewis Simpson, "Poe's Vision of His Ideal Magazine," Man of Letters, 132-144.

³⁷³ Poe to James R. Lowell, Philadelphia, PA, 30 March 1844, in Letters, 1:247.

Suppose. . . that the élite of our men of letters should combine secretly. Many of them control papers &c. . . . The articles to be supplied by the members solely, and upon a concerted plan of action. A nominal editor to be elected from among the number If we do not defend ourselves by some such coalition, we shall be devoured, without mercy, by the Godeys, the Snowdens, et id genus omne.³⁷⁴

Poe's inclusion of Lowell in this "élite" group flattered Lowell; at the same time, by clearly including himself, Poe located himself in an imagined brotherhood of independently minded authors — a clique of men committed to unbiased criticism.

No doubt Poe considered himself to be the critic most qualified to stand as "nominal editor" of this project. Through the formulation of such a clique and a corresponding journal, Poe hoped to realize his dream for a role in emerging American culture while also, seemingly, guaranteeing him the sympathetic audience he seemed to need on a personal as well as on a public level. At the same time, the higher cultural goals Poe attributed to this imaginary project — "Independence, Truth, Originality," not found in Godey's Lady's Book, apparently, until Poe began publishing signed reviews in Godey's in 1846, or in Snowden's Ladies' Companion.³⁷⁵ — follow and mask the more immediate and material gains Poe hoped to achieve through such stewardship: the "prodigious influence" the magazine would exercise, and the "vast wealth" it would provide its proprietors.

Although Poe proposed this idea to Lowell twice, Lowell seems never to have responded to this particular idea.³⁷⁶ But Lowell did assist Poe in his ongoing efforts to

³⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 1:247. Emphasis in original.

³⁷⁵ Ironically, Snowden's had published Poe's story "The Murder of Marie Rogêt" in installments from late 1842 into 1843. Poe Log, 384-388, 396. Godey's had favorably noticed Poe's Prose Romances in its September 1843 number and Poe submitted both "The Oblong Box" and "Thou Art the Man" to Godey's in June 1844. Poe Log, 436, 463. In the Columbia [Pennsylvania] Spy for 1 June 1844 Poe described Snowden's as "the ne plus ultra of ill-taste, impudence, and vulgar humbuggery." Quoted in Poe Log, 464. The comment does not suggest that its self-identification as a "Ladies' Companion" contributed to Poe's negative reaction to its contents, but Poe's lumping Snowden and Godey with an undefined body of popular and threatening editors does faintly echo Hawthorne's notorious complaint about mobs of "scribbling women." Quinn, Poe, 357, 413, 500; Silverman, Poe, 316.

³⁷⁶ Poe introduces the second proposal by stating: "A long time ago I wrote you a long letter to which you have never replied. It concerned a scheme for protecting ourselves from the imposition of publishers by a

establish his own literary magazine by introducing him in early 1845 to Charles F. Briggs, then the editor of the new New York-based Broadway Journal. In February 1845 Poe signed an agreement binding him for a year to assisting Briggs with the journal's editing and to provide at least a page a week of original matter; additionally, the agreement entitled Poe, for a trial period of one year, to one-third of any profits in exchange for his work. Poe would use the Journal as the vehicle for the biggest skirmish of the so-called "Longfellow war," publishing almost every one of his contributions to the conflict in its pages.³⁷⁷

The "Longfellow war" was Poe's most clear use of a public forum to transmit his highly personalized sense of his role as critic and, subtly, as poet as well. Although Poe had accused Longfellow of plagiarism as early as February 1840 in his review of Voices of the Night, the "Longfellow war" is generally considered to have begun with Poe's review of Longfellow's anthology The Waif, published in Nathaniel Willis' New York Evening Mirror of 13 and 14 January 1845.³⁷⁸ Poe noted similarities between the poem "The Death-Bed," by Thomas Hood, published in The Waif, and James Aldrich's poem "A Death Bed," published in Rufus Griswold's anthology Poets and Poetry of America. Poe transcribed both poems, adding, "we have only to remark, as quietly as we can, that somebody is a thief."³⁷⁹ Poe concluded the review by making similarly damaging statements about the volume's editor himself:

[T]here does appear, in this exquisite little volume, a very careful avoidance of all American poets who may be supposed especially to interfere with the claims of Mr.

coalition. I will state it again in brief." Poe to James R. Lowell, New York, NY, 28 October 1844, in Letters, 1:264-266. Cf. McGill, "Poe, Literary Nationalism."

³⁷⁷ Poe Log, 504-505; Moss, Literary Battles, 156-182, 199.

³⁷⁸ [Edgar Allan Poe], review of Voices of the Night (1839) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Burton's Gentleman's Magazine (February 1840), in Works, 10:71-80, esp. 76-80; [Edgar Allan Poe], review of The Waif ed. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in New York Evening Mirror, (13 and 14 January 1845), reprinted in Poe: Essays and Reviews, ed. Gary Richard Thompson, (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 701-702. For whatever reason, this review does not appear in Harrison's Works.

³⁷⁹ Poe, review of Waif, 702. Emphasis in original. Poe would repeat this accusation in his "Literati" sketch of James Aldrich. [Edgar Allan Poe], "James Aldrich," Godey's Lady's Book, (July 1846), in Works, 15:62.

Longfellow. These men Mr. Longfellow can continuously imitate (is that the word?) and yet never even incidentally commend.³⁸⁰

In the Mirror's March 1 number Willis published a rebuttal of this review by the anonymous "Outis," which defended Longfellow and hinted that Poe (who was not identified by Outis as the critic in question) could be, under the terms of the Waif's critic, accused of plagiarism himself. Outis' defense provided Poe with an opportunity to develop in print his position on plagiarism, and with that position, to put forth a particular assessment of the figure of the poet in American letters. Poe wrote five articles in response to Outis' letter.³⁸¹

The central conflict was between the two scenarios of plagiarism put forth by the two critics. In response to Outis, Poe at first supported his charge of plagiarism by stressing the overlap of ideas driving the two poems, rather than noting identical language or words themselves.³⁸² Plagiarism for Poe hinged on the theft of ideas as well as use of words and form. Outis questioned both of these conceptions of plagiarism, but did not cite a case of actual plagiarism. In fact, Outis claimed that plagiarism very rarely occurred, because, in an educated and well-read community, the theft would be immediately caught and the plagiarist

³⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 702. See also R. Baird Shuman, "Longfellow, Poe, and The Waif," Publications of the Modern Language Association in America 76, no. 1 (March 1961): 155-156.

³⁸¹ There is considerable controversy over the identity of Outis — some claim that Cornelius C. Felton, a Harvard professor and close friend of Longfellow's was Outis, Burton Pollin and others assert that Outis was Poe himself, drumming up controversy and creating a straw man for a discussion of plagiarism. The most complete account of the "Longfellow War" is in Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 156-182. See also Silverman, Poe, 249-257; Quinn, Poe, 453-455; Meyers, Poe, 171-173; McGill, "Poe, Literary Nationalism," 289-298.

³⁸² Wrote Poe:

In the first place. . . the subject in both pieces is death. In the second it is the death of a woman. In the third, it is the death of a woman tranquilly dying. In the fourth, it is the death of a woman who lies tranquilly throughout the night. In the fifth it is the death of a woman whose "breathing soft and low is watched through the night" in the one instance and who "breathed the long long night away in statue-like repose" in the other. In the sixth place, in both poems this woman dies just at daybreak. In the seventh place, dying just at daybreak, this woman, in both cases, steps directly into Paradise. In the eighth place all these identities of circumstance are related in identical rhythms. In the ninth place these identical rhythms are arranged in identical metres; and, in the tenth place, these identical rhymes and metres are constructed into identical stanzas.

Poe, "Imitation . . ." Broadway Journal (8 March 1845) in Works, 12:45-46.

branded a fool (wrote Outis: “one must be utterly non compos, to steal a splendid shawl, or a magnificent plume, which had been admired by thousands for its singular beauty, for the purpose of sporting it in Broadway”³⁸³). Therefore an author suspected of plagiarism should be given the benefit of the doubt.³⁸⁴

Poe’s scenario of plagiarism differed significantly. Where Outis portrayed the plagiarist as an idiot or a madman, Poe characterized the plagiarist as a well-off and popular author who stole original ideas from a poor, unknown poet. Should the “neglected man of genius” complain, the public would defend the “wealthy and triumphant gentleman of elegant leisure”³⁸⁵ based on his reputation. Poe did not suggest why an established poet should want or need to steal another’s ideas, and indeed attributed a remarkable degree of callousness to a literary gentleman who would believe he “ha[d] only done the vagabond too much honor in knocking him down and robbing him upon the highway.”³⁸⁶

Certainly Poe’s understanding of plagiarism suggested the evils of a corrupt literary marketplace. Poe’s scenario made plagiarism difficult to prove, then made that difficulty the sign of the plagiarism: the unknown poet remained unknown, or dead. It is easy to imagine Poe identifying himself in the role of the starving, nameless poet, and using his responses to Outis to master the real fear of such a fate. Portraying himself in print as the defender of a starving yet original and independent poet (who lacked influential friends to puff or defend his work), Poe appeared to strike a blow against corrupt literary cliquism. At the same time, his model of plagiarism placed great value on the discerning and ‘independent’ critic, while also placing suspicion on established poets who might well have gained their reputations

³⁸³ *ibid.*, 12:49.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Outis responded with a similar list of identities linking Poe’s poem “The Sleeper” with another poem called “The Bird of the Dream,” asking rhetorically whether those similarities constituted plagiarism. “Outis,” quoted in “Imitation. . .” in *Works*, 12:51-53.

³⁸⁵ Poe, “Imitation. . .”, *Broadway Journal*, (15 March 1845), in *Works*, 12:60-61.

³⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 12:61.

through puffery. Poe proclaimed that plagiarism did indeed happen, and that its very existence reflected badly on the plagiarist and not his accuser. The starving poet whose work was stolen deserved recompense; the critic who exposed such dastardy deserved commendation.

In his brief, final response to Outis, appearing in the April 5 Broadway Journal Poe made a radical shift in his interpretation of plagiarism, stripping it of pejorative meaning and making it instead the sign of poetic sensibility. Wrote Poe: “[T]he poetic sentiment . . . implies a peculiarly, perhaps abnormally keen appreciation of the beautiful, with a longing for its assimilation, or absorption, into poetic identity. What the poet intensely admires, becomes thus, in very fact, although only partially, a portion of his own intellect.”³⁸⁷ Plagiarism became the necessary result of the true poet’s defining mental condition. An authentic poet would be unable to resist being “possessed by another’s thought.”³⁸⁸ In thrall to his own powers of appreciation and assimilation, such a poet could not perceive stimuli without internalizing the stimulating concept. “[T]he frailest association,” wrote Poe, “will regenerate [the idea]”:

[A]nd when the poet has written it and printed it, and on its account is charged with plagiarism, there will be no one in the world more entirely astounded than himself. . . . [T]he liability to accidents of this character is in the direct ratio of the poetic sentiment — of the susceptibility to the poetic impression; and in fact all literary history demonstrates that, for the most frequent and palpable plagiarisms, we must search the works of the most eminent poets.³⁸⁹

For a keenly perceiving poet, all composition then became a form of plagiarism. Since the living mind could never be entirely free of external influences, death was the only way for a poet to avoid committing plagiarism.

³⁸⁷ Poe, “Imitation. . .” Broadway Journal (5 April 1845), in Works, 12:105-106.

³⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 12:105.

³⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 12:106. Emphasis added.

Neither Outis nor Poe offered a “practical” definition of what precisely would constitute plagiarism. Poe’s reworking of his plagiarism scenario in his final response — from nefarious theft to irresistible absorption — suggests a concession to Outis’ claim that real plagiarism rarely if ever occurred. At the same time, even as it suggested a potentially feminized passivity, Poe’s turnabout was also a desperate attempt to assert a measure of cultural authority. Though the content of the response suggested capitulation, its tone suggested a lecture, and the response contained a reference to the authority of “all literary history,” as well as the mathematical, measuring language typical of Poe: “the liability to accidents of this character is in the direct ratio of the poetic sentiment — of the susceptibility to the poetic impression.” If the poet was helplessly receptive and susceptible to all stimuli, the line between plagiarism and creation irretrievably blurred. To determine the degree of “true poet” status to grant to a given poet, one had to measure his emotional susceptibility to stimuli: the work of the critic, who, unlike the poet, should have been capable of drawing rational distinctions between original and plagiarized work.

As Poe’s obsession played itself out in the pages of the Broadway Journal, Charles Briggs’ hope that the publicity generated by Poe’s “hobby”³⁹⁰ would benefit the Journal finally dissolved into frustration with Poe’s activities, including his apparent return to drinking in the summer of 1845;³⁹¹ Briggs wrote to Lowell in June that although he was “rather taken at first with a certain appearance of independence and learning in his criticisms,” but concluded that “[the criticisms] are so verbal, and so purely selfish that I can no longer have any sympathy with him.”³⁹² In July 1845, Briggs gave up his share of the

³⁹⁰ Briggs wrote to Lowell that at first he had been willing to “allow [Poe] to ride his hobby to death in the outset and be done with it Charles Briggs to James Russell Lowell, Staten Island, NY, 16 March 1845, quoted in Poe Log, 518.

³⁹¹ Briggs to Lowell, 27 June and 16 July 1845, Poe Log, 530, 542.

³⁹² Briggs to Lowell, 27 June 1845, Poe Log, 542.

magazine and began to disentangle himself from the project. Poe entered into an arrangement with the magazine's original publisher/printer, John Bisco, to take over the magazine. And for a brief period in 1845, Poe was editor and owner of his own magazine.

The Broadway Journal period reveals an important pattern in Poe's behavior and emotional makeup: while he used the magazine to make repeated attacks on Longfellow and on plagiarizers in general, he also turned to almost abject begging in order to keep the magazine afloat. Flattering letters requesting money went out to such figures as John Pendleton Kennedy, Evert A. Duyckinck, Thomas Holley Chivers, Fitz-Greene Halleck, even Rufus Griswold, many of whose work Poe had sharply criticized.³⁹³ Some money came in, but not enough, and the magazine finally folded in January 1846. As Poe churned out his responses to Outis, acquaintances may have wanted to disassociate themselves from a journal so bent on "independent" criticism that it equated personal rancor and tortuous logic with disinterested instruction.³⁹⁴

In response to Briggs' frustration with Poe, in August 1845 Lowell wrote to Briggs that he found Poe "wholly lacking in that element of manhood which, for want of a better name, we call character [which is] quite distinct from genius — though all great geniuses are endowed with it," adding, "As I prognosticated, I have made Poe my enemy by doing him a service. . . . He probably cannot conceive of anybody's writing for anything but a newspaper reputation, or for posthumous fame, which is but the same thing magnified by distance. I

³⁹³ Poe to John P. Kennedy, New York, NY, 26 October 1845, in Letters, 1:299; Poe to Evert A. Duyckinck, [New York, NY], 13 [November 1845], in Letters, 1:300-301; Poe to Dr. Thomas H. Chivers, New York, NY, 11 August 1845, in Letters, 1:292-293; Poe to Dr. Thomas H. Chivers, New York, NY, 15 November 1845, in Letters, 1:302-303; Poe to Dr. Thomas H. Chivers, New York, NY, 29 August [1845], in Letters, 1:295-297. To Griswold, Poe wrote: "Will you aid me at a pinch — at one of the greatest pinches conceivable? If you will, I will be indebted to you, for life. After a prodigious deal of manoeuvring, I have succeeded in getting the "Broadway Journal" entirely within my own control. It will be a fortune to me if I can hold it — and I can do it easily with a very trifling aid from my friends. May I count you as one? Lend me \$50 and you shall never have cause to regret it." Poe to Rufus W. Griswold, New York, NY, 26 October 1845, in Letters, 1:298.

³⁹⁴ Silverman, Poe, 271-275

have quite other aims.”³⁹⁵ Lowell’s terms suggested the standard manly virtues of character and high-minded ambition, identifying Poe with a base desire for reputation and “posthumous fame” and himself with “quite other aims,” which Lowell defined in the vague and high-flown terminology reserved for poetry:

Though I have never yet done anything that was a fair exponent of the poetical abilities which I am conscious of possessing, yet I have confidence enough in myself (even if I desired fame greatly) to wait serenely and quietly for my time to come round. . . . I go out sometimes with my heart so full of yearning towards my fellows that the indifferent look with which even entire strangers pass me brings tears into my eyes. And then to be looked upon by those who do know me (externally) as “Lowell the poet” — it makes me sick. Why not as Lowell the man — the boy rather, — as Jemmy Lowell, as I was at school?³⁹⁶

In terms that echoed his friend Longfellow’s psalms, Lowell at once stated his confidence in his own “poetical abilities” while describing himself as willing “to wait serenely and quietly” for his moment of fame. The fame Lowell yearned for, however, was not literary-lionization but love felt toward a sensitive schoolboy, for “Lowell the man — the boy rather . . . as I was at school.” Ambition blurred into an indefinite, genteel sentimentality. If Poe yearned for influence, authority, fame and, not incidentally, money, Lowell presented himself to Briggs as merely a boyish youth yearning for love from his audience — which he characterized as a higher and less selfish goal. Lowell went on to bemoan the “meanness of men,” complaining that “B— — (the ‘Sculptor,’ as he is called) actually asked Carter how much Poe paid me for writing my notice of him in Graham’s Magazine. Did such business ever enter the head of man?”³⁹⁷ The ‘Sculptor’s’ “meanness” gave Jemmy Lowell an opportunity, in his private correspondence, to proclaim his opposition to such market-oriented motives. Similarly, Poe’s schemes for his own financially successful magazine gave

³⁹⁵ James Russell Lowell to Charles F. Briggs, Elmwood, [MA], 21 August 1845, Letters of James Russell Lowell, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1894), 1:99-100.

³⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 1:101.

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 1:102.

him the opportunity to present himself as the disinterested servant of American readership. Although he would continue to solicit backing and subscribers for the Stylus until his death in 1849, the Broadway Journal would be the closest Poe would come to realizing that ambition.³⁹⁸

“NOT... A PURPOSE BUT A PASSION”: LOSING CLARITY

1845 opened momentarily for Poe. With the first appearance of “The Raven” in the 29 January 1845 of Nathaniel Parker Willis’ New York Evening Mirror, Poe as critic overlapped with Poe as poet. In his introduction to the poem, Willis called it “the most effective single example of ‘fugitive poetry’ ever published in this country; and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification.”³⁹⁹ The poem was widely reprinted and resoundingly popular. By some reports Poe was identified with the poem: Henry Tuckerman recalled that at a gathering at the house of New York physician John W. Francis, the doctor ushered in

[A] pale, thin, and most grave-looking man, whose dark dress and solemn air, with the Doctor’s own look of ceremonious gravity, produced an ominous silence. . . . slowly conducting his guest around the table, and turning to his wife, he waved his hand, and, with elaborate courtesy, made this unique announcement: “The Raven!” and certainly no human physiognomy more resembled that bird than the stranger’s, who, without a smile or a word, bowed slightly and slowly; with a fixed, and, it

³⁹⁸ In January 1848 Poe wrote to Eveleth:

[L]et me refer to The Stylus. I am resolved to be my own publisher. To be controlled is to be ruined. My ambition is great. If I succeed, I put myself (within 2 years) in possession of a fortune & infinitely more. My plan is to go through the South & West & endeavor to interest my friends so as to commence with a list of at least 500 subscribers. With this list I can take the matter into my own hands. There are some few of my friends who have sufficient confidence in me to advance their subscriptions — but at all events succeed I will. Can you or will you help me?

Edgar Allan Poe to George Eveleth, New York, New York, 4 January 1848, in Letters, 2:356-357. Emphasis in original.

³⁹⁹ Nathaniel Parker Willis, New York Evening Mirror, 29 January 1845, reprinted in Poe Log, 496.

almost seemed, a portentous gaze, as if complacently accepting the character thus thrust upon him.⁴⁰⁰

In Tuckerman's account, Francis identified Poe with the figure of the raven rather than with the cognizant student — equating him with an unthinking bird compelled to recite the same phrase over and over again.

In "The Raven," a student grieving the death of his beloved Lenore is distracted by a raven he lets into his study. The student poses questions to the bird that are shaped around the bird's unchanging response "Nevermore." The bird's utterances are fixed; the student's are not, and involve conscious thought towards a desired effect. Yet in the poem that thought remains, apparently, unconscious; the student's actions (his repeated questioning of the bird) follow his own stated speculations on the source of the bird's pronouncements:

'Doubtless,' said I, 'what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore —
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
'Of "Never — nevermore."⁴⁰¹

In spite of this logical explanation, the student questions the raven in a way that reveals his gradual abandonment of that explanation. The stanza following describes the student's "sinking" upon a velvet-cushioned seat he had placed before the bird, and the student's consequent mental activity, which suggests both directedness and diversion:

I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore —
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking 'Nevermore.'⁴⁰²

The repeated phrase is significant: the "bird of yore," with the hint of legend and antiquity suggested by "yore," is granted at once the menace inherent in the word "ominous," as well

⁴⁰⁰ Henry Tuckerman, quoted in *Poe Log*, 497-498.

⁴⁰¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven," in *Complete Poems and Selected Essays*, 72. On the raven's rote speech, see Pahl, "De-composing," Person, Jr., "Poe's Composition of Philosophy," 11-13.

⁴⁰² Poe, "Raven," 73.

as the suggestion of negative prophecy connoted by “omen.” Immediately after providing himself with a rational explanation of the bird’s utterance, the student indulges himself in “linking/Fancy unto fancy” and convinces himself that the raven’s one word constitutes an omen and a prophesy pertaining to circumstances known only to the student, beyond the comprehension of the bird.

Within the structure of the poem, the audience for the raven’s pronouncements and the student’s speech is the student himself. The student speaks to himself, using the bird as a prop in his drama of self-torture, performed for himself alone. But the poem is also a drama performed, by Poe, for an audience of readers (and auditors).⁴⁰³ Poe may well be the raven, with the raven representing the comparatively ‘rote’ mechanics involved in the science of versification. But the felt emotion, the structure of the poem, and the conscious presentation of that emotion are represented in the poem by the student, who weaves his particular emotional state and desired effect — what Poe would describe in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” as “the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrows”⁴⁰⁴ — around the fixed utterance of the bird.⁴⁰⁵

The poem’s popularity brought Poe into the drawing rooms of the salons appearing in New York during the 1840s. Such gatherings brought together New York literati with various “Mrs. Leo Hunters.”⁴⁰⁶ Poe’s identification with his celebrated poem brought him

⁴⁰³ See Richards, “Poetic Attractions,” ff., on poetic readings as performances, particularly in the context of literary salons. See also Maureen Cobb Mabbott, “Reading ‘The Raven,’” University of Mississippi Studies in English, 3 (1982): 96-101.

⁴⁰⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in Complete Poems and Selected Essays, 109.

⁴⁰⁵ Pahl, “De-Composing,” Person, “Poe’s Composition.”

⁴⁰⁶ Silverman quotes this phrase from Anne Marie Dolan, “The Literary Salon in New York, 1830-1860,” Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1957, in Poe, 278. See also Walker, introduction, American Women Poets, xxii-xxiii. On Poe’s activity in such salons, see Richards, “Poetic Attractions;” Silverman, Poe, 278-280; Quinn, Poe, 475-478; Meyers, Poe, 164-165; Walker, introduction, American Women Poets, xxxv. Meyers attributes less significance to these salons than Richards, Silverman, and Quinn do. For a brief treatment of the apparently equal gender dynamics of Lynch’s gatherings, see Thomas Bender, New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 195-196.

into these circles, where his public stance as poet and critic became increasingly conflated with his personal character. At the same time, his participation in such salons, most often those held by Anne Lynch, brought him into contact with a particular brand of litterateur: the female writer or poetess, associated with intense and sentimental emotionalism and childlike affectedness.⁴⁰⁷ Thomas Dunn English would later describe a scene at one of Lynch's gatherings, possibly the one in July 1845 where Poe recited "The Raven" for the company. English's reminiscence suggests the figure Poe cut in such circles, and the responses he was able to gain from such women:

[Poe] and I were the only gentlemen present. I let him as much as possible monopolize the male share of the talk, and finally he gave quite a lecture on literary matters, to which we all listened attentively. . . . In the plainly furnished room at one corner stands Miss Lynch with her round, cheery face, and Mrs. Ellet, decorous and ladylike, who had ceased their conversation when Poe broke into his lecture. On a sofa on the right side of the room I sit with Miss Fuller . . . on my right side, and Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith on my left. At my feet little Mrs. Osgood, doing the infantile act, is seated on a footstool, her face upturned to Poe, as it had been previously to Miss Fuller and myself. In the center stands Poe, giving his opinions in a judicial tone and occasionally reciting passages with telling effect.⁴⁰⁸

Since English and Poe would later publish highly negative accounts of each other, English's account of Poe cannot be read as entirely objective. Still, English's description of Poe surrounded by intently listening women foreshadowed the increasing reliance Poe would place on an assortment of women to sustain his identity as a poet during the last few years of his life.⁴⁰⁹

Eliza Richards has argued persuasively that Poe's performances as a highly intuitive, emotional poet figure identified him with feminine sympathies and female audiences, while simultaneously claiming that femininity for male artists and relegating "feminine" women

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden*.

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas Dunn English, "Reminiscences of Poe," quoted in *Poe Log*, 552-553.

⁴⁰⁹ See Richards, "Poetic Attractions" for an important treatment of Poe in the context of antebellum New York literary salons and his interactions with numerous women poets.

poets to the category of the merely sentimental. Poe's physical presence as a poet balanced rational masculine control (in the form of domination of a largely female audience) with passive receptivity to the demons of his imagination. I would add that Poe needed a highly emotionally sensitive audience to validate not merely Poe's poetry but also Poe's critical stance. If, as Poe claimed, the critic's responsibility lay in assessing a poem's value by measuring its ability to stimulate poetic sentiment, Poe as critic needed a responsive audience, and preferably an audience whose responses matched — or could be persuaded to match his — calculations of effect.⁴¹⁰

The emotionally charged environment of the literary salons paralleled the fervid emotional atmosphere of Poe's home circle, made up of his child bride and cousin Virginia Clemm and her mother Maria Clemm, known familiarly as "Muddy." The intensity of this small, tightly knit family, as well as Poe's deep need for attention and care from women, can be inferred from the desperate letter Poe wrote to Muddy in 1835 vowing love for Virginia and pleading Muddy not to give herself and Virginia into the care of Neilson Poe. Edgar begged:

My last my last my only hold on life is cruelly torn away — I have no desire to live and will not. . . . I love, you know I love Virginia passionately devotedly. I cannot express in words the fervent devotion I feel toward my dear little cousin — my own darling. . . . You both have tender hearts — and you will always have the reflection that my agony is more than I can bear — that you have driven me to the grave — for love like mine can never been gotten over.⁴¹¹

Virginia and her mother created a close, supportive home environment for Poe; letters from Poe to friends also suggest that the two women provided Poe with a strongly appreciative audience. When, in 1847, Virginia succumbed to the illness that had killed Poe's real

⁴¹⁰ Richards, "Poetic Attractions."

⁴¹¹ Poe to Maria Clemm, 29 August 1835, in Letters, 1:69-70. Emphasis in original. J. Gerald Kennedy, Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 101-103.

mother, the devastated Poe would turn again to drink and, eventually, to a series of female admirers.⁴¹²

Poe's need for emotionally responsive audiences led to a series of episodes in 1845 and 1846 which brought him considerable negative publicity. The precise nature of his relationship with poetess Frances Osgood is debated, but their connection seems to have been based on their mutual recognition of each other's finely-tuned poetic sensibilities. The flirtation became public when Poe printed their poetic exchanges — the major existing evidence for the relationship — in the Broadway Journal in the spring of 1845, along with the poetry of Osgood's rival Elizabeth Ellet. The situation devolved into a messy conflict in early 1846 when Poe was confronted by Ellet and Margaret Fuller, who ordered him to relinquish Osgood's letters. Poe told the women that Ellet had better "look after her own

⁴¹² Silverman, Poe, 179-183, 287-288, 323-327. As Kenneth Silverman has argued, Poe can be seen as locked in "mournful and never-ending remembrance" of one particular beautiful woman who died: his mother, Eliza Poe. Other beautiful, dying women populated his life: a young friend's mother Jane Stanard, foster mother Frances Allan, and perhaps most importantly, his young cousin and wife, Virginia Clemm, who died in 1847 after a protracted case of consumption. His association with Virginia also brought him a mother-figure in Maria "Muddy" Clemm, to whom Poe would dedicate one of his later poems, "To My Mother," published in the Flag of our Union in July 1849. Quinn, Poe, 605-606. As an adult, Poe tended to become strongly attached to women, almost to the point of self-abnegation, a theme that would make itself apparent in his tales; as Joan Dayan has pointed out, his male characters often seemed to enslave themselves to strong and occasionally supernaturally powerful women, in the name of love — a gesture that Dayan argues essentially removed the privileges associated with white manhood from those male characters, rendering them weak, unmanly, slaves. As J. Gerald Kennedy and Dayan in an earlier argument have pointed out, in Poe's fiction the loving narrator is often distanced from the desirable woman, through misdirected feeling or through death — both of which states are overridden in his stories by an unnatural reversal of a death. This repeated pattern can also support the argument that these female characters as narcissistic projections of Poe himself, suggesting that the stories represent Poe's wish to see early losses reversed and his fear that this wish could come true: in the stories, the beautiful women return — but in altered and unnatural forms. Dayan, "Amorous Bondage;" Floyd Stovall, "The Women of Poe's Poems and Tales," Texas Studies in English, 5 (1925): 197; Kennedy, Poe, Death, 67-88.

The psychological consequences of Poe's loss of his mother at a very tender age and his simultaneous yearning for his mother and fear that she might, after all, return from the dead, make up the central theme of Silverman's biography of Poe. Eliza Richards' "Poetic Attractions" focuses powerfully on the women who made up Poe's most sympathetic audience(s) towards the end of his life; although Richards' chapters focus on specifically on three of the poetesses who cultivated Poe (and vice versa) via the New York salons — Frances Sargent Osgood, Sarah Helen Whitman, and Elizabeth Oakes Smith — she also argues that poetry was an essentially interactive literary form, drawing on the emotional relationships between the poet and his or her auditors, an argument which locates Poe and other poetry-defining figures such as Rufus W. Griswold within the oral and participatory critical discourse of the salon as well as the more fixed genre of written criticism. Richards also notes Poe's reliance on female audiences to support his own self-presentation as poet. Richards, "Poetic Attractions;" Silverman, Poe.

letters.”⁴¹³ The comment was construed to mean that Ellet had also written compromising letters to Poe. To preserve his sister’s honor, Ellet’s brother William Lummis threatened to challenge Poe to a duel. Poe went to acquaintance Thomas Dunn English to ask for advice, assistance and, according to English, a gun, and the two men fought when English, who knew there were no such letters from Ellet, refused to help Poe. What began as a flirtation driven by emotionally charged poems turned into a personal fiasco when the poems were printed; in this case, Poe had failed to anticipate the responses that would be triggered by printing the poems.⁴¹⁴

Later that year Poe sought — and failed by most accounts — to exert control over one particular audience’s response to his poetry. In October 1845, through the machinations of Lowell, Poe was invited to recite a poem at the Boston Lyceum. Poe arrived in Boston, having been unable or unwilling to write a new poem for the occasion, and proceeded to recite his juvenile poem “Al Aaraaf,” followed by “The Raven.” Reports of the performance varied, but generally agreed that the evening did not go well. The Boston press claimed that Poe had sought to insult Bostonians by appearing onstage intoxicated and by reciting an obviously recycled poem written in his youth. Poe claimed that insult had been his intent, and he worked hard to make the response he received into the response he had wanted all along: “We knew that were we to compose for them a “Paradise Lost,” they would pronounce it an indifferent poem. It would have been very weak in us, then, to put ourselves to the trouble of attempting to please these people. We

⁴¹³ Quoted in Silverman, *Poe*, 290.

⁴¹⁴ Mary G. DeJong, “Lines from a Partly Published Drama: The Romance of Frances Sargent Osgood and Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Patrons and Protégées: Gender, Friendship, and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 31-58; Moss, *Poe’s Literary Battles*, 207-221; Silverman, *Poe*, 280-292; Quinn, *Poe*, 504-506.

preferred pleasing ourselves.”⁴¹⁵ Poe protested too much. His repeated assertions suggest that the idea of the hoax had come to him after the disastrous performance rather than before.

Yet Poe also tried to turn the Boston incident to his own ends, first by claiming he had hoped for the result he got, and then by working it into publicity for The Raven and Other Poems (1845): he noted in the Broadway Journal that the volume included “Al Aaraaf,” the poem “with which we quizzed the Bostonians.”⁴¹⁶ Finally, Poe claimed to have given his audience “The Raven” because it was what people wanted from him. Turning to his recent, popular poem could also have been a desperate gesture, a grab at material proven to provoke a positive response, any positive response. The event revealed both arrogance and insecurity in Poe, but also showed his awareness of the power of audience reaction, power so strong that he attempted to turn even a strongly negative response to his own uses.⁴¹⁷

By February 1846, the Osgood/Ellet affair had made Poe no longer welcome at Anne Lynch’s soirées. Although he achieved some literary success in 1845 by publishing his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque in June 1845 and The Raven the following November, the mixed critical responses did not assuage the damage Poe’s behavior had done to his critical and creative reputation. The Raven, published in Evert Duyckinck’s Library of American Books, was the first collection of Poe’s poetry to be published since 1831 and the last to be published during his lifetime. Margaret Fuller no doubt expressed the feelings of others when she wrote that “A large band of . . . offended dignitaries and

⁴¹⁵ [Edgar Allan Poe], “Editorial Miscellany: Boston and the Bostonians,” Broadway Journal, (22 November 1845), in Works, 13:6-7.

⁴¹⁶ [Edgar Allan Poe], Broadway Journal, 1 November 1845, quoted in Thomas O. Mabbott, introduction, The Raven, xi.

⁴¹⁷ Silverman, Poe, 264-270; Moss, Poe’s Literary Battles, 190-208; McGill, “Poe, Literary Nationalism,” 299-301; Katherine Hemple Prown, “The Cavalier and the Syren: Edgar Allan Poe, Cornelia Wells Walter, and the Boston Lyceum Incident,” New England Quarterly 66, no. 1 (March 1993): 110-123.

aggrieved parents must be on the watch for a volume of ‘Poems by Edgar Allan Poe’, ready to cut, rend and slash in turn.”⁴¹⁸ Poe’s apparently self-effacing preface dismissed his poems as “trifles” primarily because other commitments had prevented him from “making, at any time, any serious effort in what, under happier circumstances, would have been the field of choice.” Poe’s inability to live up to his own standards here became a result of “events not to be controlled” rather than a failure of effort. As further explanation, Poe added: “With me poetry has not been a purpose, but a passion; and the passions should be held in reverence; they must not — they cannot at will be excited with an eye to the paltry compensations, or the more paltry commendations of mankind.”⁴¹⁹ Poetry was not to be commodified, or pursued with an eye towards fame; and yet such apparent self-effacement also carried a note of arrogance: other, lesser poets might compose for money or recognition, but such “paltry” recompenses were not for Poe. Or so he claimed.⁴²⁰

The book received mixed reviews with some praise, more resistance. Lewis Gaylord Clark of the Knickerbocker, by then a significant nemesis of Poe’s, wrote a scathing review of the volume, pointing to the mitigating circumstances experienced by other poets — Milton’s blindness, Tasso’s madness, Dante’s persecution — and noted:

⁴¹⁸ [Margaret Fuller], review of The Raven and Other Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, New York Daily Tribune, 26 November 1845, reprinted in Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage, ed. I. M. Walker, The Critical Heritage Series, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 226-227.

⁴¹⁹ Poe, preface to Raven and Other Poems, ed. Mabbott, [i.]

⁴²⁰ Both of these volumes were published in Wiley & Putnam’s Library of American Books under the direction of critic and promoter Evert Duyckinck, a major figure in the Young American movement, a group of critics and writers who called for a distinctively American literature; by 1845 the Young Americans were associated with radical Democratic politics. Whether this development represented a commitment on Poe’s part to the Young American stance or mere opportunism on his part has been debated; I am most convinced by Meredith McGill’s discussion of Poe’s usefulness to the movement, particularly to Lowell and Duyckinck. McGill argues that in early 1845 members of the movement, including in particular Lowell, Briggs, and Duyckinck, hoped to Poe’s resistance to the literary market’s cliquishness towards their own ends, and that Poe’s misbehavior over the year — intentionally or not — ended his relationship with the movement. McGill, “Poe, Literary Nationalism,” Perry Miller, The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), esp. 111-117, 124-136, 145-152; for a useful discussion of the ‘Americanness’ of the Library of American Books series, see Michael Kearns, “The Material Melville: Shaping Readers’ Horizons,” in Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America, ed. Michelle Moylan and Lane Stiles, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 56-61.

A real poet will never tell of the hinderances [sic] to effort. It is overcoming hinderances which gives the surest testimony of ability. Nothing will excuse a poet for non-production but non-ability. Let the author produce his talent and say, "'Tis the best I could do'; excuses for not doing better will avail him nothing.⁴²¹

Poetry, implied Clark, required effortful sublimation of passion, ability as well as inclination.

Clark's "real" poet would discreetly veil his own difficulties, mental or material; indeed,

Longfellow, whose 'psalms' Clark would publish in the Knickerbocker in the 1840s, would

describe his efforts in terms which cloaked the emotional struggles which had helped form

the poems. Clark and other critics favored an understanding of poetic labor which

emphasized manly effort and mastery of circumstances over excuse-making complaints of

unmasterable difficulties. Clark's understanding of the character and responsibilities of the

poet found more sympathy among critics than Poe's did. Yet both models seemed to

counsel a kind of passive receptivity. Clark's praise for poetry which obscured the

difficulties involved in its production dovetailed with Lowell's genteel willingness to wait

serenely for a subject (or an object) worthy of his poetical abilities. In contrast, Poe's waiting

gentleman was a student weaving fancies around a mysterious and monophonic bird, a man

inclining towards madness.⁴²²

In spite of mixed responses to his erratic behavior and work, Poe continued to

represent himself as a source of cultural authority. In May 1846, the first of Poe's "Literati"

sketches appeared in the Godey's Lady's Book. Poe had introduced his "Literati" series by

stating that he hoped through these sketches to transmit to American readers the true

opinions of New York literary critics, only expressed in the privacy of the parlor where face-

to-face contact made falsity and puffery all too detectable. Promising readers a peek behind

⁴²¹ [Lewis Gaylord Clark], review of The Raven and Other Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Knickerbocker (January 1846), in Poe: The Critical Heritage, 244-245. On the hostility between Clark and Poe, see Miller, Raven and Whale; Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 86-131.

⁴²² Silverman, Poe, 299-230; Quinn, Poe, 482-485.

the puffery, Poe implied that he had access to those “real” opinions — “My design is, in giving my own unbiased opinion of the literati (male and female) of New York, to give at the same time, very closely if not with absolute accuracy, that of conversational society in literary circles”⁴²³ — and then qualifying that statement immediately by adding that “[i]t must be expected, of course, that in innumerable particulars, I shall differ from the voice, that is to say, from what appears to be the voice of public — but this is a matter of no consequence whatever.”⁴²⁴ Finally, Poe indicated that his own personal knowledge of various authors would in fact color some of his portraits.⁴²⁵ The personal animosity which inflected some of the sketches suggested Poe’s willingness to pass off his own personal opinions as the “real” opinions of New York’s literary “in” crowd.

The “Literati” articles offended many of their subjects. Poe included descriptions of authors’ physiognomy; in some cases he literally rewrote subjects’ bodies to fit his assessment of their literary abilities.⁴²⁶ However, when Poe’s sketch of Thomas Dunn English appeared in the July 1846 Godey’s, events spun out of Poe’s control. After criticizing English’s poem “Azthene” and accusing him of plagiarizing from Henry Hirst’s poetry, Poe questioned English’s grasp of grammar (“an editor should certainly be able to write his own name”⁴²⁷) and his ability to function as editor of the sinking Aristedean, concluding that “Mr. E. is yet young . . . — and might with his talents, readily improve

⁴²³ [Edgar Allan Poe], “Author’s Introduction: The Literati of New York City,” Godey’s Lady’s Book, (May 1846), in Works, 15:5. Emphasis in original.

⁴²⁴ *ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁴²⁵ *ibid.*

⁴²⁶ Poe also claimed that “Mr. Briggs has never composed in his life three consecutive sentences in grammatical English,” and claimed that “Two of his most marked characteristics are vacillation of purpose and a passion for being mysterious,” qualities that would seem to describe Poe as well. [Edgar Allan Poe], “Charles F. Briggs,” Godey’s Lady’s Book, (May 1846), in Works, 15:22-23. Ironically, when Charles Briggs anonymously published a cutting and incorrect description of Poe’s person in the Mirror in retaliation for Poe’s equally incorrect physical description of Briggs and assorted other digs, Poe went to some lengths to have correct descriptions of his height and age, among other details, published to refute Briggs’ statement. Silverman, Poe, 307-308; Moss, Poe’s Literary Battles, 241-244.

⁴²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, “Thomas Dunn English,” Godey’s Lady’s Book, (July 1846), in Works, 15:66. Emphasis in original.

himself at points where he is most defective. No one of any generosity would think the worse of him for getting private instruction.⁴²⁸ Yet English was a cipher physically and literarily; according to Poe: “I do not personally know Mr. English. . . . About [English’s] personal appearance there is nothing very observable.”⁴²⁹

English hit back hard in both the New York Morning Telegraph and the Mirror, asserting that Poe did indeed know him, and making public the details of their acquaintance. Poe owed him money, English claimed; in June 1845 Poe had dropped a libel suit English had counseled him to press on merchant Edward Thomas, which, English suggested, implied Poe’s guilt;⁴³⁰ Poe was as ill-educated as Poe had claimed English to be; English had thrashed Poe when Poe came to his rooms requesting a gun to help him defend himself against Ellet’s brother. More damaging for Poe’s reputation as a poet was English’s claim that on two occasions Poe had begged English to help him compose poems to be read in public: the first, to the literary society at New York University in July 1845 (Poe had cancelled this appearance, claiming “indisposition”) and the second, to the Boston Lyceum in October 1845.⁴³¹

English presented himself as a rational and self-contained man who had offered clear-minded advice to a man unable to control his emotions and in need of external direction. In reference to Poe’s cancellation of the New York University engagement, English wrote:

About a week before the [scheduled reading] he called on me, appearing to be much troubled — said he could not write the poem, and begged me to help him out with

⁴²⁸ *ibid.*, 15:65-66.

⁴²⁹ *ibid.*, 15:66.

⁴³⁰ In June 1845 a New York merchant named Edward Thomas accused Poe of forgery based on a rumor Thomas had heard. When Thomas was unable to verify the rumor, he retracted the charge, but not until after Poe had apparently again consulted English for advice and been advised by English to sue Thomas for libel. Silverman, Poe, 284-286.

⁴³¹ According to Silverman, Poe asked both English and Fanny Osgood to compose the Boston Lyceum poem for him. Silverman, Poe, 286.

some idea of the course to pursue. I suggested that he had better write a note to the society, and frankly state his inability to compose a poem on a stated subject. He did not do this, but — as he always does when troubled — drank until intoxicated; and remained in a state of intoxication during the week. . . . [I]t was gravely announced that Mr. Poe could not deliver his poem, on account of severe indisposition!⁴³²

English's account of Poe's performance at the Boston Lyceum was even more damning.

English again presented himself as having offered Poe sage advice — "I remonstrated with him on undertaking a task he could not perform" — which Poe ignored because he greatly needed the money he would receive for the reading. English implied that Poe had not even written "Al Aaraaf," describing the poem as "a mass of ridiculous stuff, written by some one, and printed under his name when he was 18." That Poe claimed the entire affair to have been a hoax was beside the point, asserted English, considering that he accepted the money anyway, "thus committing an act unworthy of a gentleman, though in strict keeping with Mr. Poe's previous acts."⁴³³ Finally, English turned Poe's charges of editorial incompetence back onto Poe, concluding: "He is not alone thoroughly unprincipled, base and depraved, but silly, vain and ignorant — not alone an assassin in morals, but a quack in literature."⁴³⁴

As with his responses to Outis, Poe did not address English's charges directly. In his reply, published in the 10 July 1846 Spirit of the Times, Poe instead claimed to find English's writing difficult to comprehend; jeered at the New York Mirror's circulation statistics; claimed that he had beaten English rather than the other way around and listed other thrashings English had taken; claimed that English on another occasion had urged him to

⁴³² Thomas Dunn English, "Mr. English's Reply to Mr. Poe," New York Mirror, 23 June 1846, in Works, 17:235. The New York Herald reported that it had been announced that "Mr. Poe had been severely ill for a week past, and it had not been judged prudent for him to exert himself." New York Herald, 2 July 1845, in Poe Log, 545.

⁴³³ English, "Reply," in Works, 17:235-236.

⁴³⁴ *ibid.*, 17:238-239.

challenge Thomas to a duel and that Poe had preferred to press suit.⁴³⁵ Finally, Poe turned to his readers:

[H]aving demonstrated these [facts], shall I not have a right to demand of a generous public that it brand with eternal infamy that wretch, who, with a full knowledge of my exculpation from so heinous a charge, has not been ashamed to take advantage of my supposed inability to defend myself, for the purpose of stigmatising me as a felon!⁴³⁶

In his reply English pointed out that Poe's silence regarding the more serious charges implied an admission of guilt, and he challenged Poe to bring legal charges against him. Poe met the challenge, but, under the advice of a lawyer, brought his libel suit against Hiram Fuller and Augustus W. Clason, Jr., who had taken over the New York Mirror when Poe's more sympathetic friend Willis retired from the newspaper in December 1845. Although Poe eventually won the suit and was awarded \$225 and change for costs in February 1847, the publicity generated by the Poe/English exchange and the suit itself had done more damage to Poe's reputation; Virginia's death on January 30 also made the victory a bittersweet one.⁴³⁷

The logic — loopy but precise in its own way — of Poe's response to English and of his suit against the Mirror's editors hints at a rationality clung to somewhat too tightly. According to Poe, the public action should have contained both English's and Poe's escalating anger over the slights in the "Literati" sketch which were, after all, only literary slights. Defending his intentions for the series (rather than the actions English described), Poe suggested that English had misinterpreted the sketch. On the one hand, Poe twitted English for taking his sketch too personally; on the other, he suggested that English's family

⁴³⁵ Describing the event in June 1846 to Henry Hirst, Poe boasted "I gave E. a flogging which he will remember to the day of his death — and, luckily, in the presence of witnesses. He thinks to avenge himself by lies — by I shall be a match for him by means of simple truth." Poe to Henry Hirst, New York, New York, 27 June 1846, in Letters, 2:322. Poe probably did not beat English. Cf. Silverman, Poe, 291.

⁴³⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "Mr. Poe's Reply to Mr. English and Others," Spirit of the Times, 10 July 1846, in Works, 17:252.

⁴³⁷ Poe Log, 684-698; Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 223-233.

looked like “the best-looking but most unprincipled of Barnum’s baboons.”⁴³⁸ Poe’s response to the libel and the vindictiveness he displayed throughout the case and after its settlement suggests strong personal emotion lurking underneath his vaunted “objective” critical stance, a subjectivity Poe himself had claimed for the “Literati” sketches. As he had in his earlier conflict with Billy Burton, Poe presented himself as a figure of rational control in contrast to the maliciousness and deceptiveness he attributed to English himself: Poe himself was not at fault, he believed, because he had clearly advertised the subjectivity of his “Literati” essays. Intended as transcriptions of salon culture, the sketches were to reproduce the objective honesty and the subjective feeling which Poe attributed to the salon. It was not his fault, after all, that the untutored English (who was in fact an 1839 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine)⁴³⁹ could not manage the delicate mental maneuverings required to understand Poe’s sketches properly.

The trajectory of his acquaintance with English — from acquaintanceship to aid to enmity — was echoed in many of Poe’s friendships with men, although English exploited that pattern far more ruthlessly than any of Poe’s other serial ‘brothers’ would. Throughout his life, Poe’s emotional and financial neediness, coupled with his inclination to drink, led him into troubled friendships with his ‘brother’ men of letters. Poe’s early relationship with John P. Kennedy is a more typical example of Poe’s friendship. Poe did not hesitate to manipulate his role of needy protégé to Kennedy’s patron during his connection with the Southern Literary Messenger. In a September 1835 letter to John P. Kennedy, Poe lamented:

You will believe me when I say that I am still miserable in spite of the great improvement of my circumstances [employment for the Southern Literary Messenger] Convince me that it is worth one’s while — that it is at all necessary

⁴³⁸ Poe, “Poe to English,” in Works, 17:240-241.

⁴³⁹ Quinn, Poe, 349-350, 504.

to live, and you will prove yourself indeed my friend. . . . Your words will have more weight with me than the words of others — for you were my friend when no one else was.⁴⁴⁰

Closing the letter with “Fail not — as you value your peace of mind hereafter.” Poe added a postscript requesting a contribution for the Messenger and adding, “I would consider it a personal favor if you could do so without incommoding yourself.”⁴⁴¹ While Poe asked for comforting words, he implied that printable words would better assuage his distress; taken as a whole, the letter implied that by contributing to the Messenger Kennedy could prevent Poe from committing suicide. Kennedy politely declined to submit anything, and offered conventional advice — “Rise early, live generously, and make cheerful acquaintances and I have no doubt you will send these misgivings of the heart all to the Devil”⁴⁴² — using that conventionality to remove himself slightly from the weight of Poe’s histrionic demands.⁴⁴³

In the midst of Poe’s libel suit against English, William Gilmore Simms offered similarly conventional counsel. Simms urged Poe to cultivate his own “unassisted powers,” and noted that only the “manly resolution to use these powers” would make the world “countenance [Poe’s] claim to. . . regards and sympathy.”⁴⁴⁴ If Simms’ language echoed prescriptive literature for young men, it also addressed specific aspects of Poe’s literary

⁴⁴⁰ Poe to John P. Kennedy, Richmond, VA, 11 September 1835, in Letters, 1:73. Emphasis in original. J. Gerald Kennedy has labeled Poe’s “urgent messages” — letters written to key figures by Poe that utilize Poe’s dread of his own death as a tactic for pressing for aid, whether emotional or financial. Poe’s letters to Allan would fluctuate between attempts at reconciliation, warnings of dire consequences to Poe following Allan’s neglect of him, and desperate pleas for assistance. Kennedy, Poe, Death, 89-113. See also Scott A. Sandage’s discussion of begging letters addressed to John D. Rockefeller between the panics of 1873 and 1893; although Sandage focuses on a later time period, his treatment of letter writers’ injection of sentimental supplication into the form of standard business letters can also be applied to Poe’s appeals to perceived mentors for emotional and financial assistance and to Kennedy’s polite separation of the emotional implications from the business at hand. The vagaries of the American literary market, the vexed issues of patronage and publication, and the much-debated ‘feminization’ of literary culture suggests that by the midpoint of the nineteenth century the literary marketplace had already incorporated sentiment into a more rational model of transaction. Scott A. Sandage, “The Gaze of Success: Failed Men and the Sentimental Marketplace, 1873-1893,” in Sentimental Men, 181-201. Cf. Whalen, Poe and the Masses.

⁴⁴¹ *ibid.*, 1:73-74. Ostrom suggests that the postscripts to the letter was written a day or two after the first. Letters, 1:75n.

⁴⁴² John P. Kennedy to Poe, Baltimore, MD, 19 September 1835, in Works, 17:19.

⁴⁴³ Kennedy, Poe, Death, 89-113.

⁴⁴⁴ William Gilmore Simms to Poe, New York, NY, 30 July 1846, in Works, 17:260-261.

career: his need for greater prudence in his critical work and, significantly, for less reliance on the sympathy of others. However, Simms also encouraged Poe not to suppose that himself “abandoned by the worthy and honorable among your friends,” who Simms noted that Poe had been “according to all reports but too heedlessly, and, perhaps, too scornfully indifferent.”⁴⁴⁵ If Poe suffered himself to return to the “moral province,” counseled Simms, his literary prospects would return.

Simms’ assessment of Poe’s difficulties reflected Poe’s growing inability during the events of 1845 and 1846 to keep his emotions in check, even as he moved towards a definition of poetry’s value based on the mastery rather than the incitement of emotion. In the September 1846 “Literati” sketch treating poetess and salonniere Anne C. Lynch, Poe praised two of Lynch’s poems — “The Ideal” and “The Ideal Found.” Although Poe found the poems’ “ideality. . . not so manifest as their passion,” Poe wrote that “this passion is just sufficiently subdued to lie within the compass of the poetic art, within the limits of the beautiful. A step farther and it might have passed them.”⁴⁴⁶ Lynch had correctly identified the “triumph over passion” as a higher and more essentially poetic goal than the expression of passion itself. While Poe’s assessment of Lynch’s poetical character presented Poe as a critic capable of recognizing the highest forms of poetry, his characterization of the highest poetry had changed slightly: he now praised poetry which enacted as well as portrayed a conscious effort made to contain or “triumph over passion.”

Poe’s own increasing inability to manage emotion through rational criticism or creative effort can be seen most clearly in the relationship between Poe’s best-known poem “The Raven” and his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” published in the April

⁴⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 17:261.

⁴⁴⁶ Poe, “Anne C. Lynch,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, (September 1846), in *Works*, 15:117.

1846 number of Graham's. Setting himself against “most writers,” Poe began his argument by pointing out that “poets in especial”

prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought — at the true purposes seized only at the last moment — at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view — at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable — at the cautious selections and rejections — at the painful erasures and interpolations — in a word, at the wheels and pinions — the tackle for scene-shifting — the step-ladders and demon-traps — the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary histrio.⁴⁴⁷

The poet was a play-actor, who wished to conceal all the disorder, struggle, and effort of actual literary creation by claiming inspiration and “ecstatic intuition” as the real sources and procedures involved in the creation (“birth” might be a better term) of a poem. Poe, instead, proclaimed himself perfectly capable of recalling his compositional process, and proceeded to show precisely how “The Raven” was composed, claiming as his goal “to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.”⁴⁴⁸

The essay, which reads like a logical proof, is based on assumptions or assertions of intensely emotional and essentially indefensible points. Beauty, and not the homely beauty of Passion, but a more elevated Beauty, is the highest goal of a poem; sadness is the highest representation of Beauty; the repeated refrain is the most pleasurable blending of rhythmical and intellectual effect; “O” followed by “R” combines “the most sonorous sound” with “the most producible consonant.” And finally, the most notorious of Poe's maxims, presented as the result of a dialogue with himself: “the death, then, of a beautiful woman, is,

⁴⁴⁷ Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 104-105.

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 105.

unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”⁴⁴⁹ Down to the smallest detail, Poe wrote as though building on proven and accepted axioms, rather than on statements of personal taste or preference.⁴⁵⁰

Critic Dennis Pahl has argued that the logical tone affected by Poe in this essay was a means of containing the irrational emotion of the poem, and notes that the essay was ultimately unable to contain the emotion represented by the poem. The poem finally breaks the “frame” offered by the essay so that the essay’s conclusion was, literally, the conclusion of the poem. I would add that Poe’s rational presentation of the production of this poem, his willed measuring or defining of intangible elements, dissolved in the essay as the essay dissolved into the poem itself. That dissolution may also have been calculated. Ultimately the poetic sentiment rather than the proof ‘won’: the poem’s ineffability asserted itself over the reasoned tone of the essay. The essay underscored the poem’s resistance to such logically determined production.⁴⁵¹

One wonders if this twist were deliberate as well: Poe’s way of admitting that poetry cannot be willed while also distancing himself from the mushily intuitive poets mentioned at the beginning of the essay. Logic may be the starting point of the essay, but eventually the poem takes over and becomes its own entity, leaving its own beginnings (rational points) behind. Although not necessarily deleted, those assertions become a kind of skeleton or steel structure around which the intangible body of the poem is built. The skeleton of the

⁴⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁵⁰ Douglas, *Feminization*, 200-226; Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 124-152; David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 167-196. The literature focusing on antebellum/Victorian-era representations of women is extensive. See for example Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990; Douglas, *Feminization*; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, pt. 1 (Summer 1966), reprint in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 43-66; on Poe’s representations of women, see for example Kennedy, *Poe, Death*, 60-88; Dayan, “Amorous Bondage,” 179-209; Stovall, “Women of Poe’s Poems and Tales,” 197-209.

⁴⁵¹ Pahl, “De-composing,” Person, “Poe’s Composition,” 1-15.

poem is also directly related to the effect the poet wants the poem to have on its readers: by describing the skeleton, Poe also distinguished himself and his poem from the more spineless poetry — devoid of conscious intent to affect — mentioned at the beginning of the essay, while also subtly underscoring the essentially given and spontaneous character of poetic production.

Between the poem and the essay, Poe had it both ways: poetry is both inspired and consciously created. The common point of both positions lay in the intended effect each was to work on the mind of the reader. The essay can also be read as an attempt to regulate readers' response to the poem. "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect," stated Poe early in the essay. And interwoven with Poe's precisely detailed account of Poe's thought processes during composition was a point-by-point assessment of the effect Poe expected each aspect of the poem to have on the reader. Poe described each technical development of the poem in terms that inextricably linked them to the effect he hoped — or intended — the poem to have on its readers. In this essay, as in Poe's literary criticism in general, the responses of the reader elided into the responses of the poet. Explicitly identifying this essay as "commencing with the effect," Poe completely obscured any conscious effort that could not be linked to consumption. The precise, rational criticism suggested by the logical ordering of the early parts of the essay broke down into the mere repetition of the object at hand. The critic's independent voice melted into the subjective madness of the poem itself.

Finally, in "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe clearly drew on the established literary conventions of consolation literature and the general acceptance of women's bodies and minds as representative sites of purity, goodness, and beauty. He relied on those conventions as axioms; yet he also claimed to be establishing independent poetic truth and

opposing the very kinds of conventional poetry that most critics associated with women. At the same time, his interactions with live women, within the salons and elsewhere, suggested Poe's tendency to gravitate toward women who had what he had identified as "poetic sentiment," and who consequently were inclined to view Poe as a poetic genius. As his stock declined among male literati following the "Longfellow war," the collapse of the Broadway Journal, the publication of his explicitly gossipy "Literati" series and the ensuing libel suit, and his own declines into drinking, Poe came to rely more and more on female admirers and audiences to uphold his opinion of himself as a poet.

The relationship between Sarah Helen Whitman and Poe has been described as an essentially poetic one, conducted between two people more concerned with the style and presentation of their alliance than with actual relationship between them. But Poe's engagement to Whitman and its dissolution marked a significant moment in Poe's life; following their breakup Poe would seek to connect himself to women who possessed more poetic sentiment than poetic ability — and who thus were capable of appreciating Poe without offering him competition. This is not to say that Sarah Helen Whitman was an unheralded genius; it is merely to point out that as Poe's public persona tarnished, he seemed more inclined to seek comfort than stimulation or challenge. Whitman in effect identified weaknesses in Poe's character, represented by his drinking; more importantly, Whitman also resisted Poe's chastisement of her for, as he claimed, allowing herself to be turned against him by Ellet's and other enemies' claims about Poe's drinking and his lack of moral principles.⁴⁵² Whitman extricated herself from a relationship with a man more interested in

⁴⁵² Wrote Poe to Whitman: "[Y]ou do not love me, or you would have felt too thorough a sympathy with the sensitiveness of my nature, to have so wounded me as you have done with this terrible passage of your letter: — "How often I have heard men and even women say of you — 'He has great intellectual power, but no principle — no moral sense.'" Is it possible that such expressions as these could have been repeated to me — to me — by one whom I loved — ah, whom I love — by one at whose feet I knelt — I still kneel — in deeper

winning a wife who would defend him against his enemies (including himself) than in Whitman herself.⁴⁵³

The collapse of his relationship with Whitman left Poe resolving, as he wrote to Annie Richmond, “to shun the pestilential society of literary women. They are a heartless, unnatural, venomous, dishonorable set, with no guiding principle but inordinate self-esteem. Mrs[.] [Osgood] is the only exception I know.”⁴⁵⁴ The wife of a Lowell, Massachusetts paper manufacturer, Richmond was the recipient of highly emotional letters from Poe during the last year of his life, and the object of his late poem “To Annie.” Richmond seems to have

worship than ever man offered to God?” Poe to Sarah Helen Whitman, [Fordham, NY, 18 October 1848], in Letters, 2:392. Emphasis in original.

In the same letter, Poe linked his poverty and other difficulties to his desire to maintain literary independence, and suggests that his enemies’ personal attacks on him were related to this drive towards independence: “Let it suffice that have had the audacity to remain poor that I might preserve my independence — that, nevertheless, in letters, to a certain extent and in certain regards, I have been “successful” — that I have been a critic — and unscrupulously honest and no doubt in many cases a bitter one — that I have uniformly attacked — where I attacked at all — those who stood highest in power and influence — and that, whether in literature or in society, I have seldom refrained from expressing, either directly or indirectly, the pure contempt with which the pretensions of ignorance, arrogance, or imbecility inspire me. — And you who know all this — you ask me why I have enemies. Ah, Helen, I have a hundred friends for every individual enemy — but has it never occurred to you that you do not live among my friends? Miss Lynch, Miss Fuller, Miss Blackwell, Mrs Ellet — neither these nor any within their influence are my friends. Had you read my criticisms generally, you would see, too, how and why it is that the Channings — the Emerson and Hudson coterie — the Longfellow clique, one and all — the cabal of the “N. American Review” — you would see why all these, whom you know best, know me least and are my enemies. Do you not remember with how deep a sigh I said to you in Providence — “My heart is heavy, Helen, for I see that your friends are not my own.”? — But the cruel sentence in your letter would not — could not so deeply have wounded me, had my soul been first strengthened by those assurances of your love which I so wildly — so vainly — and, I now feel, so presumptuously entreated.” *ibid.*, 394. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵³ Whitman’s final unwillingness to marry Poe had more to do with her assessment of his character as a potential husband than with any interest on her part in challenging or questioning his poetic claims. See for example Whitman’s critical assessment of Poe’s work, Poe and His Critics, published after his death; Richards, “Poetic Attractions.” Karen Lystra, in her assessment of nineteenth-century love letters, has argued that young women tested their potential husbands’ character and prospects through a variety of courtship rituals. Ironically, throughout their courtship, Poe seems to have been testing Whitman, rather than vice versa; his anger at her for refusing to disbelieve negative accounts of him from such enemies as Elizabeth Ellet certainly reads like a testing of her love, and I suspect that Whitman perceived the test and made her decision not to marry him based on her own assessment of his character rather than on his accounts of his character. Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

In spite of the broken engagement Whitman worked to preserve Poe’s reputation after his death and, as Eliza Richards has put it, “successfully transformed herself into a shrine for Poe worshippers.” Interested in spiritualism, Whitman also claimed to communicate with and receive poetry from Poe’s spirit; Richards’ treatment of Whitman focuses on the centrality of poetry to spiritualist circles, the poet as receptive medium, and Whitman’s cultivation of a spiritual “twinsip” with Poe after his death. Richards, “Poetic Attractions,” 139-190, quote on 141; Silverman, Poe, 347-394.

⁴⁵⁴ Poe to Annie L. Richmond, New York, NY, [21 January 1849], in Letters, 2:417-420. Emphasis in original.

served as a combination of sister, mother, and love interest to Poe, who entertained fantasies of living with Muddy in a cozy domestic setting, with Annie nearby. Towards the end of his life, Poe also courted a past love, Elmira Shelton (née Royster), to whom he had been engaged before attending the University of Virginia, and who considered herself engaged to him at his death. Neither Richmond nor Shelton seem to have had any literary ambitions; like Virginia (and Muddy) both seemed willing to view Edgar as the brilliant but misunderstood poet he understood himself to be. After the scandal surrounding his relationship with Osgood and the failed engagement to Sarah Helen Whitman, Poe turned increasingly to women to manage his emotions for him; the poetry he wrote (“Ulalume”) during those last few years suggested his grief over Virginia’s death (a grief no doubt exacerbated by the earlier loss of his mother), his ambivalent feelings about the women around him, and his growing reliance on women like Muddy Clemm and Annie Richmond to serve as maternal or sisterly figures.

These less threatening women represented a more unmediated and emotionally absorbent audience, which allowed Poe to sink even more deeply into a kind of incoherent infantile emotionality, revealed by his letters; indeed, the boundaries between women seemed to break down as Poe sent his letters to and from Whitman to Nancy Richmond for her to read as well. One of Poe’s last letter to Muddy in 1849 suggests a breakdown of mental and even physical boundaries between himself and his mother-in-law. Ill or drunk, Poe wrote:

The very instant you get this, come to me. The joy of seeing you will almost compensate for our sorrows. We can but die together. It is no use to reason with me now; I must die I have no desire to live since I have done “Eureka.” I could accomplish nothing more. For your sake it would be sweet to live, but we must die together. You have been all in all to me, darling, ever beloved mother, and dearest, truest friend.

I was never really insane, except on occasions where my heart was touched.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁵ Poe to Maria Clemm, New York, NY [Philadelphia, PA], 7 July [1849], in *Letters*, 2:452. Emphasis in original. Several other notes to Muddy in July 1849 express Poe’s great longing to Muddy; in the last known

By the end of his life, it was clear that, to Poe, his ideal readers — of his literary work and of his own literary persona — were women. By asking Muddy to die with him, Poe in effect asked his most sympathetic and uncritical audience to accompany him to the shadowy next world.⁴⁵⁶

“WHAT I HERE PROPOUND IS TRUE: — THEREFORE IT CANNOT DIE”

As suggested by his letter to Muddy, Poe regarded Eureka (1848) as his crowning achievement, a statement of metaphysical principles, scientific truth in the form of a prose-poem. Prior to the publication of the volume in July 1848, Poe had presented the ideas in Eureka as a lengthy lecture, “The Universe,” first given in New York on February 3, 1848. Poe dedicated the volume to his ideal readers, addressing them as “the few who love me and whom I love . . . those who feel rather than . . . those who think . . . the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities.” The truth of the book lay, claimed Poe, in the beauty and the symmetry of its argument, rendering it, “if I be not urging too lofty a claim, [a] Poem.”⁴⁵⁷ Poe left its readers with specific and complex instructions on the text’s interpretation:

letter he wrote to Muddy in September 1849, his spirits seem to have lifted somewhat, and he speaks of a possible marriage, probably to Elmira Shelton, but his encouragements to her to “keep [her] spirits up” suggests a willed optimism rather than an unqualified hopefulness. Poe to Clemm, Richmond, VA, 18 September 1849, in Letters, 2:461.

⁴⁵⁶ Cf. Kennedy, Poe, Death, 112-113. During his courtship of Sarah Helen Whitman Poe also proclaimed himself more than willing to die with Whitman should their marriage exacerbate rather than heal Whitman’s heart condition. Poe wrote:

I would comfort you — soothe you — tranquilize you. My love — my faith — should instil into your bosom a praeternatural calm. You would rest from care — from all worldly agitation. You would get better, and finally well. And if not, Helen, — if not — if you died — then at least would I clasp your dear hand in death, and willingly — oh, joyfully — joyfully — joyfully — go down with you into the night of the Grave.

Poe to Sarah Helen Whitman, [Fordham, NY], 1 October 1848, in Letters, 2:390. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵⁷ Poe, Eureka, [8].

What I here propound is true: — therefore it cannot die: — or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will ‘rise again to the Life Everlasting. Nevertheless it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead.’⁴⁵⁸

Eureka is a nightmarish text juxtaposing scientific detail with poetical flights, astronomical jargon with bad puns (Aristotle becomes ‘Aries Tottle,’ Bacon becomes, simply, ‘Hog’),⁴⁵⁹ rational and measuring language with representations of unattainable infinity. In a typical passage, Poe asserted:

[A]s the divine intentions are accomplished — as less and still less remains to be accomplished — so — in the same ratio — should we expect to find an acceleration of the End: — and thus the philosophical mind will easily comprehend that the Divine designs in constituting the stars, advance mathematically to their fulfillment: — and more; it will readily give the advance a mathematical expression; it will decide that this advance is inversely proportional with the squares of the distances of all created things from the starting-point and goal of their creation.⁴⁶⁰

According to Poe, divine design blurred distinctions between cause and effect entirely, and the pleasure resulting from the contemplation of man’s creations could be measured in proportion to its approach to such perfection. Continued Poe,

The pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is in the ratio of the approach to this species of reciprocity. In the construction of plot, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one or other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is really, or practically, unattainable — but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God. (165)

The perfection of God’s Universe, as presented by Poe, however, carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. In Eureka’s concluding sentences, Poe described the ultimate dissolution of the boundaries between persons and between God and man:

Think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness—that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his

⁴⁵⁸ *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 163. Emphasis in original.

existence as that of Jehovah. In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life—Life—Life within Life—the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine.⁴⁶¹

Although Poe here proclaimed “all is Life—Life—Life within Life—” the closing image of Eureka is of apocalypse and death. Man’s “awfully triumphant” recognition of his existence as Jehovah’s fused such an ascendance with destruction, as the universe returned from its “abnormal” dispersion of matter into building-block ‘atoms’ to its “normal” absolute unity of matter. If Very’s primary goal was to bring to others the message of resurrection, based on God’s ability to rupture the boundaries of finite space and time, in Eureka and other boundary-breaking texts Poe presented such ruptures as being desirable but also inherently — and grandiosely — destructive. If fusion with God provided Jones Very both purpose and goal for creative activity, Poe’s prose-poem Eureka linked God’s creative power with an overriding vision of ultimate destruction as part of God’s ‘plot’ for the universe. Poe’s letter to Muddy suggested both a desire to fuse with a comforting presence and the identification of that boundary loss with annihilation.⁴⁶²

Poe’s instructions to his “few” true readers in the preface to Eureka suggest, again, that he believed himself truly understood by a limited number of readers identifiable by their adherence to intuitive “dream” rather than thought. Nevertheless, the instructions he included in his preface suggest his continuing interest in adding to that following. Readers who struggled through the statistics and scientific theories would also find a legitimization of

⁴⁶¹ *ibid.*, 197. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶² J. Gerald Kennedy reads Eureka as a long exercise in sublimation in which “Poe fastens upon lofty themes and vast perspectives to avoid immediate anxiety,” but also suggests that Poe wrote with a premonitory sense of his own death. Eliza Richards has pointed out that the oscillation between rational scientific discourse and sentimentality in Eureka collapses into a portrait of matter that is essentially emotional (consider the multiple inflections of the terms “attraction” and “repulsion”). This pattern — oscillation followed by the triumph of sentiment over rationality — echoes the pattern noted by Pahl and Person in the relationship between “The Raven” and “The Philosophy of Composition,” and even, arguably, in Poe’s final letter to Muddy, in which. Feeling overwhelms rational thought, strong emotion bursts through willed self-mastery, and the resulting fusion means, at one level, the loss of purpose (in “The Philosophy of Composition” rational analysis is defeated by the object being analyzed), and at another, annihilation, whether of the universe at large, as in Eureka, or of the individual self, as in Poe’s dream of fusion and death with Muddy. Kennedy, Poe, Death, esp. 209; Richards, “Poetic Attractions,” 76-84.

intuitive thinking which mocked the fathers of inductive and deductive thought. Using a typical device, in the early pages of Eureka Poe introduced a “letter” written by a philosopher in the year 2848 which poked fun at the limited reasoning capacities of his ancestors, claiming that they had “retard[ed] the progress of true Science, which makes its most important advances — as all History will show — by seemingly intuitive leaps.”⁴⁶³ Acceptance of intuitive thought required the rejection of ‘rational’ thinkers’ fascination with means; indeed, by Poe’s definition, by rejecting the conscious thought involved in the “dogmatizing philosophers”⁴⁶⁴ inductive or deductive logic, intuition itself obliterated any connection between means and end. Since the very processes of intuitive thought were mysterious and inexplicable, its ends could not be attributed reliably to any specific means.

A figment of Poe’s imagination, the letter-writer’s presence in the prose-poem existed to validate Poe’s belief in the lasting value of intuitive rather than inductive or deductive thought. Since, at the same time, Poe presented Eureka itself as an example of intuitive thinking, once again the game was rigged: theoretically, anyone who dismissed Poe’s literally outlandish metaphysical claims could be identified as merely a “Hog-ite” or a follower of the “Ram” (“Aries Tottle”) and not sufficiently appreciative of intuition. Poe’s preface directed the text to what he hoped would be a self-selected audience of sympathetic readers, ready to have their faith in intuitive thinking validated by a text that offered rationalized — literally — demonstrations of such thought. The philosophers of the future, suggested Poe, would duly appreciate him as a man whose critical and intellectual powers had exceeded his own time and anticipated the ‘right’ thinking of future generations.

Poe’s most comprehensive statement of his poetic and critical theory, “The Poetic Principle,” was published after his death in 1849. Based on lectures delivered in the last two

⁴⁶³ Poe, Eureka, 15-16.

⁴⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 16,

years of his life, the essay contained all the key elements of Poe's poetic theory: the carefully circumscribed emotional effect as the determinant of a poem's value; the critique of those who valued moral instruction over affective pleasure; the affinity of poetry and music based on their common indefiniteness; the virtues of brevity and its contribution to a true poem's necessary unity. Poe dismissed the epic form as too ponderous to be properly denoted poetry, suggesting instead that in the future, common sense would "prefer deciding upon a work of Art, rather by the impression it makes — by the effect it produces — than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of 'sustained effort' which had been found necessary in effecting the impression."⁴⁶⁵ Effect itself and not the effort put into the creation of that effect, was the truest measure of poetry. Work was subordinated to the results of that work. Praising Longfellow's poem "The Day is Done," (originally the "Proem" that served as preface to The Waif),⁴⁶⁶ Poe asserted that Longfellow's apparent effortless was, in fact, the result not of effort, but of intuition and receptivity, mental states that allowed the poet to access and speak in "the tone . . . which the mass of mankind would adopt."⁴⁶⁷ Ease came to those who already possessed ease. A "natural manner" could not be cultivated, and the best results come from writing with the "understanding" of the tone, and consequently, the response of the "mass of mankind."

Like Emerson's essays, "The Poetic Principle" was a work shaped by its author's publicly spoken performance, translated into writing and then into print. Poe seemed to echo Emerson, suggesting that the truest poet was the man whose natural speech would anticipate and confirm the best feelings of "the mass of mankind." By speaking, the poet magically spoke for all men. Yet in reality, Poe sought to reverse Emerson's fusion of

⁴⁶⁵ Poe, "The Poetic Principle," in Complete Poems and Selected Essays, 155.

⁴⁶⁶ In his review of The Waif Poe identified the "Proem" as being "professedly by the compiler." Poe, review of Waif, 696.

⁴⁶⁷ Poe, "Poetic Principle," 162.

mankind with the self, in a way that reveals some implicit egotism in Emerson's project. If Emerson's poet spoke the thoughts that ordinary men could not formulate into words, Poe worked to make ordinary men recognize his thoughts as theirs. The distinction is subtle but important and reveals a difference in emotional style. Certainly by 1849 Emerson had an audience, and knew he would be listened to;⁴⁶⁸ his journals also suggest that Emerson was comfortable with himself as his own best listener. Less self-confident than Emerson, Poe required an audience to re-present him to himself as both poet and critic.⁴⁶⁹ Ultimately, Poe's personal and professional anxieties drove him to try to make his audience over, to make them appreciate him. Consequently he needed to teach readers who and what to appreciate (himself and poetry like his) and how to register that appreciation (through emotional effect). But Poe became trapped between the two critical modes — critical rigor and valuation of intense emotional effect— that he used to promote his work.⁴⁷⁰

Poe's death in 1849 and his ill-advised decision to make Rufus Griswold his literary executor left Poe's life and work open to interpretation by a wide range of critics, well-wishers, and calumniators. The very circumstances of Poe's death are still debated; the most recent account of Poe's death adheres to the theory that Poe was seized by goons, kept intoxicated, and "voted" to death during elections in Baltimore.⁴⁷¹ Eliza Richards has noted that a number of Poe's female colleagues believed that he was transmitting poetry to them from beyond the grave. I am less concerned in this chapter with the circumstances surrounding his death, or with negotiating the vagaries of his posthumous reputation.

⁴⁶⁸ William Charvat, Emerson's American Lecture Engagements: A Chronological List (New York: New York Public Library, 1961); Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," American Historical Review 92, no. 3 (June 1987): 597-620.

;" Wilson, Figures of Speech, 169-173.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Richards, "Poetic Attractions."

⁴⁷⁰ Pahl, "De-composing"

⁴⁷¹ John Evangelist Michael, Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

Instead, I would refer to Longfellow's stunningly ironic portrayal of Poe in his novel Kavanagh as "H. Adolphus Hawkins," a Byronic dandy who adored one of the novel's heroines, who wrote "sad, desponding, perhaps slightly morbid" poetry, and "imagined that it was impossible for any woman to look upon him and not love him,"⁴⁷² when, "finding it impossible . . . to look upon Miss Vaughan as a beautiful statue, he made one or two attempts, but in vain, to throw himself away on unworthy objects," Hawkins died, "two elderly maidens went into mourning simultaneously, each thinking herself engaged to him; and suddenly went out of it again, mutually indignant with each other, and mortified with themselves."⁴⁷³ Such was the reputation Poe managed to accrue for himself as a poet, a reputation he himself might have enjoyed granting to some unfortunate Frogpondian.

Yet that reputation, reflected in prose by the most popular poet of Poe's time, reflected a figuration of the male poet both Longfellow and Poe had helped bring into being: Longfellow, as I will suggest, by presenting himself as a spontaneously composing poet; and Poe, by repeatedly proclaiming the essence of poetry to be ineffable, and by working to establish himself as the principle steward of that ineffability. Poe's dream of establishing himself as an objective source of cultural authority was ultimately undercut by his inability to manage his own emotional responses to any and all stimuli, responses he himself had sanctioned as the measure of the highest poetic sensibility. By collapsing the boundary between poetic production and consumption, Poe's characterization of poetic sensibility had also undermined his vision of rational criticism as the salvation of American poetry and American literature in general. C. Auguste Dupin, the man whose mind apparently

⁴⁷² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Kavanagh, in Prose Works, 2 vols., (Boston: Houghton, 1880), 2:81-82.

⁴⁷³ *ibid.*, 2:178.

effortlessly balanced conscious and intuitive thought, was, after all, only a figment of Poe's imagination.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁴ In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (1841) Poe defined the mind of the "analyst" as partaking of both intuition and conscious thought: "his results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition. The faculty in question is possibly much invigorated by mathematical study, and especially by that highest branch of it which, unjustly, and merely on account of its retrograde operations, has been called, as if par excellence, analysis. Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyse." Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Unabridged, 656.

Chapter 5

“True Beauty in Utility”: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Poetic Labor

In the summer of 1838, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, then the Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard, opened his public lectures on “Literature and Literary Life” with this introduction:

I propose no connected history of any one age or nation, but the Lives and Writings of a few Literary men, who afford illustrious examples. Who being dead, yet speak. Whose voices are of encouragement, — consolation — warning.

In doing this, I shall throughout consider Literature as an Art, and Authors as Artists. Think not that thus I degrade the Poet’s high vocation into a base handicraft. Truth degradens not, but ennobles. It was with no sarcastic meaning that the Icelanders of old called the Poet a Rhyme-Smith. He is God’s workman; and amid the smoke and sparks about him, on his sound anvil forges the broad shield of Truth and weapons of her warfare.⁴⁷⁵

Several years later, in October 1840, Longfellow wrote to his father: “There will be a kind of Ballad on a Blacksmith in the next Knickerbocker, which you may consider, if you please, as a song in praise of your ancestors at Newbury.”⁴⁷⁶ The ballad was “The Village Blacksmith,” composed earlier that month; it concluded:

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou hast taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
Each burning deed and thought.⁴⁷⁷

This stanza clearly drew on the imagery Longfellow had used in the earlier lecture; yet, Longfellow’s portrayal of the smith had shifted significantly over those years. In the lecture, the poet was identified as a Rhyme-Smith, actively forging weapons for the service of Truth

⁴⁷⁵ The original contains the phrase “the sword that will win [illegible] in the field” immediately following “the broad shield of truth,” and struck out. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, [Lecture on Literature], Cambridge, MA, [May] 1838, 7-8, in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Hereafter I will refer to this collection as Longfellow Papers.

⁴⁷⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Cambridge, MA, 25 October 1840, in Letters, 2:259. According to Hilen, the first Stephen Longfellow was a blacksmith in Newbury. See Hilen, Letters, 2:260n2.

⁴⁷⁷ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Village Blacksmith,” in Poetical Works, 1:66.

on his “sound anvil;” he is a man engaged in useful labor. While Longfellow distinguished between the poet’s labor at his “high vocation” and the “base handicraft” of the smith, the analogy between the poet and smith hinged on conscious effort and on the service provided by the tangible products of that labor. Poems were “forged” objects, artifacts consciously produced by “God’s workman,” the Rhyme-Smith.

By 1840, however, Longfellow no longer explicitly identified the poet’s labor with the active work of the blacksmith. Having observed (or imagined) a blacksmith at work, Longfellow organized his impressions into a poem which presented a particular interpretation of those perceptions — the “moral” of the poem — for the instruction of its readers. The analogy between the poet and smith turned only on the abstract moral lesson the fact of each man’s labor could provide to others. Urging readers to learn from and imitate the blacksmith’s effort, “The Village Blacksmith” de-emphasized the actual products of the blacksmith’s labor. The products of the drive the poem encouraged would be the “burning deeds and thoughts” of the readers themselves — as well as their “fortunes.” The poet no longer appeared as a Rhyme-Smith forging his works on a “sounding anvil;” instead, he served as an observer, an instructor, a nuder of others rather than a creator of a tangible product. When Longfellow stated that the purpose of his summer lectures was to present “voices. . . of encouragement, — consolation — warning,” he also described the role he hoped to play, as professor and poet alike.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. Edgar Allan Poe’s critical comments on the poem: “In [‘The Village Blacksmith’] we have the beauty of simple-mindedness as a genuine thesis; and this thesis is inimitably handled until the concluding stanza, where the spirit of legitimate poesy is aggrieved in the pointed antithetical deduction of a moral from what has gone before.” [emphasis his] Poe, review of Ballads and Other Poems, in Works, 11:77. Cf. Joseph Masheck, “Professor Longfellow and the Blacksmith,” Annals of Scholarship 10, no. 3/4 (1993): 345-361; John Stephen Martin, “Longfellow’s ‘The Village Blacksmith’ and the Changing Image of Labour,” in Essays in Honour of Erwin Stürzl on His Sixtieth Birthday, ed. James Hogg et al. (Salzburg: Inst. für eng. Sprache & Lit., 1980), 412-423. For a useful discussion of the separation enacted (here, in Longfellow’s poem) between a laboring villager and the writer who observes and records his activities, see Sweeting, Reading Houses, 173-180, 183. Sweeting’s discussion focuses on Irving’s private correspondence as well as his Sketch-Book and on James

With that statement, Longfellow put forth a particular understanding of the poet's broader cultural responsibilities along with a less determinate conception of the poet's labor. Longfellow's early letters and belletristic productions show him cultivating a persona — The Poet — that came to be a professional identification for the young man; his earliest publications in the United States Literary Gazette during the 1820s were both examples and results of his preparation for that role. As Longfellow developed this essentially cerebral conception of his desired profession, his prose and poetry often featured images of men engaged in active physical labor. By identifying the visibly hard-working blacksmith with the less recognizably working poet, Longfellow attempted to assert the validity and the utility of creative mental labor. Yet Longfellow undercut those gestures by presenting himself as a spontaneously composing poet, and his poems as products of inexplicable forces. For Longfellow, the title of "poet" was a kind of dream identity, something to be wished for and worked towards, but also to be disclaimed even as it was achieved or embodied.

Fenimore Cooper's daughter Susan Cooper's private and published writings, specifically, her novel Rural Hours; describing both turning their observations of picturesque locals into literary production, Sweeting does not discuss the gendered implications of the relative passivity of this creative approach.

⁴⁷⁸ As William Charvat has noted, in his creative work Longfellow always functioned as a teacher, presenting moral instruction and inspiration in poetry and prose alike. Modern critics have criticized Longfellow for his heavy-handed moralism, his vapidness, his sentimentality. Others have offered more sensitive readings of his work that locate his poems in their historical and cultural context. For my purposes, Longfellow is of importance precisely because of his apparently anomalous status as a male poet who was able to approximate a livelihood through his poetry. Charvat, Profession of Authorship, 100-167. More recent treatments of Longfellow have sought to explain Longfellow's fall into critical disfavor in the twentieth century; see for example Eric Haralson, "Mars in Petticoats: Longfellow and Sentimental Masculinity," Nineteenth-Century Literature 51, no. 3 (December 1996): 326-355; Dana Gioia, "Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism," The Columbia History of American Poetry, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 64-96. Others have focused on locating Longfellow within the political and economic circumstances of his own time; see Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "El Gran Poeta Longfellow and a Psalm of Exile," American Literary History, 10, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 395-427; Kenneth Hovey, "'A Psalm of Life' Reconsidered: The Dialogue of Western Literature and Monologue of Young America," ATQ n.s. 1, 1 (March 1987): 3-19; Hans-Joachim Lang and Fritz Fleischmann, "'All This Beauty, All This Grace': Longfellow's 'The Building of the Ship' and Alexander Slidell Mackenzie's 'Ship,'" New England Quarterly 56, no. 1 (March 1981): 104-118; Robert A. Ferguson, "Longfellow's Political Fears: Civic Authority and the Role of the Artist in Hiawatha and Miles Standish," American Literature, 50, no. 2 (May 1978): 187-215; Janet Harris, "Longfellow's Poems on Slavery," Colby Library Quarterly, 14, no. 2 (June 1978): 84-92; Cecelia Tichi, "Longfellow's Motives for the Structure of Hiawatha," American Literature 42, no. 4 (January 1971): 548-553; Michael Zimmerman, "War and Peace: Longfellow's 'The Occultation of Orion,'" American Literature, 38, no. 4 (January 1967): 540-546.

Longfellow's poems were the products of a mind Longfellow had worked to shape in accordance with conventional middle-class patterns of thought and with a melange of Romantic and Common-Sense conceptions of mission. The active effort he urged on his readers in such poems as "Psalm of Life" and "Excelsior" involved the replication of patterns of thought — striving, action, resolution — rather than the forging of tangible products. By urging these patterns of thought on readers, Longfellow echoed an emerging body of prescriptive literature directed towards young men and offered his own achievement of middle-class manhood as a model for others to emulate. Yet throughout his poetry and prose Longfellow would incorporate images of idleness and passive waiting that lent a darker tone to the "up and doing" Longfellow urged on his readers: activity, however defined, was to be pursued as an end in itself, as a form of mental and emotional discipline, rather than a means to any guaranteed end. The "endless toil and endeavor" Longfellow urged on his readers was effort for its own sake, without a specific goal — literally, end-less.⁴⁷⁹

Longfellow's poetic career demonstrated and ratified the separation of activity from a stated end. This disconnection was expressed remarkably in Longfellow's autobiographical novel *Hyperion* (1839), in which the protagonist Paul Flemming dedicates himself to an

⁴⁷⁹ In his recent article "Mars in Petticoats," Eric Haralson argues that the passive endurance and suffering portrayed in Longfellow's poems reflected Longfellow's "advocacy of a cross-gendered sensibility"; noting, correctly, that these were virtues ascribed primarily to women, and that such virtues went against standard prescriptions for masculinity, Haralson correctly points to others' characterizations of Longfellow's work as feminine or feminized. In another recent article, Kirsten Silva Gruesz has discussed the complex gender meanings assigned to grief and domestic space in Longfellow's poetry. Haralson's argument that this perceived feminine/feminized character contributed to Longfellow's de-canonization in the twentieth century is well-taken. I would add, though, that Longfellow's own understanding of what it meant to be a "man of letters" must also be taken into consideration. How he understood himself as a man was closely linked to his understanding of himself as an aspiring poet; if Longfellow is unique among nineteenth-century American poets in that he was able to earn a semblance of a living through his poetry, he is also then unique because, arguably, he was a man who could claim economic success in a field considered unable to provide a man with a livelihood. Regardless of the "masculine" and "feminine" meanings assigned to his work and thought, the fact remains that Longfellow understood himself to be a man engaged in the defense of poetry as a useful as well as decorative art. Haralson, "Mars in Petticoats;" Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "Feeling for the Fireside: Longfellow, Lynch, and the Topography of Poetic Power," in *Sentimental Men*, 43-63. For other treatments of multiple conceptions of masculinity in relationship to authorship in the nineteenth century, cf. Ellison, "Gender of Transparency;" Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*; Leverenz, *Manhood*.

essentially obscure goal, and through which Longfellow exorcised his own emotional demons and resolved to achieve a particular goal, left unsaid but not undone: the publication of Voices in the Night, his first collection of poetry, later that same year. That Flemming lacked a specific goal suggests the challenges Longfellow faced in claiming the production of poetry to be a worthwhile goal for a man to pursue. From his “Lay Monk” essays, published in 1824 and 1825, through the publication of his final novel, Kavanagh, in 1849, Longfellow’s conception of the poet’s work and mission shifted from his characterization of the “strong” in his essay “Poets and Common-sense Men,” (1825) to the contrast between the stirring and manly work of Sir Philip Sidney and the solace offered by “humbler” poets, a tension portrayed in Longfellow’s 1844 poem “The Day is Done.” Longfellow’s successful collections of “psalms” in the 1840s suggest that he had settled the issue by resolving to produce poetry intended to carry moral uplift and instruction. Yet, in Kavanagh, the figure of Churchill, a schoolmaster always shown actively not writing his dreamed-of romance, suggests that in 1849 Longfellow felt his negotiation of the cultural burdens carried by the man of letters to remain, at some level, unfinished, inconclusive.

Indeed, Longfellow’s response to the question of poetry as a legitimate pursuit for a man was to leave it unresolved: throughout his work, his Poet appeared as a figure uniquely receptive to inspiring emotions and perceptions, or the poems themselves were presented as the products of inexplicable forces. Longfellow’s poetry and prose alike showed an uneasy balance between the elevated and elevating labor of the poet and the practical and visibly productive effort of the manly laborer. Even as Longfellow worked to establish an understanding of the poet’s labor as at once mental and manly, producing objects that were both useful and beautiful, material and ethereal, his figure of the Poet — and Longfellow

himself as a poet — ultimately obscured the connection between conscious effort and literary production.

MAKING THE POET

In the summer of 1825, a seventeen-year-old Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote to Theophilus Parsons, Jr., then editor of the United States Literary Gazette, to inquire about the possibility of an editorial position at the Boston-based Gazette. Longfellow, having informed his father that he “eagerly aspire[d] after future eminence in literature,”⁴⁸⁰ had just persuaded his father to allow him to spend the year after his graduation from Bowdoin studying languages and literature at Harvard. Henry offered the proposed year of study at Cambridge as a compromise between his desire for “future eminence in letters” and his father’s insistence that he study law towards earning a competence:

Let me reside one year at Cambridge, — let me study Belles Lettres, — and after that time has elapsed it will not require a spirit of prophecy to predict with some degree of certainty what kind of a figure I commence to make in the literary world. If I fail here, there is still time enough for the study of a profession: — and whilst residing at Cambridge I shall have acquired the knowledge of some foreign languages which will be, through life, of the greatest utility.⁴⁸¹

Stephen Longfellow’s response to Henry’s bid for a year of postgraduate education was guarded, but ultimately indulgent. Acknowledging the allure of a literary life, Stephen also pointed out the nation’s economic inhospitability to “merely literary” men, and noted that since Henry did not have a patrimony capable of sustaining him, he would have to enter a profession that would “afford . . . subsistence as well as reputation.”⁴⁸² Having finally received permission for his year at Harvard, Longfellow set about realizing another key

⁴⁸⁰ Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Brunswick, ME, 5 December 1824, in Letters, 1:94.

⁴⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁸² Stephen Longfellow to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington, DC, 26 Dec 1824, Longfellow Papers.

aspect of his plan to become a man of letters; he wrote Parsons, “I wish to breathe a little while a literary atmosphere, and as I shall probably not enter upon the study of my profession for a year, I wish to be connected in some way with a literary periodical work.”⁴⁸³ A paying affiliation with a literary journal would prove to Stephen Longfellow and to Henry himself the economic viability of a career in letters.

By that summer, Theophilus Parsons had published a number of Longfellow’s early poems and a series of his literary essays, under the pseudonym “The Lay Monk.” A year earlier, when Longfellow first began to submit pieces to the Gazette, Parsons had encouraged his efforts, assuring the young man that “[a]n exuberance of blossoms is a good promise for fruit — & as many of your flowers as you can spare, I shall be glad to exhibit.”⁴⁸⁴ Parsons’ response to Longfellow’s inquiry about a paid position, however, was explicitly discouraging if not insulting. Longfellow would not be able to earn any significant money from work for the Gazette, Parsons replied, adding: “I should think it would be exceedingly difficult for any one to earn a living by literature just now. There are very few in our country who actually provide for themselves in the way except newspaper editors. . . . You can easily earn a little any where, but I think you will find it difficult to earn much as a mere scholar.”⁴⁸⁵ Literature was not a profession; literary promise was not to be confused with earning potential. Parsons shared Stephen Longfellow’s pessimistic view of the economic viability of a career in letters; both counseled the young man to prepare for a more traditional profession.

The next paragraph of Parsons’ letter, however, was considerably more damning:

⁴⁸³ Longfellow to Theophilus Parsons, Jr., Portland, ME, 13 August 1825, in Letters, 1:134-135.

⁴⁸⁴ Theophilus Parsons to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Taunton, MA, 16 August 1824, Longfellow Papers. Much of this letter is published in Lawrance Thompson, Young Longfellow, 1807-1843, (New York: Octagon Books, 1938), 75-77.

⁴⁸⁵ Parsons to Longfellow, 16 August 1824.

You may rely upon it, my dear Sir, that the kind of love of letters which you & all men of taste & talent have at a certain age, — is proper to an unripened intellect. . . . There is a stage in the progress of a bright mind, when the boy has thrown away his tops and marbles, but the young man is still so far a child as to value things more by their elegance and power of amusing, than by their usefulness. He plays with his books, — and thinks he is working when he is only playing hard. At this stage, he thinks it more worthy and becoming him. . . . to busy himself with with [sic] his books, like like [sic] a “Lay-Monk,” — and be refined, delicate, and unconnected with passing events, — than to plunge at once into the business of life & help it along vigorously, & fix upon oneself its yoke.⁴⁸⁶

Parsons implied that Longfellow was actually in a late phase of childhood where, having outgrown marbles and tops, books became his playthings. Moreover, Parsons implied, Longfellow’s belief that such “work” could be the legitimate activity of an adult was itself childish illusion, regardless of how “hard” the work seemed to be. Longfellow’s dream of a literary life was, implied Parsons, merely the sign of an “unripened intellect,” a phase passed through by “all men of taste and talent.” The young man who “[thought] it more worthy and becoming . . . [to] be refined, delicate, and unconnected with passing events,” suggested Parsons, failed to achieve adult manhood. By refusing to “plunge at once into the business of life & help it along vigorously,” a would-be man of letters in effect rejected the responsibilities associated with adult manhood.

Parsons’ advice to Longfellow was harsh:

Get through your present delusion as soon as you can, & then you will see how wise it will be for you to devote yourself to the law. In one year you can by obstinate perseverance create a love of labour and a relish for legal pursuits, which will not only secure success, but, allowing for poor human nature, win it with [letter torn] pain or sacrifice[.]⁴⁸⁷

Parsons followed this stinging paragraph with a bit of biographical information: “Lest you should oppose my principles to my practice, I may as well say, that I became an editor, because I had then just married, & did not earn by the law so much money as I needed. As

⁴⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ Parsons to Longfellow, 16 August 1825.

soon as I could I dropt [sic] the Gazette.”⁴⁸⁸ Parsons’ bitterness can be inferred most strongly from his syntactical difficulties in the line referring to the “Lay Monk” essays. The jab at Longfellow’s pseudonym, coming from a man who had written several months earlier that “[p]arts of your Lay Monastery are extremely beautiful, & the whole is decidedly good,”⁴⁸⁹ must have cut sharply. Beautiful as the essays were, they were in the end ornamental, the products of leisured thought, and they showed no mark of the yoke of duty. Parsons must have cherished similar literary dreams, and may have taken some pleasure in deflating the younger man’s dreams; meanwhile, Parsons was practicing law in Taunton in addition to his editorial work and no doubt struggling with competing demands on his time and energy.⁴⁹⁰ Longfellow’s response — if there was one — to Parsons’ August 1825 letter is unrecovered.

Parsons’ letter must have come as a surprise to Longfellow, who had used the Gazette as a kind of forum for his ideas about letters — and poetry in particular — as a vocation. His “Lay Monk” essays, in particular, show Longfellow trying his hand at identifying the poet, his labor, and the position the poet/author could hold in an emerging American culture. In these early essays, Longfellow also put forth a definition of American literary culture that would permit him — and other would-be men of letters — to earn a livelihood through literary effort. Longfellow worked to formulate an authorial persona that

⁴⁸⁸ *ibid.* According to Mott, however, Theophilus Parsons took over the editorship from Carter in spring 1825 and served as editor until the Gazette merged with William Cullen Bryant’s New-York Review and Atheneum Magazine in October 1826 to form the United States Review and Literary Gazette, published simultaneously in New York and Boston, with Bryant as the New York editor and Charles Folsom as the Boston editor. Mott, History of American Magazines, 1741-1850, 1:331-333.

⁴⁸⁹ Parsons to Longfellow, Taunton, MA, 15 Feb 1825, Longfellow Papers.

⁴⁹⁰ Mott, History, 1741-1850, 332; C[h]arles F[airman], “Theophilus Parsons,” Dictionary of American Biography, ed. Dumas Malone, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, for the American Council of Learned Societies, 1962, vol. 7, pt. 2, 273-274. Ironically, in 1840 he would write to Longfellow thanking him for “your kind present [Voices of the Night] & kinder letter. . . . [Your Poems] are beautiful, some of them exceedingly so. The two first, — & particularly the second — contain passages of the truest poetry.” Parsons to Longfellow, [Cambridge, MA?], 3 Feb 1840, Longfellow Papers.

would reconcile his dreams of literary eminence with his need to earn a living, and, in a broader sense, his need to assure those around him of his attainment of manhood.

In the second essay of the series, “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” published in the 1 April 1825 Gazette’s, Longfellow asserted that the “spirit of activity” which pervaded the country would, through exercise and cultivation, unfold into a national literature. What hindered that unfolding, Longfellow asserted, was the economics of literature, particularly of poetry, in the United States. The primary reason for poetry’s lack of progress in America was “the want of that exclusive cultivation, which so noble a branch of literature would seem to require,” a lack Longfellow described in explicitly vocational terms: “Few here think of relying upon the exertion of poetic talent for a livelihood, and of making literature the profession of life. The bar or the pulpit claims the greater part of the scholar’s existence, and poetry is made its pastime.”⁴⁹¹ “[H]onourable patronage,” argued Longfellow, would free the poet of the necessity of earning his living through the pursuit of a separate profession. Longfellow asserted:

[T]here is no intellectual occupation, which requires such high, peculiar, and exclusive qualifications as the labours of the poet. . . . When the scholar can go on his way prosperous and rejoicing, and poetry no longer holds with us a ‘bootless reed,’ minds of the finest mould will be active to invigorate our literature, and to honour the country, which in its turn shall honour them.”⁴⁹²

By freeing the aspiring poet’s mind from the lesser mental work required by the law and the ministry, patronage would pave the way for the strong national literature Longfellow believed his country was capable of producing.

In the fourth “Lay Monastery” essay, “Poets and Common-sense Men,” printed in the June 1, 1825 number, Longfellow explicated the dual roles that he hoped to fill. The

⁴⁹¹Longfellow, “Literary Spirit,” 27.

⁴⁹² *ibid.*

entire first paragraph of the essay contained a complex and evasive ‘definition’ of the poet and his work that underscored the unidentifiability of the poet’s mental powers:

There is something of mystery in the poetical character. We may talk as we will of gifted minds, and inspired thoughts, and holy feelings, — and may see in each other the strong light of some intellectual feature throwing a deep shadow over the rest of the mind,— and yet we are not a step nearer the solution than before. We may say, that poets hold secret communion with nature, — that they enter within the veil of her temple, and come out to reveal what other eyes have not seen nor other ears heard; aye, that poets themselves have their altars, their worshippers, their devotees, — and yet there is a mystery. We may say, that the same temperament, which prompts a man to be a poet, prompts him to love, — that the same enthusiasm in thought and sensibility in feeling are working out their different ends in each; — but the silent miracle is still going on within those thoughts and feelings, we know not how.⁴⁹³

In this passage, each attempt at clarification of the poet’s mental processes was countered by a “yet” statement that undercut that identification. At the same time, even the more rational assessments of poetic activity obscured rather than specified the nature of the high labor involved in poetic creation. To claim that poets were men with “gifted minds, and inspired thoughts, and holy feelings” cloaked the actual writing processes of any given poet; to assert that “poets hold secret communion with nature. . . enter within the veil of her temple. . . come out to reveal what other eyes have not seen nor other ears heard” was certainly to uphold the popular image of the Romantic poet, but provided no insight into how the poet went about communicating the results of that “secret communion” to other eyes and ears.

Longfellow went on to characterize poets as men with strong imaginations and powerful, if not overwhelming, emotional sensibilities. Although the emotions the poet experienced were universal, the poet was more highly strung than the ordinary man; the resulting “want of unison . . . [was] the fountain of the poet’s proverbial unhappiness — full

⁴⁹³[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow], “Lay Monk,” “Poets and Common-sense Men,” United States Literary Gazette (1 June 1825): 182-186, reprinted in Thomas E. Bellavance, “The Periodical Prose of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1970, 165. Emphasis added.

even to overflowing.”⁴⁹⁴ The “poetical temperament,” continued Longfellow, “unfits men in some degree for life’s ordinary scenes and duties . . . [and] lays them open to embarrassments[.]”⁴⁹⁵ If Longfellow’s portrayal of the overly emotional poet echoed Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,”⁴⁹⁶ Longfellow’s model of rational intellect, the Common-sense Man, represented the intellectual control that Wordsworth, among others, including Stephen Longfellow, attributed to the ideal poet.⁴⁹⁷ The second half of the essay opened with a blunt dismissal of the Poet: “These are poets; and common-sense men differ widely from them.”⁴⁹⁸ Longfellow’s Common-sense Man was the product of a carefully managed education; though such a man might not have “the superiority of one intellectual faculty, which we call genius,” Longfellow stated,

yet there is within his mind, that beautiful proportion and exact balance of its powers, which, from their several relations, produce a harmonious whole. This fits him for the business of life, and for its enjoyment; for keeping that just equipoise of his passive impressions and active principles which will keep his sympathies from ending in feeling.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.*.

⁴⁹⁶ Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1:870-871.

⁴⁹⁷ A month after granting his son permission to study at Harvard, Stephen Longfellow wrote to Henry about several poems the young man had had published. Noting that Henry’s productions “do you great credit . . . [and] indicate that you possess talents which if properly cultivated will make you highly respectable,” Stephen asserted, “It is necessary however that the ardor of youth should be checked,” and urged his son to devote more time to revision of his poems:

You should make it a rule never to send an effusion of the moment to the press, till the the [sic] ardor & feelings, with which it was written, have subsided. As those who read cannot be supposed to possess the feelings produced in the mind of the writer, by the efforts which are [used? illegible] in preparing a paper, every author should lay his production aside, till all the emotions with which it was produced have subsided. He should then take it up, not as a work of his own, but as the production of a stranger, & and [sic] should examine & criticise it, with the same feelings & severity that he would the work of another. He will thus be able to discover his own defects, and judge in some degree with the feelings & impartiality of a stranger. . . . Your effusions have generally been sent to the press immediately after they were written, & without allowing time for reflection & examination. . . . I hope you will not be wounded by these observations, they proceed from the purest motives and the kindest feelings, and I hope will produce beneficial effects.

Stephen Longfellow to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington, DC, 28 Jan 1825, Longfellow Papers.

⁴⁹⁸ Longfellow, “Poets and Common-sense Men,” 168.

⁴⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 170. Emphasis added.

If Longfellow's description of the cultivated Common-sense Man reflected the Unitarian ideal of self-culture, with its roots in Scottish common-sense aesthetics, it also echoed the Romantic tension between the passively receiving and actively making mind. The cultivated "just equipoise" and "exact balance" of the mind also mirrored the growing body of prescriptive "success" literature directed towards middle-class young men during the antebellum decades. Such literature urged various forms of intellectual and mental effort as a means of controlling the emotions and resisting the temptations which would ultimately undo the young man both mentally and physically. By opposing the Poet to the Common-sense Man, Longfellow echoed the common wisdom that unmastered passion would unfit a young man for the life of business as well as for the business of life. Like the successfully "self-made" men who populated the advice literature, the Common-sense Man cultivated the intellectual apparatus needed for self-mastery ; the contrast between this figure and the highly strung poet who died poor is sharply drawn.⁵⁰⁰

Yet, in his treatment of the Poet, Longfellow offered a secondary dichotomy between the "strong" and the "weak" poet, describing the "strong" poet as an essentially masculine figure whose vigor and energy drove him to create original images.⁵⁰¹ "Strong" poets were "those who have within them the light of genius;" Longfellow elaborated:

From the strong minds of [these poets], spring up vigorous conceptions, which have not been nurtured with a careful, overweening prudence. These are men who hold,

⁵⁰⁰ According to Longfellow, "the poetical temperament . . . gives many a one occasion to say of the dead son of song, as a forgotten French poet once sung over the grave of the unfortunate Malherbe, —

*Il est mort pauvre, — et moi,
Je vis comme il est mort.*"

ibid., 172.

⁵⁰¹ Harold Bloom's terminology in his *Anxiety of Influence* strangely echoes Longfellow's terminology here; ironically, Longfellow's "strong" poets, unlike Bloom's, seem happily unaware of their lack of priority, where his "weak" poets are the ones who struggle with established models and ideas, and are doomed to produce imitative poetry that falls short of the transhistorical universality Longfellow attributes to his "strong" poets. Read in light of Bloom's work, Longfellow's strong poets almost seem like children, capable of believing that what they had discovered or created is wholly unique and without influence. Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

and who are to exercise, the mighty prerogative of genius. They have minds full of energy and high aspirings, — trying hazardous flights, and sustaining themselves long & gloriously. The poetical vein grows excellent by use; and these have shown, from an early and first beginning, the germs of that power, which, by exercise, gave them in its maturity, a wide sway in the intellectual world.⁵⁰²

Such poets' masculinity would manifest itself in the poetical results of their "vigorous conceptions" and "high aspirings." If the strong poets were "the suns of their spheres, — stars of the first magnitude, — fixed, and shining with a steady brightness," the "weak" poets, in contrast, were "but satellites, changing and vacillating in their orbits, with a pale and borrowed light."⁵⁰³ "Weak" poets were "poets of the second class, — poets who are afraid to follow the waywardness of fancy, but in the spirit of weighing and measuring, give all diligence to suit their writings to the spirit of the age they live in, and bring down every thing to an unambitious level."⁵⁰⁴ Like the moon, the weak poet could not generate his own light, and could only reflect the light emanating from the strong poet. And, unlike the strong poets, those "true poets [who] embody and give form to the fine thoughts which are passing through their minds," these weaker poets, "only animate[d] those forms, which have long existed in every one's fancy."⁵⁰⁵ Lacking the capacity or the courage to "follow the waywardness of fancy," weak poets instead "[grew] old in aping the ways of better writers, — the faults and follies of genius."⁵⁰⁶ To borrow Coleridge's terms, the weak poets were Fancy to the strong poets' Imagination.

And yet, by Longfellow's characterization, if the strong poets "ha[d] within them the light of original genius," they seemed to emanate that light rather than create it. The one direct connection Longfellow drew between the strong poet and his poetry was a passive

⁵⁰² Longfellow, "Poets and Common-sense Men," 167.

⁵⁰³ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 167-168.

⁵⁰⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ *ibid.*

statement that actually reflected absence of effort: “From the strong minds of the [poet], spring up vigorous conceptions, which have not been nurtured with a careful, overweening prudence.” Of the two types, the strong poet actually put forth the least mental effort; the weaker poets were the ones who “in the spirit of weighing and measuring” (a phrase that suggests an overly conscious attentiveness to the demands of meter and form), “g[a]ve all diligence to suit their writings to the spirit of the age they live in” and indulged in “constant effort to familiarize the mind to a preciseness of thought and a nicety of style.”⁵⁰⁷ Their efforts, ironically, ensured the limited value of their poetry, which, according to Longfellow, was merely occasional and failed to achieve transhistorical value. The strong poet, in contrast, was driven by inspiration to create original images — which, nevertheless, appeared not to be consciously produced or labored over by him.

The tension between these two poetic types, as well as the tension between the Poet and the Common-sense Man, reflected Longfellow’s own uncertainty about the feasibility of his dream of supporting himself as a man of letters. Having stated in an earlier “Lay Monk” essay that “there is no intellectual occupation, which requires such high, peculiar, and exclusive qualifications as the labours of the poet,”⁵⁰⁸ Longfellow presented in “Poets and Common-sense Man” ambiguous figures of poets at work. Though Longfellow seemed to favor the energetic, manly model of the strong poet, his portrayal of the two poetic types made the strong poet, as vocational model, a contradiction in terms: how prepare to become a poet without falling into the labored imitativeness of the weak poet? How experience the strong emotions of the Poet without losing the balance and mental order of the Common-sense Man?

⁵⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁰⁸ [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow], “Lay Monk,” “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” United States Literary Gazette 2, no. 1(1 April 1825): 27.

Longfellow understood poetic labor to be a complex mixture of passive and active thought, and the poet to be a man whose mental sensibilities gave him access to the higher knowledge involved in the production of poetry. The emotional expressions of the poet could be ordered by reason or by the “moral sense” posited by Common-Sense aesthetic theory into verse form; in this way, the well-ordered mind could at once present strong emotions and contain them by putting them into deliberate form. Yet, at the heart of this collaboration between personae, or faculties, lay a persistent problem: the passivity and the dreaminess ascribed to the poet smacked of idleness. By leaving the essay unconcluded, Longfellow avoided the logical conclusion implied by the form of the essay, that is, the superiority of the Common-sense Man as a model to emulate, allowed for his own continuing oscillation between the two figures.

These early essays showed Longfellow playing with authorial identities, working out a sense of literary vocation that was subtly gendered through its associations with the rational common-sense man, the man of sensibility, and the Romantic poet. Additionally, the pseudonym “Lay Monk” and the series’ collective title “Lay Monastery” are significant in themselves. If the term ‘lay monk’ suggests a secular contemplative in cloister, Longfellow in the series’ introductory essay, “The Author,” appeared as a Unitarian monk, in whom nature had “touched. . . [a] chord of simple poetic feeling,” happily dreaming in the solitude of his “silent cloister,”⁵⁰⁹ an aged uncle’s antiquated library. Affirming his faith in aesthetic and intellectual self-culture, this ‘Author’ presented himself as an adherent of self-culture and as an instrument for others’ self-culture. This monk offered the products of his contemplations to the Gazette’s readers in order to facilitate their own self-improvement;

⁵⁰⁹[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow], “Lay Monk,” “The Author,” United States Literary Gazette 1(1 March 1825), 348.

withdrawal into a cloister was, ultimately, a means of preparing himself to be of better service to readers.⁵¹⁰

For the would-be man of letters, the Poet and the Common-Sense Man were crucial yet difficult figures to reconcile. Wanting to lay claim to the “high, peculiar, and exclusive qualifications” he ascribed to poetic labor, Longfellow at the same time wanted to prove himself capable of earning a competency, and to prove himself to be a man, not a dreamy child, to his father, to his first significant editor, Theophilus Parsons, Jr., and, ultimately, to American readers in general. Longfellow’s proposed course of study at Harvard never materialized. At Bowdoin’s August 1825 commencement, the college’s governing body voted to establish a professorship of modern languages, based on a bequest of a thousand dollars from James Bowdoin, Jr.’s widow. Although the board of trustees made no specific appointment, it was generally understood that the position would be offered to Henry Longfellow; the offer was delivered to him by Stephen Longfellow himself, who sat on the college’s board of trustees. The board also suggested that Longfellow travel abroad for two years, at his family’s expense, to prepare for the position. Although Longfellow spent several months reading Blackstone in his father’s Portland law office while his departure was delayed, the offer from Bowdoin made further legal training unnecessary. The offer also provided Longfellow with a professional identity based on his interest in and facility with

⁵¹⁰ My thinking here is loosely informed by Herbert Sussman’s fascinating treatment of early Victorian male writers’ and artists’ use of monastic imagery to suggest a particularly masculine, homosocial individual and communal identity for the male artist. Sussman’s treatment of Thomas Carlyle’s use of monk/monastery imagery to support capitalist conceptions of mental and manual labor seems particularly relevant to my treatment of Longfellow and to my project in general, particularly in Sussman’s discussion of Carlyle’s “sublimation,” which is strongly informed by Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality. While I do think that Sussman’s overall arguments apply to Longfellow’s case — the monk does represent a particular and complex figuration of bourgeois masculinity for Longfellow — my hunch is that Longfellow also meant to associate himself with the spatial significance of the cloister rather than with the gendered meanings of the monastery (although I recognize that the two are likely to be strongly linked) — and that the antiquated library, filled with friendly, dusty books, is paired with the leafy green avenues in opposition to the mart, as a space representing intellectual and emotional freedom, tranquillity, solitude. Sussman, Victorian Masculinities, esp. 1-72; Foucault, The Use of Pleasure.

literature and language. And, by offering him a professor's salary, the Bowdoin position gave Longfellow the opportunity to prove that a man could, indeed, make a living as a scholar. Longfellow departed for Europe on May 15, 1826.⁵¹¹

The anticipation of professional duties necessarily shaped Longfellow's course of travel; Stephen Longfellow, concerned that his son was wasting time, gathering picturesque experiences instead of preparing for teaching, would frequently remind Longfellow of his approaching responsibilities. In August 1828, Stephen wrote in response to his son's account of a visit to Granada:

[Y]ou must not permit your mind to be so much enchanted with these scenes of antiquity, as to render the dull pursuits of civil life insipid to you when you return. Remember that utility is the great object of this world, and we must in early life prepare ourselves to be most extensively useful in future life, & prepared for a world of glory & happiness hereafter.⁵¹²

Stephen urged his son to keep his mind always focused on utility and duty. Permitting the mind to wander too freely among enchanting scenes could make less pleasurable mental activities seem "insipid" and uninteresting. Too much enchantment could work against Henry's future success. The young man was to keep his mind in proper order for the useful work it would have to perform as part of his professional career. And, of course, keeping his mind firmly fixed on professional responsibilities would keep Longfellow from dwelling too much on the distractions and temptations he would encounter during his travels.

⁵¹¹ Thompson, Young Longfellow, 74-88; Louis C. Hatch, The History of Bowdoin College (Portland, ME: Loring, Short & Harmon, 1927), 61. Interestingly, Hatch quotes the trustees' decision as reading: "a professorship be established for the instruction of the Junior and Senior classes in the modern languages of Europe, particularly the French and Spanish, and that until a professor be elected the Executive Government be authorized and directed to make the best provision in their power to accomplish the object of this vote at an expense to the college not exceeding the sum of \$500 per annum." Hatch, Bowdoin, 61. Andrew Hilen, editor of Longfellow's Letters, has noted the possibility that Longfellow's father worked behind the scenes to get his son nominated for the position. Hilen, introduction to Letters, 1:6.

⁵¹² Stephen Longfellow to Longfellow, Portland, ME, 9 Aug 1828, in Longfellow Papers. Emphasis in original.

Appropriately, then, in his letters home, Longfellow made few direct references to his literary dreams; indeed, in March 1829, he wrote to his sisters:

My poetic career is finished. Since I left America, I have hardly put two lines together. I may indeed say, that my muse has been sent to the House of Correction — and her last offspring were laid at the door of one of those Foundling Hospitals for poor poetry — a New Year's "Souvenir." So you see the Dark Ages have come upon me: and no soft poetic ray has irradiated my heart.⁵¹³

If poetry had taken a back seat to his language studies, Longfellow continued to dabble in the essay format. In May 1829 he wrote to his father, following a description of his studies at Göttingen:

I am also writing a book — a kind of Sketch Book of scenes in France, Spain, and Italy — one volume of which I hope to get finished this Summer. . . . I hope by it to prove that I have not wasted my time: though I have no longer a very high opinion of my own prudence or my own talents. The farther I advance the more I see to be done — and the less time to do it in. The more, too, am I persuaded of the charlatanism of literary men.⁵¹⁴

By listing his "Sketch Book" scribbles among his ongoing projects, and suggesting that that particular project would prove that he "[had] not wasted. . . time" (or his father's money), Longfellow had hit upon a conception of literary effort that would utilize his European experiences and identify him as both a professor of modern languages and an author — in company with none other than Washington Irving.

This project was the reed Longfellow clung to during a time of sudden vocational uncertainty. In September 1828 Stephen Longfellow had written to his son of the Bowdoin Overseers' failure to support the trustees' appointment of Henry as professor of modern languages, and of their determination to offer him a tutor's position (which paid slightly more than half a professor's salary) instead. The September 15 letter is lost, but

⁵¹³ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Elizabeth Longfellow, Lucia Wadsworth, and Anne Longfellow, Göttingen, Germany, 28 March 1829, in *Letters*, 1:305.

⁵¹⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Göttingen, Germany, 15 May 1829, in *Letters*, 1:310. Emphasis in original. Unfortunately for modern readers, Longfellow did not elaborate on the "charlatanism" he attributed to literary men.

Longfellow's reply, dated December 20, 1828, clearly indicated his state of mind upon hearing of the offer's withdrawal:

They say I am too young! . . . I know not in what light they may look upon it, but for my own part I do not in the least regard it as a favor conferred upon me. It is no sinecure: and if my services are an equivalent to my salary, — there is no favor done me: — if they be not, I do not desire the situation. If they think I would accept the place they offer me, — as I presume they do, — they are much mistaken in my character. No Sir — I am not yet reduced to this. I am not a dog to eat the crumbs, that fall from such a table. Excuse my warmth, but I feel rather hurt and indignant.⁵¹⁵

Longfellow let the letter sit for several days and added to the letter an apology for the heated emotions of his initial response and a passing mention of the possibilities offered by a Sketch-Book-like project.⁵¹⁶ In May 1829, Longfellow wrote again to his father on the subject: “If I can have the Professorship at Bow. Coll. — I should like it — but I must have it on fair terms: — with the same privileges as the other professors. No state of probation — and no calling me a boy — and retrenching salary.”⁵¹⁷ Later that summer, with his father's consent, Longfellow wrote Bowdoin President William Allen that he would decline the appointment altogether rather than accept a position as a tutor. The college trustees worked out a compromise, and when Longfellow returned from Europe in 1829, he took the position at Bowdoin on more favorable terms. Although the Trustees requested that Longfellow serve a kind of apprenticeship before being inducted into office formally, Longfellow received word that he had been appointed “Professor of Modern Languages” at Bowdoin. In the eyes of Bowdoin he was, nominally, a man and not a boy.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁵ Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Venice, Italy, 19 December 1828, in Letters, 286.

⁵¹⁶ Longfellow wrote, “Whoever first makes a Sketch Book of Spain will necessarily make a very interesting book.” Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Trieste, Germany, 27 December 1828, in Letters, 287.

⁵¹⁷ Emphasis added. Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Göttingen, Germany, 15 May 1829, in Letters, 1:310.

⁵¹⁸ Longfellow's salary would be eight hundred dollars (two hundred dollars less than a regular professor's salary), with an additional one hundred dollars given to Longfellow as salary for serving as college librarian. For the details of the Bowdoin trustees' compromise, see Thompson, Young Longfellow, 148.

As he navigated this controversy, Longfellow had begun work on his “Sketch-Book” project, and had even written a letter to the Philadelphia publishers Carey and Lea offering to let them publish the work in pamphlet form. Under less obligation to the publishers than to his father or to Bowdoin, Henry stated that “[m]y object in visiting Europe has been a literary one,” and asserted that he would leave the terms of publication to the publishers, with the caveat that he retain the copy-right and that the project be kept secret, “for in case of failure, it might injure my after-prospects as a literary man, were my name known, for the same reason I publish in nos. since in putting out a pamphlet, one has not much at stake — and at all events the loss cannot be great in any point of view.”⁵¹⁹ The attention Longfellow gave the project while in Europe showed his growing skill at converting his experiences into literary material. If Bowdoin’s offer had provided Longfellow with the opportunity to accumulate a stock of poetical and linguistic experiences in Europe, the threatened loss of the offer threw him back on his own resources: his ability to capitalize on his own intellectual and emotional responses. His generation of this project in the face of this threatened loss of position showed his ability to turn to literary production as a means of mastering his emotions and of supporting himself financially.

While this particular project went through several permutations before being published as Outre-Mer, Longfellow always self-consciously modeled it on Irving’s Sketch-Book (1819-1820). Longfellow referred to the Sketch-Book as his “first book,” and its influence on his earliest work can be seen not only in Outre-Mer but also in the ‘Lay Monk’ essays: Longfellow’s “Lay Monk,” certainly sounded at points like Geoffrey Crayon. Yet unlike Irving, Longfellow presented images of idleness against images of effort, toil, and drive; suggestions of ease, peace and idleness were often expressed in Longfellow’s poetry in

⁵¹⁹ Longfellow to Carey and Lea, Dresden, Germany, 15 January 1829, in Letters, 1:296.

ways that often approached a desire for the obliteration of consciousness and of sensory stimulation. If Irving sketched scenes of genteel masculine idleness, Longfellow's images of dreamy idleness, rest, and solace were usually matched by images of effort and drive which bordered on the obsessive or the manic. The two sets of images were the opposite sides of the same coin: the sleep needed to balance the drive, the drive to keep the sleep from sliding into death.⁵²⁰

Irving may also have influenced the young Longfellow simply by virtue of having made literature — specifically, literary essays carrying apparently personal, emotional inflections — pay. Longfellow's move towards an explicitly Sketch-Book-like project revealed his awareness of the economic success the popular Sketch-Book had been for Irving as well as his awareness of Irving's ability to manage a range of authorial personae — the genteel dabbler Crayon, the childlike Rip Van Winkle, the comic Knickerbocker — and 'Washington Irving' himself, the professional author whose financial success was the result of the careful orchestration of such figures. Upon returning to the United States, Longfellow's task for himself was to turn his experiences and emotions into literary products. If Longfellow felt himself to be a Poet, subject to strong feeling, he also hoped to bring his Common-sensical faculties to bear on that feeling — to learn how to channel that emotion in a way that would serve himself (emotionally, morally, and economically) while also transmitting similar service to readers. In short, he hoped to teach readers the lessons

⁵²⁰ Newton Arvin, Longfellow: His Life and Work (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1962), 64-68; Thomas Pauly, "Outre-Mer and Longfellow's Quest for a Career," New England Quarterly 50, no. 1 (March 1977): 30-52; Wilson, Figures of Speech; Douglas, Feminization. For an important treatment of how ideas about idleness and industry affected perceptions of literary production and authorial class standing, see Tomc, "Idle Industry." Although Tomc focuses on Willis' career, the distinctions she draws between Willis and Irving are significant — Willis appeared to be an example of upward mobility based on lack of industry; although Willis really did work very hard, his presentation of himself as idle helped to undercut awareness of that very work. Although Tomc argues that this idleness must be seen as significant beyond the gender arguments put forth by Ann Douglas, Tomc does not focus on gender in the article. On the influence of Irving on Longfellow's early writing, see Bellavance, "Periodical Prose"; Pauly, "Outre-Mer"; Thompson, Young Longfellow, 43-46; Edward Wagenknecht, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: His Poetry and Prose, Literature and Life: American Writers (New York: Ungar, 1986), 39.

he had learned through his own efforts to channel those feelings into prose and, eventually, into verse.⁵²¹

THE DEFENCE OF POESY

During his teaching years at Bowdoin, Longfellow struggled to reconcile his dreams of literary eminence with the realities of academic life. By the time he received the call to Harvard in 1835, he had come to legitimize literary inclination by linking literature to national culture and by identifying authors as powerful indicators or representatives of that culture. Such an understanding also assigned value to the professor of modern languages, whose sensitive instruction could make a foreign literature reveal its secrets to the willing and receptive student. In his 1830 inaugural address, Longfellow spoke to the Bowdoin community as a guide to the moral and intellectual riches offered by the study of languages. The learning of a particular language, Longfellow asserted, was “not the ultimate object: it is a means to be employed in the acquisition of something which lies beyond;” yet the “something which lies beyond” went undefined in the address. Longfellow continued:

It is little [use] to point one to the portals of the magic gardens and enchanted halls of learning, and to teach him certain cabalistic words at whose utterance the golden hinges of its gates shall turn: he must be led through the glittering halls and fragrant bowers, and shown where the richest treasures lie, and where the clearest fountains spring.⁵²²

Without such guidance, the words learned would lack their proper meaning and context, and become merely “cabalistic words” whose connection to the opening gates remained mysterious. And yet Longfellow did not characterize his responsibility as being one of

⁵²¹ Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 71-113; Douglas, *Feminization*; Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*.

⁵²² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Origin and Growth of the Languages of Southern Europe and of Their Literature. An Inaugural Address, delivered September 2, 1830*, pref. George T. Little (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Library, 1907), 7-8.

enlightenment; instead, he became a guide, maneuvering his students “through the glittering halls and fragrant bowers,” directing them to the richest treasures and clearest fountains. If Longfellow as guide brought clarity to the locations and objects within the “magic gardens,” he did not make clear to them the connection between the magic words and the gate’s opening. The opening of that gate remained mystified.

In the inaugural address, Longfellow followed a brief history of the modern languages with a discussion of poetry which at once celebrated and obscured the genre.

“The Origin of Poetry,” Longfellow stated:

loses itself in the shades of a remote and fabulous age, of which we have only vague and uncertain traditions. Its fountain, like that of the river of the desert, springs up in a distant and unknown story, the theme of visionary story, and the subject of curious speculation. Doubtless however it originated amid the scenes of pastoral life, and in the quiet and repose of a golden age.⁵²³

The origins of poetry itself are presented as blurred, indefinite, and ethereal, “los[ing] itself in the shades of a remote and fabulous age,” retained through “vague and uncertain traditions,” “springing up in a distant and unknown story.” Poetry is removed from space and time, and appears to be produced outside of human agency, instead “spring[ing] up in a distant and unknown story.” In Longfellow’s account of the origins of poetry, human activity is essentially receptive and reactive, responding to the inspiration brought by the landscape:

There is something congenial in the soft melancholy of the groves which pervades the heart, and delights the imagination. Their silent repose is favorable to the musings of the poetic mind: and hence in all ages poets have loved the woodland shades and have peopled them with presiding deities. The fountain that gushed in the valley was made the dwelling of a nymph: the grove that overshadowed it the abode of dryads: and the flower that grew beside it became the fairy habitation of a spirit. These woodland deities were made to preside over shepherds and their flocks, and were propitiated by songs and festive rites. Thus poetry added new charms to the simplicity and repose of bucolic life; and the poet mingled in his song the delights of rural ease, and the praise of sylvan deities.⁵²⁴

⁵²³ *ibid.*, 61.

⁵²⁴ *ibid.*, 61-62.

Longfellow's use of the passive voice suggested the receptiveness he attributed to these poets, who responded to their environment by singing of "the delights of rural ease" rather than of strong emotion or diligent labor. The fountain "was made the dwelling of a nymph;" the woodland deities "were made to preside over shepherds and their flocks;" the shepherds are seen being presided over rather than shown performing any kind of work other than, perhaps, the shaping of a song about rural ease. Poetry appeared to generate itself; poets were essentially receptive and subordinate to the poetry with which they were associated.

By functioning as his audience's guide to the history of modern languages and the poetry associated with each language, Longfellow subtly separated himself from the poets he described. Longfellow addressed his audience not as a poet, but as the keeper of poetry, the man who held the key to the "magic gardens" of poetry. And indeed, during his teaching years at Bowdoin, Longfellow made a living by writing about poetry and speaking about poetry; he would not publish any significant poetry until after he had replaced George Ticknor as Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard in 1835. He would recycle parts of his inaugural address into essay reviews, including several in the North American Review, thus expanding his student body, in a sense, to include North American readers.

As a student at Bowdoin, Longfellow had called for an American literature, and had noted the economic factors inhibiting the development of an American poetry. As a professor at Bowdoin, Longfellow was in a stronger position to exert influence toward that goal. His review of Sir Philip Sidney's Defence of Poetry, published in the January 1832 North American, was a call to action directed towards American poets and readers.

Longfellow used his review of Sidney's Defence to build a 'defence' of his own on behalf of poetry in the United States, turning Sidney's arguments against what Longfellow perceived to

be a national culture hostile to the production of poetry. Sidney's specific arguments against the association of poetry with effeminacy, along with Sidney's own career as poet and military man, allowed Longfellow to defend American poetry in terms that addressed the complicated relationships between masculinity and poetic creativity.

The essay presented a subtle conflict between physical labor, described in strongly masculine terms, and mental effort, identified with moral superiority and virility in increasingly defensive terms.⁵²⁵ Longfellow described the "spirit of the age" as:

clamorous for utility, — for visible, tangible utility, — for bare, brawny, muscular utility. We would be roused to action by the voice of the populace, and the sounds of the crowded mart, and not 'lulled asleep in shady idleness with poet's pastime.' We are swallowed up in schemes for gain, and engrossed with contrivances for bodily enjoyments, as if this particle of dust were immortal, — as if the soul needed no aliment, and the mind no raiment.⁵²⁶

Utilitarian schemes for gain directed the mind towards the physical and the bodily, away from consideration of the higher spheres, and the body Longfellow set against the mind in this passage was masculine: bare, brawny, and muscular. Against, but also, oddly, in agreement with this emphasis on utility, Longfellow offered an expanded definition of utility which incorporated the solace and "happiness" brought by aesthetic consumption into the range of acceptable endeavor. Longfellow identified poetry as a source of "meditation" as well as of "action." "There are times," he asserted,

when both mind and body are worn down by the severity of daily toil; when the grasshopper is a burden; and thirsty with the heat of labor, the spirit longs for the waters of Shiloah, that go softly. At such seasons, both mind and body should unbend themselves; they should be set free from the yoke of their customary service, and thought take some other direction, than that of the beaten, dusty thoroughfare of business. And there are times, too, when the divinity stirs within us; when the soul abstracts herself from the world, and the slow and regular motions of earthly

⁵²⁵ For an important treatment of a "man of letters'" attempt to link physical with mental strength that falls short in the same way, see Herbert Sussman's treatment of Thomas Carlyle in *Victorian Masculinities*, 16-72, esp. 41-45.

⁵²⁶ [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow], rev. of *The Defence of Poesy* by Sir Philip Sidney, *North American Review* 34, no. 74 (January 1832): 59. Emphasis added.

business do not keep peace with the Heaven-directed mind. . . . Call, if you will, such thoughts and feelings the dreams of the imagination; yet they are no unprofitable dreams. Such moments of silence and meditation are often those of the greatest utility to ourselves and others.⁵²⁷

And, asserted Longfellow, it is “the peculiar province of poetry” to fill “these interludes of life with a song, that shall soothe our worldly passions and inspire us with a love of Heaven and virtue.”⁵²⁸

In his own “Defence” Longfellow focused far more on the significance of poetry’s consumption than on the circumstances or the meaning of its creation. Consequently he directed readers’ attention toward the service the poet could provide readers and away from compensation or recognition merited by the poet himself.⁵²⁹ Poetry was a road for the mind to travel, a higher path distinctly separate from “the beaten, dusty thoroughfare of business.” To travel that road — to read poetry — was to gain access to “the dreams of the imagination,” to allow the soul to “abstract herself from the world” and to direct the mind Heaven-ward.

Longfellow portrayed the reading of poetry as a necessary, sustaining respite from labor, a position Longfellow would later embody in his poem “The Day is Done,” (1845)

⁵²⁷ *ibid.*, 63-64.

⁵²⁸ *ibid.*, 64.

⁵²⁹ Fame was to be deprecated in favor of moral service to the reader: Byron’s fame (or notoriety) had, according to Longfellow, created a body of imitative, self-serving would-be poets incapable of producing uplifting, instructive poetry:

[N]o writer has done half so much to corrupt the literary taste as well as the moral principle of our country, as the author of *Childe Harold*. Minds that could not understand his beauties, could imitate his great and glaring defects. Souls that could not fathom his depths, could grasp the straw and bubbles that floated upon the agitated surface, until at length every city, town, and village had its little Byron, its self-tormenting scoffer at morality, its gloomy misanthropist in song.

“Happily,” added Longfellow, “[Byron’s] noxious influence has been in some measure checked and counteracted by the writings of Wordsworth, whose pure and gentle philosophy has been gradually gaining the ascendancy over the bold and visionary speculations of an unhealthy imagination.” Without denying the appeal of Byron’s poetry, Longfellow nevertheless gave his blessing (however qualified) to the “pure and gentle philosophy” of Wordsworth, the application of which would help the would-be poet to master and order the products of an “unhealthy” Byronic imagination into more worthy offerings. *ibid.*, 76.

Cf. Hovey, “Critical Provincialism.” In this essay Hovey argues that Longfellow represented the dominant American conception of poetic identity — a “Wordsworthian” one based on didactic instruction — that Poe defined his own more Byronic conception of the poet’s duties and responsibilities against.

where he clearly distinguished between two kinds of poetry, one which would stimulate the mind to action, and the other, which would soothe the anxious mind into sleep:

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of day.

Not from the grand old masters,
Not from the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Through the corridors of Time.

For, like strains of martial music,
Their mighty thoughts suggest
Life's endless toil and endeavor;
And to-night I long for rest.⁵³⁰

“The Day is Done” was originally the introductory poem to The Waif, a collection of poems by other poets that Longfellow compiled in 1845. “The Day is Done” functioned as a poem in its own right and as an advertisement for the poems in the collection, directing the reader towards a particular interpretation of the poems in the volume. The poem also affirmed a particular understanding of the work poetry in general could, or should, perform for its readers. Whether inspiring or soothing, the poem was meant to provide a service for the reader, and its merit would be determined by the job it performed (or failed to perform). One form of service demanded activity and effort from the reader; but another form of service released the reader from that effort and, by virtue of the poem’s “power to quiet/The restless pulse of care,” permitted the reader to rest through its very consumption.

The “Defence” and the poem alike presented two kinds of poets: the grand masters, whose works are intended to inspire the reader to action, and the “humbler” poets whose soothing work are what the narrator particularly wants at that moment. Although the “bards sublime” produce “mighty thoughts,” we do not see those poets at work. The humbler

⁵³⁰ Longfellow, “The Day is Done,” in Poetical Works, 1:222-223.

poet, on the other hand, corresponds to the narrator who “long[s] for rest.” “[T]hrough long days of labor,/And nights devoid of ease,” this poet “[s]till heard in his soul the music/Of wonderful melodies.” The music comes to the poet; the poet does not compose the music, but hears the wonderful melodies. Finally, the melodies that the humble poet hears appear to have been soothing to the poet himself; his transcription of them will offer similar service to others. This service would occur only if the reader accepted the “lesson” of this poem, agreed with Longfellow’s assessment of the dual services that poetry could provide, and found “Day is Done” either soothing or a prod to seek out suitably comforting poetry for bedtime reading.⁵³¹

As much as “Day is Done” seems to bolster Ann Douglas’ argument that some kinds of writing are consumptive rather than productive, the poem nevertheless asserted that the production of some poetry carried with it a call to masculine action. The poets that Longfellow offered as examples of manly composition did stand for Longfellow as “bards sublime,” whose work could stir readers to manly action. When he wrote that Americans “would be roused to action by the voice of the populace, and the sounds of the crowded mart, and not ‘lulled asleep in shady idleness with poet’s pastime,’” he meant to suggest the necessity for both action and the “shady idleness” following that action. Uplift was equated with comfort, earned by labor; utility was granted to restfulness as a property conveyed by poetry.⁵³²

And yet in this poem, the “grand old masters” poetry, rather than spurring the narrator to directed action, brought instead a reminder of “[l]ife’s endless toil and endeavor” — toil without end, work without a clear beginning or conclusion. Wearied, perhaps by his

⁵³¹ The word “still” also seems important: the humbler poet hears the music “still,” in spite of the days of labor and the difficult nights; but he also hears the music because in spite of the jangled state of his mind through that labor and pain, his mind remains “still” enough to hear and then to transcribe those melodies.

⁵³² Cf. Douglas, Feminization.

own apparently “endless toil,” the narrator pleaded for a “simple and heartfelt lay” that would “soothe this restless feeling” and “banish the thoughts of day:” the day’s labor and the wearying thoughts generated the work. The thoughts stirred by the “masters’ mighty thoughts,” are not of productive effort, of specific, bounded deeds to be done, but “suggest” instead thoughts on “endless toil.” The alternatives posed by the poem are ceaseless, goal-less labor or mind-numbing rest. Longfellow’s poetry generally oscillated between calls to effort and calls to rest: rest was earned by labor and by care; labor on the other hand earned the reader the right to rest, or to read soothing poetry. In “The Day Is Done,” the favored poet was more sandman than workman.

His “Defence” showed Longfellow beginning to focus his attention more on the services that poetry could provide to readers and less on whatever mental labor was involved in the production of that poetry, a focus that might be attributed to his own vocational circumstances: in 1832 Longfellow functioned primarily as a professor. An exchange between Longfellow and his close friend George Washington Greene suggests that this poetic “silence” at this time may have been at least partially calculated. In a June 1829 letter, Greene mentioned that he had been reading some of Longfellow’s early poetry from the United States Literary Gazette, which had “confirm[ed] me in the opinion I have a[lways?] held that you are capable of taking a high place ~~among~~ in the literary page of your country.” Greene continued: “Do not then, like many young men, hazard all by too early an appearance. . . . No country has produced more young men who at twenty have promised great things and have failed to justify the expectations formed of them from too great a hurry to be known. I hope you will not be ~~among~~ of these.”⁵³³ [strikeout in original] Longfellow thanked Greene for his interest in the early poems, and remarked:

⁵³³ George Washington Greene to Longfellow, East Greenwich, RI, 16 April 1830, Longfellow Papers.

Since my return home I have written a piece and a half, but have not published a line. You need not be alarmed on that score. I am all prudence, now, since I can form a more accurate judgement of the merit of poetry. If I ever publish a volume it will be many years first. Indeed I find such an engrossing interest in the studies of my profession, that I write very seldom, except in connection with those studies.⁵³⁴

Longfellow's prediction was accurate. He would not publish a volume of poetry until 1839, several years after he been called to replace George Ticknor as Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard.

IMPERATIVES WITHOUT OBJECTS

Grateful for the opportunity to leave Brunswick, Maine for the more intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge, Longfellow accepted the position at Harvard and, against his father's advice, traveled again to Europe to prepare himself further for teaching. He was accompanied by his young wife Mary Storer Potter and two female companions. The company departed for Europe in April 1835. The trip would have unexpected consequences for Longfellow personally and professionally: Mary Longfellow died of complications following a miscarriage in Rotterdam in November 1835, leaving Henry despondent. Throwing himself into work following his wife's death, Longfellow read deeply in German literature — particularly in Goethe, Novalis, and Schiller — and identified strongly with the turbulent emotion expressed in these works. During his subsequent stay at Interlaken, Longfellow met and fell in love with Frances Appleton. If Mary's death drove him into strongly emotional reading, Fanny Appleton's continuing rejection of Longfellow (she finally agreed to marry him in 1843) drove him into literary composition as a means of expressing and resolving his emotional difficulties. Longfellow's 'striving' poems, published in Voices

⁵³⁴ Longfellow to Greene, Brunswick, ME, 27 June 1830, in Letters, 1:343.

of the Night (1839) and Ballads and Other Poems (1841) — his psalms — suggested a conscious decision to reject “mere literary ambition” in favor of a “higher motive,” service to others through his literary works. Mary’s death gave Longfellow a true taste of the “cares” of life. His conversion of his grief into “psalms” would ultimately turn him back to youthful dreams.⁵³⁵

In January 1836, Longfellow noted that George Washington Greene had confided in him his “corroding ambition” for literary reputation. Still actively grieving for his wife, Longfellow wrote the following in his journal in response to Greene’s letter:

If I know my own heart, I labor from a higher motive than this; and so does my friend Greene, tho’ he knows it not.

Literary ambition! away with this destroyer of peace and quietude and the soul’s self-profession! The scholar would have a higher and holier aim than this. He should struggle after truth; he should forget himself in communion with the great minds of all ages: and when he writes it should be, not to immortalize himself, but to make a salutary and lasting impression on the minds of all others. . . .

Let our object, then, be, not to build ourselves up, but to build up others, and leave our mark upon the age we live in, each according to the measure of his talent. To oppose error and vice, and make mankind in love with truth and virtue — this is a far higher motive of action than mere literary ambition.⁵³⁶

This journal entry was as much a directive to himself as it was a response to his friend’s ambition.

Only a few months earlier, days before Mary Longfellow’s death, Longfellow had written in his journal: “Sat up late at night writing poetry — the first I have written for many a long, long day. Pleasant feelings of the olden time came over me; — of those years when as yet a boy, I gave so many hours to rhymery! — I wonder whether I am destined to write anything in verse, that will live?”⁵³⁷ When, to his deep sorrow, Mary passed away later that month, Longfellow called on Mary’s spirit to instruct him: “teach me,” he wrote:

⁵³⁵ Thompson, Young Longfellow, 239-230, 265-274; Arvin, Longfellow, 32-35.

⁵³⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, [Journal] 21 May 1835 - 17 July 1836, 198-199, Longfellow Papers.

⁵³⁷ *ibid.*, 148.

to be good, and kind, and gentle as thou wert when here on earth — teach me to say
as thou didst on thy death-bed,

‘Father, I thank thee! may no thought
E’er deem thy chastisements severe.
But may this heart, by sorrow taught,
Calm each wild wish, each idle fear.’⁵³⁸

On December 19, Longfellow wrote in the same journal of Mary’s death:

How like a saint she died: The grave had there[?] no victory. Yet when I think of it,
I am overwhelmed with sorrow. Why should I be so selfish? Would I recall her
from the heaven she dwells in — where all is peace and holiness and joy — back to
this earth — to this world — where joy is transitory and there is so much of sorrow
and suffering? — No: let me rather live a life of goodness and purity like hers —
that when I die, I may <go> to her.⁵³⁹

In his journal, Longfellow worked to convince himself that Mary was better off in Heaven,
that he was selfish to wish her with him rather than with God, that he must work to better
himself in order to join Mary in heaven.⁵⁴⁰

Several years later, on February 27, 1838, his thirty-first birthday, Longfellow
transcribed in his journal a poem, titled “Evening Shadows,” one of his first efforts since his
student years. An elaboration on Mary’s last words to her husband, the poem imagined her
ghost appearing to Longfellow:

the forms of the departed
Enter at the open door,
The belov’d ones — the true-hearted,
Come to sit with me once more.

And with them the Being Beauteous,
Who unto my youth was given,
More than all things else to love me,
And is now a Saint in Heaven

⁵³⁸ *ibid.*, 171. Longfellow had included this scrap of poetry — by Andrews Norton — as among Mary’s last words in his letter informing Mary’s father of her death; this guardian was a Unitarian angel, using rhyme and meter to convey moral exhortation while also displaying her own level of cultural acquisition. Longfellow to Barrett Potter, Rotterdam, Germany, 1 December 1835, in *Letters*, 1:526-528.

⁵³⁹ Longfellow, *Journal*, 1835-1836, 173.

⁵⁴⁰ For important treatments of the sentimental conventions surrounding grief and bereavement, see Douglas, *Feminization*, 200-226; Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 124-152; Stannard, *Puritan Way of Death*, 167-196. For another discussion of Longfellow’s grief-oriented poetry, see also Gruez, “Feeling for the Fireside.”

With a slow and noiseless footstep
 Comes she, like a shape divine,
 Takes the vacant chair beside me,
 Lays her gentle hand in mine.

And she sits and gazes at me
 With her deep and tender eyes,
 Like the stars so still and Saint-like,
 Looking downward from the skies.⁵⁴¹

Although clearly returned from the dead, the “Being Beauteous” does not appear as a threatening figure; she comes to offer peace to the man who grieves for her. Comfort comes to the protagonist without mental or emotional labor on his part. Mary comes to him, takes his hand in her own “gentle hand,” and gazes at him with “deep and tender eyes” whose stillness and silence (her “noiseless” steps) reflect her “Saint-like” qualities and heavenly abode. Her soundlessness also underscores the circumstances of the transmission of that comfort: Mary influences him through sentiment, not through words or rational argument. Her presence alone brings solace. The moral tag so commonly found in Longfellow’s later poetry is implied rather than explicitly stated in this poem. And yet the moral of the poem infused Longfellow’s journal and his letters at the time of Mary’s death: the solace the protagonist experiences in the presence of Mary was a feeling Longfellow himself had struggled to achieve, willed himself to achieve. The simple transmission of comfort in the poem reflected and elided Longfellow’s own considerable emotional effort.

The poem itself was the result of emotional as well as intellectual effort. Longfellow worked “Evening Shadows” into a slightly longer poem, which he published in the May 1839 Knickerbocker; in March 1839 he described the revision of the poem and in his journal:

Sat at home and finished a Third Psalm of Life, which I began long ago, but could never rightly close and complete till now. . . . In the afternoon carried it to Felton

⁵⁴¹ Longfellow, [Journal], Feb 1838 - Dec 1839, 1-3, Longfellow Papers.

and left it with him. He came up in the evening. Said he read it to his wife, who “cried like a child.” I want no more favorable criticism than this.⁵⁴²

The final version of the poem essentially duplicated the first version, with several stanzas added, one introducing another ghost, that of Longfellow’s brother-in-law George Pierce, and two final stanzas which concluded the poem more definitively:

Uttered not, yet comprehended,
Is the spirit’s voiceless prayer,
Soft rebukes, in blessings ended,
Breathing from her lips of air.

Oh, though oft depressed and lonely
All my fears are laid aside,
If I but remember only
Such as these have lived and died!⁵⁴³

These last two stanzas give the lesson of the poem: memories of beloved figures have the power to banish depression and loneliness.

In this poem, Longfellow not only portrayed the circumstances of his grief, but also presented a means of resolving grief in general: through conscious effort to form his emotions in a particular way, and, at a deeper level, by literally forming those feelings into a consciously determined pattern of words. And yet the final version of the poem retained the effortless understanding and emotion carried in its first draft; the added stanzas underscored the wordlessness of Mary’s “voiceless prayer,” which, “[u]ttered not” is “yet comprehended” as it “breathes” from her ethereal lips.⁵⁴⁴ The solace the protagonist experiences in the presence of Mary was a feeling Longfellow had actually struggled to achieve. Comfort came to the protagonist without mental or emotional labor on his part.

The simple transmission of comfort in the poem reflected and elided Longfellow’s own

⁵⁴² Longfellow, *Manuscript Gleanings, and Literary Scrapbook*, (London: J. Poole, [n.d.], 24-25, in Longfellow Papers. This is a commercially printed commonplace book; internal evidence indicates that Longfellow presented it to his second wife Frances Appleton Longfellow (it is inscribed “To the beloved Fanny”) in 1846.

⁵⁴³ Longfellow, “Footsteps of Angels,” in *Poetical Works*, 1:27.

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. Thompson, *Young Longfellow*.

considerable emotional effort. By the time he published the poem in the Knickerbocker, Longfellow had become able to offer his grief and its resolution as a lesson to readers.

Felton's wife's emotional response to the poem (and Felton's report of that response) were typical reactions to Longfellow's poetry. Longfellow would occasionally record in his journal the emotionally laden compliments he received on his poetry, and saved a good number of fan letters. Yet Mrs. Felton's response was based more on her sympathy with the sentiments, than with any inspiration towards action or even towards resolution of any particular sorrow of her own: she reads (or, in this case, she listens); she cries. She experiences emotion, but towards no particular or useful end. In this sense, her response embodies Colin Campbell's theory of romantic consumption, based on the consumer's ability or desire to experience a deliberately cultivated feeling for the sake of the feeling itself; in this case, the success of Longfellow's psalm came not so much from the solution he offered in the poem as from the emotion it incited in its audience.⁵⁴⁵

Before settling on its final title, "Footsteps of Angels," Longfellow identified this poem as his "Third Psalm of Life." His first "Psalm of Life" was composed in July 1838 as an essentially private exercise, undertaken after an unsatisfying visit with Frances Appleton. The mental process transcribed in "Psalm of Life" — the conscious turning of his mind and self towards action — was a process he believed himself to have exercised and one which he recorded, originally, for himself alone. In a commonplace book that he presented to Frances in 1846 (who by then had become his wife), Longfellow wrote: "I kept it some time in manuscript, unwilling to show it to anyone, it being a voice from my inmost heart, and expressing my feelings at a time when I was rallying from the depression of

⁵⁴⁵ Campbell, Romantic Ethos.

disappointment.”⁵⁴⁶ Longfellow drew heavily on his journal for the material he included in this “Book of Vanity,” and in the common-place book he gave the story of the psalm’s composition in more detail than he had in his journal, where he had written: “Felton is married and happy, and lives in his own hired house. I sit at an open window this bright morning, and am also happy, though alone. Wrote ‘Psalm of Life;’ which, I suppose will soon go to the Knickerbocker or some other Magazine.”⁵⁴⁷ Longfellow’s rather businesslike account of the poem follows two sentences which carry a note of wistfulness along with a willed resistance to that wistfulness — “[I] am also happy, though alone.” On August 3, 1838, Longfellow sent “Psalm of Life” to Lewis Gaylord Clark for publication in the Knickerbocker, asking, “Will not this ‘Psalm of Life’ do well on the front and first page of your next number? Is it not true? Has it not some spirit in it?”⁵⁴⁸ The poem was subsequently published in the September 1838 number of the Knickerbocker.

“Psalm of Life” is a relentless call to action, a call to resist naysayers who proclaimed that “Life is but an empty dream!”⁵⁴⁹, a call to face the Future and abandon the Past. The final three stanzas contain Longfellow’s essential stance on masculine achievement, and can be read at several levels:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

⁵⁴⁶ Longfellow, Manuscript Gleanings, 13-14.

⁵⁴⁷ Longfellow, [Journal], Feb 1828 - Dec 1839, 65, Longfellow Papers.

⁵⁴⁸ Longfellow to Lewis Gaylord Clark, [Portland, ME, 3 August 1838], in Letters, 2:90.

⁵⁴⁹ Longfellow, “Psalm of Life,” in Poetical Works, 21.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
 With a heart for any fate;
 Still achieving, still pursuing,
 Learn to labor and to wait.⁵⁵⁰

In the first of these three stanzas, Longfellow directed the reader's attention to the inspirational value of the lives of great men, which stood as models, not necessarily of particular achievements, but of effort and achievement in general. As had great men gone before, each reader could shape his own mind and heart in particular directions. In this sense, the poem echoed other didactic texts of the era by urging that the heart and the mind be directed towards a number of goals — mature adulthood, moral integrity, economic success, salvation itself. The mind of a man was an object to be molded and shaped by the man himself (with the usual assistance from wholesome influences, feminine and masculine alike). If Longfellow's prescription echoed the rhetoric of self-made manhood, it also echoed a key area of overlap between Romantic and Common-Sense aesthetic thought: the conscious work done by the artist that was either determined by the material itself (the Romantic concept of organic form) or by externally determined principles familiar to both the artist and the audience. The man, working to "make [his] life sublime," would work on himself as an artist might work on a painting, or a poet on a poem.⁵⁵¹

Longfellow's own activity — the writing of this psalm — took this lesson to another level. The poem, the result of Longfellow's own desire or need to master his own strongly felt emotion, was a made product whose existence embodied the effort Longfellow had put into directing his own mind and heart. Having written the poem as a means of dealing with his own emotional difficulties, Longfellow packaged the product of that emotional work and

⁵⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 21-22.

⁵⁵¹ Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, esp. 10-32. On Romantic theory, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*; Abrams, *Mirror and Lamp*; on Scottish common-sense theory, see Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*, esp. 174-204; Martin, *Instructed Vision*. See also Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*; Halttunen, *Confidence Men*; Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*; Cawelti, *Apostles*; Ryan, *Cradle*; on the fashioning of emotion, see Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*; Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

sold it (for a small amount) to the Knickerbocker, hoping that others' consumption of the poem would benefit him as its production had benefited him. "Psalm of Life" was meant to be those footprints in the sand, another blueprint — as well as the indicator and result of Longfellow's own work to make himself into a man whose footsteps should be followed.⁵⁵² In his review of Voices of the Night, published in the May 1840 number of the Christian Examiner, Oliver W. B. Peabody took just that meaning from the poem; praising the volume for its "sincerity and manliness" Peabody reprinted "Psalm of Life" and noted:

[The poem] is equally admirable for its simplicity, manly fervor, dignity, and truth. The young man can ask no nobler hymn of battle, with which to march, like the soldier of antiquity, into the momentous conflict which awaits him, when the calm enjoyments of early life are over, and his years of labor, anxiety, suffering, perhaps of victory, begin.⁵⁵³

Peabody read — and encouraged other young men to read — "Psalm of Life," and indeed all of Voices of the Night, as a guide to upright, persevering, manly conduct. Shortly after the poem's publication, Longfellow wrote with satisfaction in his journal that he had seen in quoted in a number of papers from around the country "with great praise of its truth, and poetry," adding, "This is a great pleasure, to see the working of it upon other minds."⁵⁵⁴

Given the poem's popularity as an expression of earnestness and moral activism, "Psalm of Life" ended on an oddly passive note. Although Longfellow urged his readers to "act, act, in the living present!" the poem ends with the infinitive phrase "to wait." Pairing "to wait" with "to labor," Longfellow implied that waiting itself was a form of mental labor.

⁵⁵² Foucault, Use of Pleasure; Lawrence Buell, New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 116-117; Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., "Longfellow's 'A Psalm of Life': A Relation of Method to Popularity," Markham Review 7 (1978): 49-51; James H. Justus, "The Fireside Poets: Hearthside Values and the Language of Care," Nineteenth-Century American Poetry, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1985), 146-165.

⁵⁵³ [Peabody, Oliver W. B.], review of Voices of the Night (1839) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Christian Examiner, 3rd ser. 10, no. 2 (May 1840): 244-245.

⁵⁵⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, [Journal], Feb 1828 - Dec 1839, 26 October [1838], 99. Cf. Houghton, Victorian Frame, 218-262, esp. 221 where Houghton quotes a stanza from "Psalm of Life" as a model of moral earnestness.

At the same time, the presence of an injunction to a passive form of effort injected a darker tone into the poem: labor, it implied, would not necessarily bring desired results; labor for its own sake might only serve to fill the time passed in waiting for a particular end to come about. There might be no direct connection between effort and end.⁵⁵⁵

By the autumn of 1838, Longfellow was working on Hyperion, the autobiographical novel he would publish in 1839. The novel narrated the intellectual and emotional development of Paul Flemming, who, grieving the death of his young wife, traveled to Germany. Flemming meets Mary Ashburton and her family, promptly falls in love with Mary, and, after a highly poetic courtship, is rejected by her; the novel ends with Flemming resolving to give up his hopes of Mary and to live actively in the present. The similarity between this plot and Longfellow's life did not go unrecognized, and Longfellow complained that Bostonians and Cantabridgians who perceived that "Mary" was Fanny Appleton failed to grasp the larger philosophical meaning of the book.⁵⁵⁶

That meaning was didactic, as he would explain to George Washington Greene. Longfellow wrote to Greene that writing the novel had been an essentially therapeutic experience for him, helping him, as he claimed, to resolve his disappointment over Fanny Appleton's rejection; as he told Greene:

I had the glorious satisfaction of writing it; and thereby gained a great victory, not over the "dark Ladie" but over myself. I now once more rejoice in my freedom; and am no longer the thrall of anyone. I have great faith in one's writing himself clear from a passion — giving vent to the pent up fire. But George, George! It was a horrible thing; as my former letters must testify. I have an indistinct idea of raving on paper to a large amount. But it was all sincere. My mind was morbid. I have

⁵⁵⁵ See Tomc, "Idle Industry"; Justus, "Fireside Poets"; Martin, "Longfellow's 'Village Blacksmith,'" Haralson, "Mars in Petticoats."

⁵⁵⁶ See Longfellow to George Washington Greene, Cambridge, MA, 1 October 1839, in Letters, 2:177; Longfellow to Greene, Cambridge, MA, 2 Jan 1840, in Letters, 2:201-203.

portrayed it all in the book; and how a man is to come out of it; not by shooting himself like Werter [sic]; but in a better way.⁵⁵⁷

Longfellow had reread Werther a month after Mary Longfellow's death, and hoped that his own novel would provide readers with a hero whose strong emotions did not drive him to an unmanly self-murder.⁵⁵⁸ At the climactic moment in Hyperion, Flemming is affected by a marble tablet that urged him to "Look not mournfully into the Past. It comes not back again. Wisely improve the Present. It is thine. Go forth to meet the shadowy Future, without fear, and with a manly heart."⁵⁵⁹ Flemming resolves:

Thither will I turn my wandering footsteps . . . and be a man among men, and no longer a dreamer among shadows. Henceforth be mine a life of action and reality! I will work in my own sphere, nor wish it other than it is. This alone is health and happiness. . . . Why have I not made these sage reflections, this wise resolve, sooner? Can such a simple result spring only from the long and intricate process of experience? Alas! it is not till time, with reckless hand, has torn out half the leaves from the Book of Human Life, to light the fires of passion with, from day to day, that man begins to see that the leaves which remain are few in number, and to remember, faintly at first, and then more clearly, that upon the earlier pages of that book was written a story of happy innocence, which he would fain read over again. Then come listless irresolution, and the inevitable inaction of despair; or else the firm resolve to record upon the leaves that still remain a more noble history than the child's story with which the book began.⁵⁶⁰

The putting away of childish things to become "a man among men" was a common theme in advice literature aimed at young men; at the same time, Longfellow's phrasing echoes Wordsworth's description in his "Preface" to the poet as "a man speaking to men."⁵⁶¹ The setting of active resolution against "listless irresolution" and the happiness and health of the

⁵⁵⁷ Emphasis in original. Longfellow to George Washington Greene, Cambridge, MA, 2 Jan 1840, in Letters 2:202.

⁵⁵⁸ Longfellow wrote: "The book is the history [of] a young man of fine intellect, and a heart overflowing with a love [of] the good and beautiful — full of the religion of nature — of violent passions, unrestrained by Christian principle. He is weak, like a little child. He has the intellect of a man, with the heart of a child. . . . He believes that a man has power given him over his ~~what~~ own life — to resign it when he will. But his reasonings on this head are very weak. To a man placed in a similar situation with Werther — and like him without a fixed Christian rule of conduct, — they might seem powerful." [strikeout his] Longfellow, Journal, 1835-1836, 181-182.

⁵⁵⁹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hyperion, in Prose Works, 2:378.

⁵⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 2:380-381.

⁵⁶¹ Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1:877.

practical man against the “the inevitable inaction of despair” could come from any prescriptive text; yet it also echoes American critics’ reactions to Wertherian angst. The fear of passing time is linked to despair and lack of resolution, and is a fear that can only be dispelled by willed activity. Hyperion itself, as a counterexample to Werther, stood as Longfellow’s statement of mastery — over his own powerful emotions, and over the suggestion that literary dreams were childish.⁵⁶²

When Flemming asserts that he will leave dreaminess behind and embrace action, we can also read Longfellow asserting that he will put aside his fondness for idle reverie and move towards more “active” poetry — that is, towards poetry which will “actively” provide valuable moral and mental service to readers. Having already seen “Psalm of Life” and several other ‘psalms’ receive sympathetic responses, Longfellow determined that he had found a mode of poetry that would contain his dreamy yearnings and his desire to demonstrate a manly self-mastery. Psalm-making would allow him to present emotional expression and mastery in a form that would affect and instruct others. In Hyperion both the emotion and its mastery — the sympathizing heart and the directing, sagacious head — were presented by Longfellow and validated other like-minded readers as tokens of Longfellow’s credentials as a man of both sensibility and self-possession.

By producing a novel intended to provide intellectual, emotional, and moral service alike, Longfellow hoped to establish himself as a man whose duty lay in providing just those services to Americans through his pen. And yet, like “Psalm of Life,” and “Excelsior,” the conclusion of Hyperion seemed to counsel effort for the sake of effort rather than work as a means to any more specific end. The end product or goal of Flemming’s resolution goes unspecified, and the reader is left with a man resolving, but lacking a clear object to work

⁵⁶² See Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 379-383, 411-415; Schiller, “Naïve and Sentimental,” 179-260; see also Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads.

that resolution on. The imperatives stack up, exhaustingly: act! Be up and doing! Live! Labor! Toil! Strive! Excelsior! But Longfellow rarely offered a direct object for these imperative verbs, an absence which lends a hysterical note to these “action!” works. With no object to work on or towards, how would the acting man know when he had accomplished his goal — any goal? Would the achievement of a specific goal remove the motive for action?⁵⁶³ If the publication of Voices of the Night was the final product of the resolution Longfellow portrayed in Hyperion, poetic production as a goal for Flemming remained unspecified at best, precluded at worst by Flemming’s resolution to be “a man among men, and no longer a dreamer among shadows. Henceforth be mine a life of action and reality!” Flemming’s resolution — to be a man — was a far less concretely defined or realized goal, one which may have seemed as fluid, as insubstantial, and as elusive as the title “poet” was to Longfellow and his fellow “dreamers among shadows.”

Longfellow’s emphasis on the conscious making of the life in “Psalm of Life” and in Hyperion anticipated the lesson of the blacksmith in “The Village Blacksmith,” whose life, Longfellow tells the reader, should teach us that we, too, can “forge” our lives with “burning deeds.” Yet “The Village Blacksmith” is also another example of a poem that urges work for the sake of work. In the penultimate stanza, we are told that for the blacksmith,

Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close;
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night’s repose.⁵⁶⁴

Rest is earned by hard labor, by a “brow . . . wet with honest sweat,” by a man willing to earn “whate’er he can” and able to “look the whole world in the face/For he owes not any

⁵⁶³ See Tomc, “Idle Industry.”

⁵⁶⁴ Longfellow, “Village Blacksmith,” in Poetical Works, 1:66.

man.”⁵⁶⁵ These are classic statements of self-made manhood: hard work, independence, lack of debt, but Longfellow also notes moments of rest that have been earned through that labor. The blacksmith’s day cycles — work by day, rest by night — are matched by the pattern of his week — days of labor followed by a day of rest, a day at church, marked by the emotional experience of his daughter’s singing with its evocation of his dead wife’s voice.

“The Village Blacksmith” denies any upward mobility to the blacksmith — he works for “whate’er” he can get, with no thought of advancement. Work is done for the sake of the work itself and for an accompanying sense of independence. The message of the poem, stated in the last stanza, is clear: the reader was to learn from the blacksmith to take charge of each “burning thought and deed” and fashion those acts into a solid, honest, hard-working life. The blacksmith himself is portrayed as having no higher goal in his life towards which that hard work would get him. No “Excelsior!” here. The blacksmith’s emotion during the church service stands in for that higher purpose: the blacksmith is revealed as a rough-hewn man of sensibility, whose “rough hand” is juxtaposed against the “tender tear” brought on by the sound of his daughter’s voice, rather than by the parson’s words. The emotions experienced in the church are the highest moments of the blacksmith’s life; he participates in the religious service, but it is not clear that he cherishes any religious belief beyond the feelings induced by the church environment. According to the structure of the poem, he is living for his independence, earned by his work, and for the emotional sustenance of the memory of his wife, earned by his own sensibility. Yet the moral of the poem — that one should make one’s life as a blacksmith makes objects on his anvil, through the conscious forging of “burning deeds” — was not quite borne out by the poem itself. The blacksmith’s hard work and sensibility earn him that repose; the concrete products of

⁵⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 65.

the blacksmith's efforts are less important than the effort itself. The reader is encouraged to think about his or her own "burning deeds," with the doing of those deeds becoming more important than the deeds themselves. In "The Village Blacksmith," the life made — the intangible — was more valued than the actual objects forged by blacksmith, which go unnamed.⁵⁶⁶

The figure of the blacksmith, who appeared first in "The Village Blacksmith," reappeared in "Nuremberg," (published in Longfellow's 1845-1856 volume The Belfry of Bruges), as a metaphorical image of Dürer; in the seventeenth and eighteenth couplets of the poem, Longfellow wrote, of Dürer:

As the weaver plied the shuttle, wove he too the mystic rhyme,
And the smith his iron measures hammered to the anvil's chime;
.....
Thanking God, whose boundless wisdom makes the flowers of poetry bloom
In the forge's dust and cinders, in the tissues of the loom.⁵⁶⁷

Here the blacksmith appeared again in explicit relationship to poetry and its production; this smith actually hammered out "iron measures" to the rhythmic sounds of "the anvil's chime." Yet it was God and not the artisans whose "boundless wisdom makes the flowers of poetry bloom" within the tools of the smith's and weaver's trades. The smith, the weaver, and the painter appeared as tools utilized by God for the production of artifacts — ironwork, cloth, mystic rhymes, flowers of poetry. Longfellow went on to introduce Sachs, "the cobbler-poet, laureate of the gentle craft," whose house had turned into an ale-house, desecrated by the "swart mechanic" who came at night "to drown his cark and care,/Quaffing ale from pewter tankards, in the master's antique chair."⁵⁶⁸ (One wonders if the mechanic would have been less objectionable had he demonstrated a knack for writing uplifting verse.) In the

⁵⁶⁶ Martin, "Longfellow's 'The Village Blacksmith,'" Campbell, Romantic Ethic.

⁵⁶⁷ Longfellow, "Nuremberg," in Poetical Works, 1:199-200.

⁵⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 200.

concluding couplets, Longfellow at once offered his own poetic homage to Nuremberg and its artistic laborers:

Thus, O Nuremberg, a wanderer from a region far away,
As he paced thy streets and court-yards, sang in thought his careless lay;
.....
Gathering from the pavement's crevice, as a floweret of the soil,
The nobility of labor, — the pedigree of toil.⁵⁶⁹

Clearly the labor Longfellow referred to was aesthetic rather than merely manual; the comparisons he drew between the blacksmith, the weaver, and Dürer were intended to grant to Dürer (and to other great artists in general) that “nobility of labor” and “pedigree of toil”; his description of the uncouth mechanic who desecrates Sachs’ house makes the class bias of his position clear.

Similarly, in “To a Child,” Longfellow offered advice to his infant son which drew clear distinctions between manual and mental labor as markers of class status, while also blurring the lines between forms of labor. Should fate sentence the boy to labor, Longfellow bids him “[r]emember, in that perilous hour,/When most afflicted and oppressed,/From labor there shall come forth rest.”⁵⁷⁰ Should the young man secure “a more auspicious fate,” Longfellow urged him,

Still let it ever be thy pride
To linger by the laborer's side;
With words of sympathy or song
To cheer the dreary march along
Of the great army of the poor
.....
Nor to thyself the task shall be
Without reward; for thou shalt learn
The wisdom early to discern
True beauty in utility;
As great Pythagoras of yore,
Standing beside the blacksmith's door,
And hearing the hammers, as they smote

⁵⁶⁹ *ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁵⁵⁹ Longfellow, “To a Child,” in *Poetical Works*, 1:212-213.

The anvils with a different note,
 Stole from the varying tones, that hung
 Vibrant on every iron tongue,
 The secret of the sounding wire,
 And formed the seven-chorded lyre.⁵⁷¹

The fragile link connecting working smith and observing youth in “To a Child” was the moral value placed on the smith’s effort, rather than on the tangible products of that effort; significantly, the instruction described in the poem was conveyed through the musical sounds unintentionally produced by the smith’s work. Longfellow counseled his son to learn to abstract moral value from his observations of the manual laborer. Actual engagement in manual labor could only teach the value of perseverance towards the promise of eventual rest; the effort put forth by the smith, and not his actual physical labor, was to be observed and imitated. The great lesson to be drawn from this particular incarnation of Longfellow’s ancestor was “True beauty in utility.” That phrase, and the lesson it carried, summed up Longfellow’s understanding of poetry, and links his “defence” of American poetry — by virtue of the expanded definition of utility he offered in that essay — to his own progress to manhood and letters. The phrase and its context, advice given to a son, neatly echoed Stephen Longfellow’s (and even Theophilus Parsons’) admonitions to Longfellow himself.

In “Excelsior,” a young man’s striving, past the point of reason and to the point of death is, on the one hand, justified and vindicated by the voice — God’s? — that speaks the final “Excelsior!” of the poem, and on the other hand, a force that radically separates the young man from all levels of human society — peasants women, wise men, religious figures.⁵⁷² Summarizing and explaining the poem to an inquirer in 1843, Longfellow described the poem’s intent, identifying it as “no more than to display in a series of pictures the Life of a man of genius, resisting all temptations, laying aside all fears, heedless of all

⁵⁷¹ *ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁵⁷² Cf. Hovey, “Psalm of Life.”

warnings and pressing right on to accomplish his purpose.”⁵⁷³ Describing the progress of the poem and the various social groups that populate the poem, Longfellow concluded his description with a sentence that powerfully underscored the literal and figurative endlessness of the protagonist’s strife: “Filled with these aspirations he perishes; — without having reached the perfection he longed for; and the voice heard in the air is the promise of immortality and progress ever upward.”⁵⁷⁴

Shortly after composing “Excelsior,” Longfellow sent a copy of it to his friend Samuel Gray Ward, with a letter. Introducing the subject, Longfellow wrote: “today I send you . . . one of the best things, if not the best, that I have written. . . . The idea of this poem is the Life of Genius. This you will comprehend at a glance. Many people will not comprehend it at all.”⁵⁷⁵ He continued, giving a rare glimpse of the poet at work:

The other night [Sept 28], about one o’clock, as I was smoking a cigar preparatory to going to bed, it came into my mind; but, as it was late, I thought I would not write it out until morning. Accordingly, I went to bed, but I could not sleep. That voice kept ringing in my ears; and finally I jumped out of my bed, lighted my lamp and set to work. The result was this poem and a dreadful cold and rheumatism, which have confined me to my chamber for two days.⁵⁷⁶

Did the poem “speak” itself to Longfellow whole, in “that voice,” or did he labor over it? Did Longfellow identify with the driven-unto-death genius of the poem? (Would the spontaneous receipt of such a poem constitute him a genius?) Portraying a genius dying striving, misunderstood, and alone, the poem can be read as a warning against cultivating “genius,” or as a kind of consolation for a perceived lack of genius. The poem can also be

⁵⁷³ Longfellow to J.G. Jarvis, Jr., Cambridge, MA, 22 Jan 1843, in Letters, 2:500-501.

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ Longfellow to Samuel Gray Ward, Cambridge, MA, 30 September 1841, in Letters, 2:334.

⁵⁷⁶ *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

read as showing genius as a kind of asymptotic limit, depicting the keyed-up, literally rest-less drive of the genius as a drive only a few men could emulate.⁵⁷⁷

If “Excelsior” was meant to be about the life of genius, it seems significant that the protagonist did not produce anything more tangible than his cry, his banner, and a host of perplexed observers unable to make him see reason. The banner and the goal it proclaimed was meant no doubt to symbolize the power of the genius’ written word; but the reader does not see this protagonist, unidentified in the poem, as a genius. Even to a reader in the know, as Longfellow clearly believed Ward to be (and just in case Ward failed to be as perceptive as Longfellow believed him to be, Longfellow informed him of the poem’s meaning), genius was imputed to the figure, rather than demonstrated. Besides the banner, the young man carries no props, made no statement beyond “Excelsior!” He does not attempt to explain his behavior, or his banner; he drives himself to death and is vindicated, finally, by a voice from heaven. The genius thus appeared as an isolated figure, highly strung and comprehensible only to God and to a highly refined few. Genius, then, lay more in driving aspiration, in the will to act, than in actual literary or aesthetic production.

If “Excelsior” is a poem about genius, it is also a poem about a man whose primary effect on others was at once mysterious and mystifying. The people around him do not understand him; they do not follow his banner; they do not embrace his ethic. And within the construction of genius inherent in “Excelsior,” effort shaped behavior rather than production: one is a genius; one does not necessarily produce works of genius. And for Longfellow, effort went more into his production and identification of himself as a man of letters than into the production of poetry itself. Longfellow’s description of the composition of “Excelsior” portrayed little striving. Indeed, the poem demanded to be written, and the

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. Reinhard Friederich, “Excelsior!” *Gettysburg Review* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 481-492.

poet's sleep was interrupted by the "voice" — of the poem (and certainly "Excelsior" reads like a poem written by an insomniac). But there is no indication that labor was involved in the production of the poem; "Excelsior!" may have been the cry that kept Longfellow awake and made him ill, but otherwise, he mentioned little striving in the description of how he came to write the poem.

In other letters accompanying other 'psalms,' Longfellow referred to his poetry somewhat passively and often with a mention of strong emotion accompanying composition. In a letter to Lewis Gaylord Clark, offering him the "Psalm of Death" that would become "The Reaper and the Flowers" in Voices of the Night, Longfellow wrote, in terms that blended affect and service: "These lines I wrote yesterday morning, my heart moving me thereunto, and not without tears in my eyes. They may bring none into yours, perchance; and yet sitting lonely here there in the world are sorrowing souls, who will not read them without feeling soothed."⁵⁷⁸ In his journal, Longfellow had noted how spontaneously this poem had been 'born':

Dec. 6. A beautiful holy morning with me. I was softly excited I knew not why; and wrote, with peace in my heart and not without tears in my eyes 'The Reaper and the Flowers' a Psalm of Death. I have had an idea of this kind for a long time in my mind, without finding any expression for it in words. This morning it seemed to crystallize at once, without any effort of my own. It would seem as if thoughts, like children have their period of gestation, and then are born whither we will or not.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁸ Longfellow to Lewis Gaylord Clark, Cambridge, MA, 7 December 1838, in Letters, 2:117-118.

⁵⁷⁹ Longfellow, [Journal], Feb 1838 - Dec 1839, 107. Longfellow's comparison of poems to children is striking, precisely because he does not assert his authorship of the poem in active terms. The poem came to him without effort on his part, just as a man's children appeared without significant labor on his part (ironically, in April 1847 Fanny Longfellow would become the first woman in the United States to give birth while under ether). Edward Wagenknecht, *Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), 240-244; Frances Appleton Longfellow, *Mrs. Longfellow: Selected Letters and Journals of Fanny Appleton Longfellow, 1817-1861*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), 129-130.

Longfellow's parallel between poems and children in his journal is also rather chilling given that "The Reaper and the Flowers" draws the same parallel, with the children/flowers dying in order to beautify Heaven. Kirsten Silva Gruesz has noted that well-wishers placed placards with quotes from "The Reaper and the Flowers" at the South Carolina lake where Susan Smith drowned her children in 1995. Gruesz, "Feeling for the Fireside," 43-44.

On December 7, he noted that his attempts to revise the poem had failed, writing: “In the afternoon copied the Reaper for Knickerbocker, having in the morning received a letter from Clark. Added two stanzas. Dissatisfied with them, and struck them out; leaving the piece as it came yesterday from my mind in a gush.”⁵⁸⁰ Later, in July 1839, he wrote again to Lewis Gaylord Clark, apologizing for not having a psalm on hand for Clark’s next Knickerbocker, explaining that “no ‘Psalm or nothing’ has sung itself through my lips of late.”⁵⁸¹ Psalms sang themselves. Longfellow presented himself as their tool, not their creator, found his more consciously ‘worked-on’ additions to an inspired poem less acceptable.

Ironically, when Longfellow wrote to his father about publishing a second collection of poetry shortly after Voices of the Night, he explained his haste in terms clearly intended to refer to the smith who would appear in that second volume: “I think it important to bring it out now, and not to wait till a larger number of pieces are ready. Blow upon blow, is the word, and not let the iron cool.”⁵⁸² Longfellow’s decision to publish Ballads and Other Poems shortly after the enormously successful Voices of the Night showed Longfellow calculating how best to present himself to an American audience, resolving to act — by publishing quickly — and “not [to] let the iron cool.” Yet his presentation of himself to his father in an earlier letter as an emotional and spontaneously composing Poet whose work “trickled from [his pen]”⁵⁸³ masked that calculation.

Yet, in his poetry, poets were portrayed as men whose minds were receptive rather than resolving, and whose work involved spontaneous reception and composition. In “Rain in Summer,” published in The Belfry of Bruges, Longfellow contrasted the perceptive and

⁵⁸⁰ Longfellow, [Journal], Feb 1838 - Dec 1839, 108.

⁵⁸¹ Longfellow to Lewis Gaylord Clark, Cambridge, MA, 20 July 1839, in Letters, 2:157.

⁵⁸² Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Cambridge, MA, 26 September 1841, in Letters, 2:332.

⁵⁸³ Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, 25 October 1840, in Letters, 2:259.

instructive poet with the ordinary mortals presented in the poem. A sick man is soothed by the rain; school boys sail “mimic fleets” in the streams of rainwater; the “toilsome and patient oxen stand/Lifting the yoke-encumbered head” to inhale the sweet air following the rain, thanking the Lord “[f]or this rest in the furrow after toil;” a farmer rejoices in the rain, and “counts it as no sin/That he sees therein/Only his own thrift and gain.”⁵⁸⁴ The rain benefits all of these figures, offering them comfort, play, and “thrift and gain.” It also provides the poet, who appears in the third-to-last stanza of the poem as an all-seeing figure capable of perceiving spiritual entities in the very rain-soaked air. In the penultimate stanza, Longfellow elaborated on the mental powers of the poet:

He can behold
Things manifold
That have not yet been wholly told, —
Have not been wholly sung nor said.
For his thought, that never stops,
Follows the water-drops
Down to the graves of the dead,
Down through chasms and gulfs profound,
To the dreary fountain-head
Of lakes and rivers under ground;
And sees them, when the rain is done,
On the bridge of colors seven
Climbing up once more to heaven
Opposite the setting sun.⁵⁸⁵

The final stanza, typically, summarized Longfellow’s perception of the poet/seer’s ineffable capacities while also assigning those capacities a particular cultural value:

Thus the Seer,
With vision clear,
Sees forms appear and disappear,
In the perpetual round of strange,
Mysterious change
From birth to death, from death to birth,
From earth the heaven, from heaven to earth;
Till glimpses more sublime

⁵⁸⁴ Longfellow, “Rain in Summer,” in *Poetical Works*, 1:204-206.

⁵⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 206.

Of things, unseen before
 Unto his wondering eyes reveal
 The Universe, as an immeasurable wheel
 Turning forevermore
 In the rapid and rushing river of Time.⁵⁸⁶

The Seer, blessed by “vision clear,” sees those forms as they “appear and disappear;” he receives those “glimpses more sublime,” the Universe is revealed to him — the images come to the poet/seer, they are not generated by him. And while in this poem Longfellow attributed mysterious powers of sight and perception to his poet, the perceptions did not seem to go beyond the poet: he sees both the material and the spiritual benefits offered by the rain, but does not communicate those lessons to the other figures in the poem. The poem stands as that communication, but the poem, significantly, is not presented as the made product of that poet’s perceptions.

⁵⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 206-207.

EPILOGUE: NOTHING DONE!

In 1842, while preparing to leave Marienberg after taking the water cure for his physical and mental health, Longfellow penned the following sonnet, “Mezzo Cammin”:

Half of my life is gone, and I have let
The years slip from me and have not fulfilled
The aspiration of my youth, to build
Some tower of song with lofty parapet.
Not indolence, nor pleasure, nor the fret
Of restless passions that would not be stilled,
But sorrow, and a care that almost killed,
Kept me from what I may accomplish yet;
Though, half-way up the hill, I see the Past
Lying beneath me with its sounds and sights, —
A city in the twilight dim and vast,
With smoking roofs, soft bells, and gleaming lights, —
And hear above me on the autumnal blast
The cataract of Death far thundering from the heights.⁵⁸⁷

Not published with his collected poetry until years after its composition, this sonnet expressed Longfellow’s dissatisfaction in 1842 with the disparity between his dreams of literary production and his actual accomplishments. It is the production of a man feeling his age and feeling the approach of death, nostalgic for the past and fearing the future. His assessment of the factors that had inhibited his ability to realize his youthful dreams acknowledged the usual suspects — indolence, pleasure, and unmasterable passions — and dismissed them with that introducing “[n]ot.” Rather, Longfellow asserted that “sorrow, and a care that almost killed,” references to Mary Longfellow’s death and Fanny Appleton’s rejection, “[k]ept him” from reaching his goals. A note of optimism sounded in the octave’s last line: he may accomplish those goals “yet.” And yet the sestet, which mapped Longfellow’s lifespan onto a hill, with the Past as a cozy city in the twilight-lit valley, and the “cataract of Death far thundering from the heights” of the hill, imposes a tone of resignation

⁵⁸⁷ Longfellow, “Mezzo Cammin,” in Poetical Works, 1:234-235.

and endurance over the sonnet. A gleam of hope, a youthful dream of towers built is followed by a fatalistic vision of life as a hill to be laboriously climbed, burdened by sorrow and killing cares; as the imagery shifts from the architectural to the geographical, it becomes less clear — to the reader and, one presumes, to Longfellow himself — what relationship the dreamed-of towers bear to the hill Longfellow pictured himself climbing, laden with sadness and regret.

Yet Longfellow's claim of dreams unfulfilled obscures his very real success as a poet by 1842. By the time Longfellow left Cambridge for Marienberg, his collection Voices of the Night had gone through six editions; Ballads and Other Poems had also met with resounding success.⁵⁸⁸ The success of both collections was particularly noteworthy at a time of national economic depression, when publishing houses were particularly careful to limit publications to those deemed most likely to succeed economically; in November 1840 Longfellow wrote to his father that the third edition of Voices was finished and that "[t]he second edition is all sold; which considering the hard times is very well. The publisher is confident it will continue to sell, and. . . has accordingly stereotyped it."⁵⁸⁹ Longfellow's sense of failure may have been to some extent a kind of romantic pose, the portrayal of himself to himself as a man of great promise kept from fulfilling his real potential by emotional misfortune. Yet within the poem, that sense of failure hinged on a particular goal that Longfellow had not in fact achieved: the production of that "tower of song with lofty parapet." As William Charvat has noted, Longfellow never did complete the great Christian romance he dreamed of producing, though he did produce and publish parts of it as

⁵⁸⁸ On January 30, 1842 Longfellow had written to his father that "We have just got out a new edition of the Voices. — the sixth. I make no changes. The Ballads are also very successful; and I am glad they find favor in your eyes." Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, Cambridge, MA, 30 January 1842, in Letters, 2:381.

⁵⁸⁹ Longfellow to Stephen Longfellow, [Cambridge, MA], 15 November 1840, in Letters, 2:263.

Christus: A Mystery in 1872. Instead, his poetic career and reputation have ultimately rested on his psalms and other short lyrics and on his longer narrative poems.⁵⁹⁰

Ironically, Longfellow's last novel, Kavanagh, published in 1849, portrayed a would-be poet always actively not writing a great romantic poem. Ostensibly about Arthur Kavanagh, a Catholic who as a young man converted to Protestantism and who hoped to establish a universal Christian church in an unnamed small town, the novel is also the story of Churchill the schoolmaster. The first chapters are, in fact, about Churchill, his domestic life, and his long-standing desire to write a great romance. The running joke of the novel, however, is that Churchill never writes this romance. Though he is full of resolve to begin, he is perpetually distracted by letters to be answered, by his children, and by his own fondness for exotic poetical detail and effect. Churchill's many statements of his intent to write his romance all fail to be followed by actual creative effort directed towards that goal.

Churchill is portrayed as a man who not only lacked the courage to begin work on his pet project, but who is also so intent on creating a magical Romance based on arcane mysteries that he misses the more domestic romance of life in the town around him. Indeed, Longfellow twits Churchill for having missed the significance of a female character's heroic self-sacrifice:

How often, ah, how often, between the desire of the heart and its fulfilment, lies only the briefest space of time and distance, and yet the desire remains forever unfulfilled! It is so near that we can touch it with the hand, and yet so far away that the eye cannot perceive it. What Mr. Churchill most desired was before him. The Romance he was longing to find and record had really occurred in his neighborhood, among his own friends. It had been set like a picture into the frame-work of his life, enclosed within his own experience. But he could not see it as an object apart from himself; and as he was gazing at what was remote and strange and indistinct, the nearer incidents of aspiration, love, and death, escaped him. They were too near to be clothed by the imagination with the golden vapors of romance; for the familiar

⁵⁹⁰ Charvat, "Longfellow," Profession of Authorship, 146-147.

seems trivial, and only the distant and unknown completely fill and satisfy the mind.⁵⁹¹

The real poetry, Longfellow suggested, was domestic; had Churchill possessed the ability to clothe “the familiar” with “the golden vapors of romance,” he might have drawn on local materials and created a perfectly serviceable romance out of materials at hand. Note, however, that the “golden vapors” remain; according to the narrator, the setting and not the romanticism itself should have been altered.

At the end of the novel, when Kavanagh and his wife Cecilia return to the village after several years of missionary work abroad, they find Churchill unchanged, still dreaming of his Romance, still frustrated by his inability to begin on it. Considering Churchill’s condition, Kavanagh/Longfellow muses:

The same dreams, the same longings, the same aspirations, the same indecision. A thousand things had been planned, and none completed. His imagination seemed still to exhaust itself in running, before it tried to leap the ditch. While he mused, the fire burned in other brains. . . . He wanted the all-controlling, all-subduing will. He wanted the fixed purpose that sways and bends all circumstances to its uses, as the wind bends the reeds and rushes beneath it.⁵⁹²

The novel concludes with Kavanagh reflecting on his final conversation with Churchill — “Nothing done! Nothing done! . . . And shall all these lofty aspirations end in nothing? Shall the arms be thus stretched forth to encircle the universe, and come back empty against a bleeding, aching breast?” — and pronouncing lines of poetry that should be placed on the door of every house, “as a warning, a suggestion, an incitement”: —

Stay, stay the present instant!
Imprint the marks of wisdom on its wings!
O, let it not elude thy grasp, but like

⁵⁹¹ Longfellow, *Kavanagh*, 168-169.

⁵⁹² *ibid.*, 181. Emphasis added.

The good old patriarch upon record,
Hold the fleet angel fast until he bless thee!⁵⁹³

The interaction between Churchill and Kavanagh at the novel's close, however, represents a larger tension between effort and intellectual labor. Kavanagh advises Churchill to be up and doing, to focus on what is at hand and near. And yet: if Kavanagh is meant to stand as Churchill's opposite, an intellectual laborer who achieves his goals, we do not see him actually accomplishing those goals.⁵⁹⁴ The ambivalence of the conclusion — whose aspirations does Kavanagh fear might go unfulfilled, Churchill's or his own? — suggests a larger uncertainty that doctrines of action and directed mental effort would, indeed, fulfill the dreams of the literarily-inclined man. Kavanagh directs Churchill towards the production of more psalms, a gesture that implies that Longfellow was inclined to embrace that form and urge it on others. And yet: in the novel's conclusion, Churchill only grudgingly accepts Kavanagh's advice, a hint perhaps that Churchill's poetic flights of fancy and his dreams of producing that fabulous Romance — poetry composed for pleasure rather than for service — still appealed to Longfellow.

Although Longfellow meant to poke fun at Churchill, his portrayal of Churchill as a poet who was all talk and no action presented the poet as a man incapable of performing disciplined intellectual labor and of finishing a tangible product. Longfellow's work, overall, upheld an image of the poet that granted him cultural value insofar as he produced psalms for the benefit of readers. Preserving a sense of the mysterious powers of the poet's mind, he nevertheless devalued those powers by continuing to identify the products of the poet's mind as being separate from, and of greater service than, the poet himself. The messages

⁵⁹³ *ibid.*, 188.

⁵⁹⁴ William Charvat has argued that in this novel, Longfellow portrays his 1849 self — Kavanagh — outgrowing younger models of himself, with Churchill as his 1840s self, struggling between a desire to write and external distractions, and a minor character, a melodramatic poetaster and dandy named Hawkins as his 1830s persona. Charvat, "Longfellow," *Profession of Authorship*, 144-146; Hovey, "Critical Provincialism," 342.

carried by his most popular early poems — striving, struggling, working without a particular end or product in sight — became more significant than the poet who produced those poems, precisely because, in Longfellow’s configuration of poetic labor, poetic production involved no labor, no effort whatsoever. Poems which called for effort appeared to have been created without any such effort. Yet Churchill’s creative paralysis suggests that successful poetry-making required will power and conscious effort; Kavanagh’s lament that Churchill had gotten “nothing done! Nothing done!” in fact implied Longfellow’s own awareness of the labor “done” in the production of poetry. Churchill embodied the inherent conflict between poetry as a goal to be actively pursued and poems as spontaneously produced artifacts.

Even as Longfellow worked to establish an understanding of the poet’s labor as at once mental and manly, producing objects that were both useful and beautiful, material and ethereal, his figure of the Poet — and Longfellow himself as a poet — ultimately obscured the connection between mental work and poetic production by focusing exclusively on the mysterious processes of the poet’s mind or on the moral service provided by the finished poetry itself. Although he would present himself as more seer than as rhyme-smith, Longfellow nevertheless bolstered a conception of poetry as a commodity capable of providing intellectual and moral service to its readers. That conception ultimately helped to sell poetry (including, of course, his own) while separating the finished commodity from the mental labor that went into its production. By focusing exclusively on the mysterious processes of the poet’s mind or on the moral service provided by the finished poetry itself, Longfellow ultimately obscured the connection between mental work and poetic production.

Chapter 6

“Something Incompleted Still:” The Meaning Of Success

Labor with what goal you will,
 Something still remains undone;
 Something incompleted still
 Waits the rising of the sun!

 Waits and will not go away;
 Waits and will not be gainsaid;
 By the cares of yesterday
 Each to-day is heavier made.⁵⁹⁵

In the spring of 1854, during his final semester as a Harvard professor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his final lectures, discussed various projects with his publishers, responded to requests for contributions and advice. That February, Longfellow wrote to a would-be poet:

If you have the ‘vision and the faculty divine,’ they will assert themselves, and make their presence known, without the aid and advice of any one. There will be knockings at your heart, which you cannot mistake, and which will be loud and frequent enough to make you pause and listen! . . . Success is of two kinds. One is in the poem itself; the other is in the recognition of the public.⁵⁹⁶

Longfellow both advised and refused to advise. Declining to give the young man any more specific criticism, Longfellow instead told ‘Harper’ that vision and ability would “assert themselves” in the mind of the true poet regardless of any external influence. The drive to write poetry would act on its own behalf; yet, ironically, in the concluding line of

⁵⁹⁵ In an entry dated January [24] 1846, Longfellow wrote these two stanzas, along with an intervening second stanza (“By yon bedside — on the stair — / At the threshold — near the gate, / With its never-ceasing prayer, / Like a beggar it doth wait!”) in his journal. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, [Jan 1846] *Journal* [1 Oct 1845–28 Feb 1847], 20, Longfellow Papers.

Although he clearly began work on this poem in 1846 and had published it separately, Longfellow did not publish it in a collection until 1858 when it appeared in his *Courtship of Miles Standish* volume (1858) as one of the poems in a group he labeled “Birds of Passage.” In the version printed in the collected *Poetical Works*, two more stanzas have been added, one specifically referring to the weight of past dreams: “Till at length the burden seems / Greater than our strength can bear, / Heavy as the weight of dreams, / Pressing on us everywhere.” Significantly, in the later version, the word “goal” in the first stanza has been changed to “zeal” — again, showing the blurring of a specific goal into the more diffuse abstraction of “zeal.” In *Poetical Works*, 3:71; Arvin, *Longfellow*, 137.

⁵⁹⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to ‘Horace Harper,’ Cambridge [MA], 15 February 1854, in *Letters*, 3:411. According to Hilen, the signature was a pseudonym.

Longfellow's letter, the finished poem and readers' reactions to that poem stood as the two signs of poetic success. No actual labor takes place in this scenario. The poem knocks, the poet, obeying the signal, pauses, listens, and transcribes; he does not actively create. The poem itself, or a disembodied Poetry, is the subject. The poet would achieve his success by doing the bidding of the poetic faculty.

Longfellow's transition from Harvard professor to mere poet in the spring of 1854 meant that he had amassed enough social, cultural, and financial security to give up, literally, his "day job," and rely on his literary work (and his second wife's inheritance and family investments) to support himself and his family. The transition is significant because it was the exception to the rule: in his influential essay on Longfellow's income, William Charvat has noted that Longfellow was virtually the only American poet — male or female — able to approximate a living by his poetry. The fact that others contributed to Longfellow's assets (his father-in-law, Nathan Appleton, gave him the title to Craigie House as a wedding present) does qualify the image of Longfellow as a self-supporting poet. Nevertheless, few poets in the nineteenth century could hope to replicate the double blessing of literary and financial success represented by Longfellow.⁵⁹⁷

Indeed, Longfellow's story could not easily be used as a model for an aspiring poet. The business aspects of Longfellow's career — his careful control of the timing of his publications, his shrewd purchasing of his own stereotypes — could be imitated, of course. But Longfellow's ability to profit from these aspects of his career was built on the all-important willingness of American publishers to print his volumes of poetry in the first place. The reputation Longfellow built for himself through the publication of his 'psalms' in the Knickerbocker as well as the recognizable services to readers offered by those poems

⁵⁹⁷ Charvat, "Longfellow" and "Longfellow's Income," Profession of Authorship; on Appleton's gift, see Arvin, Longfellow, 51.

made him a stronger candidate for volume publication. As a young man Longfellow's strength lay in his ability, literally, to capitalize on lucky breaks offered by supportive others: Bowdoin's decision to establish a professorship in modern languages; his father's willingness to bankroll his travels in Europe; George Ticknor's resignation from Harvard. Longfellow turned those opportunities into avenues for literary activity; later he would turn that resourcefulness toward the careful marketing of his poetry.⁵⁹⁸

Yet even this most successful American poet felt the need to defend the legitimacy of poetic creativity, in essays like his defense of Sidney's Defence published in the North American. Although Longfellow's privately stated reasons for leaving Harvard in 1854 suggested his clear awareness of the need for uninterrupted time to devote to his poetry, his formal letter of resignation made no reference to this desire, and even after leaving Harvard Longfellow's journal suggests that he was unable to create the time to write: weeks after the official acceptance of his resignation, he noted that he found "[n]o time to write. The time once given to the College is filled up with other little, nameless things. I perceive no gap."⁵⁹⁹

Both privately and publicly, Longfellow separated his desire to write from actual creation; even in the relative privacy of his journal he characterized his poems as transient beings appearing at their own time, not his: on October 31, 1854, Longfellow lamented the end of his favorite month, sighing, "Ah me! why do no songs flit through my brain as of old? It is a consolation to think, they come when least expected."⁶⁰⁰ The consolation Longfellow urged on himself acknowledged that poems could not be willed, but would arrive according to their own mysterious schedule. At another level, Longfellow's attempt to

⁵⁹⁸ Charvat, "Longfellow" and "Longfellow's Income," Profession of Authorship. See also Thompson, Young Longfellow.

⁵⁹⁹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 29 [September] 1854, [Journal] [v.] 1 Sept 1853-21 Dec 1855, 121, Longfellow Papers.

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 31 October 1855, 213.

comfort himself involved a particular kind of mental effort: he recorded his disappointment, and immediately willed himself to a more hopeful attitude. In an earlier journal entry, written in January 1854, Longfellow complained of another day lost to college work, then answered himself with “But why complain? These golden days are driven like nails into the fabric. Who knows but they may help it to hold fast and firm, when assailed from without? Who knows but some good may come of all this drudgery? Let us hope and believe so!”⁶⁰¹ This willed cheerfulness echoed his earlier poem “The Rainy Day.” The poem began with a stanza describing a gloomy day; in the second stanza, an active and untiring wind (“the wind is never weary”) heightened the narrator’s sense of his life as “cold, and dark, and dreary;” the discouraging environment fells “the hopes of youth” and tears his thoughts from the “mouldering Past.” In the last stanza, the narrator willed his “sad heart!” into silence, commanding:

Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
 Thy fate is the common fate of all,
 Into each life some rain must fall,
 Some days must be dark and dreary.⁶⁰²

The narrator ordered himself to “cease repining,” reasoning that “[t]hy fate is the common fate of all” and that all men must expect “dark and dreary days.” The moral was clearly stated, but the imagery of cold, moldy dankness and the repeated phrase “dark and dreary”

⁶⁰¹ *ibid.*, 4 January [1854], 41.

⁶⁰² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Rainy Day,” in *Works*, 1:69. The poem appeared in Longfellow’s *Ballads and Other Poems* (1841).

An anecdotal note on twentieth-century reception: my grandfather could recite this poem in 1996, having memorized it in school around 1920. When we read the poem together in 1996, he was surprised to see that there were three, not two, stanzas to the poem. He had learned the first and third stanza, and was not familiar with the second stanza — the one which described Longfellow’s private feelings of despair. The difference between the poem my grandfather recalled and the printed version is instructive. Without the second stanza, the poem does function as a more explicitly and objectively moralistic poem. The addition of the second stanza shows Longfellow not merely offering wisdom to his readers, but presenting his own experiences — both the sadness and the following will to persevere — to his readers to be imitated. Personal conversation with Leonard E. Anderson, July 1996. Cf. Joan Shelley Rubin, “‘Listen, My Children’: Modes and Functions of Poetry Reading in American Schools, 1880-1950,” in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 261-281.

overpowered the brief mention of sunshine in the third stanza, and conveyed overall a darker message: not “hope for a brighter future,” but “shut up and deal.” No specific or ameliorating action was suggested; again, the implicit message, this time directed by the narrator to his feeling self, was “learn to labor and to wait.” Like Longfellow’s wishful belief that his unfulfilling college work might lead to unknown future benefit, his poetry sought to turn moments of personal doubt into generalized and readily applicable statements of uplift. If readers could identify with the subjective sadness of the first two stanzas of “The Rainy Day,” they could also internalize the call to persevere in the third stanza. Apparently speaking to himself in this and other poems, Longfellow could also direct the same instructions to readers experiencing the same feelings.

The specific patterns of thought which Longfellow transcribed in his journal and worked into his poems would ultimately become the means by which Longfellow — and antebellum American poets in general — would both justify and obscure the labor involved in the production of poetry. And it was precisely this kind of lesson in emotional management which allowed Longfellow to justify the time he needed for his poetry. Longfellow’s understanding of his creative work as work was accompanied by language which stressed his need for time and conducive space for the reception and the transcription of poems. However, to his readers and his intimates alike, Longfellow presented himself as a spontaneously composing poet. Poems bade him work — not vice versa. In this sense Longfellow’s sense of poetic vocation echoed the gentleman amateur model embodied by Bryant who, like Longfellow, also addressed issues of conducive spaces and times for poetic labor.

Yet as a “Lay Monk” young Longfellow called explicitly for payment for poets’ work, while Bryant found this difficult. When approached by Theophilus Parsons in December

1823 and offered money to publish his poetry in the United States Literary Gazette, Bryant did not decline, but he also could not name a price; he asked Parsons to set a price for him. Longfellow, in contrast, wrote to the same editor in August 1825, asking for paid work at the Gazette. Parsons offered Bryant roughly two hundred dollars a year for an average of one hundred lines a month; all he could offer Longfellow was highly discouraging advice. The two young men dealt with Parsons at different moments in the editor's literary career; the distinctions between tactics and Parsons' reactions are instructive. The editor's changing attitude suggests ambiguous beliefs about the position of the poet in American culture. Between 1823 and 1825 at least one literary editor had come to see poetry as bad business.

A crucial difference between Bryant and Longfellow American poets lay in their assessments of the economic validity of poetic labor. As a young editor, Bryant had identified revision and conscious effort as important aspects of poetic production; yet, ironically, in his influential 1826 lectures, Bryant framed an understanding of poetry which valued the products of poets' labor while explicitly arguing against compensation for that labor. Instead, according to Bryant, the love of his appreciative countrymen would be the poet's highest reward. By 1826, Bryant knew quite well that the love of appreciative countrymen did not put food on a poet's table. Yet, holding to the model of the gentleman poet, he took a temporary position at the New York Evening Post to supplement his dwindling editorial income. When he became permanent editor-in-chief of the newspaper after his employer's death in 1829, belles-lettres became, again, a pastime for Bryant rather than a source of livelihood, a condition Bryant himself had helped to solidify by upholding the model of the gentleman amateur.

Bryant along with other early nineteenth-century American critics, understood the male poet to be a genteel amateur — learned, cultivated, sensible — and his literary efforts

as finished products, offered for the pleasure, uplift, and instruction of his fellows. Bryant and his contemporaries believed themselves to have uniquely democratic responsibilities: in the wake of the War of 1812, they were to help usher in a distinctive American culture which would support and maintain republican virtue in the young nation. Fame and wealth, if they were thought of at all, were to be incidentals, secondary, mere byproducts of the higher service offered by the poet and his work to the members of the republic.

Major social changes would challenge this conception. Literacy rates in the new republic were on the rise in the antebellum decades, especially among women; additionally, rapid technological advances in transportation and communications made more books available to more readers, and made publishing a flourishing industry. Following the losses triggered by the Depression of 1837-1844, a handful of publishing houses emerged as major national industries, branching out into distribution and sales as well as publishing and production. Under these conditions, a number of American writers began to realize financial along with literary success. If American critics and readers continued to embrace the ethic of service offered by the model of the genteel amateur poet, the rise of a literary marketplace and the expansion of the publishing industry, and the continuing absence of an international copyright law in the U.S. nevertheless superimposed profit issues and money value onto authors — or, more specifically, onto the work produced by authors.⁶⁰³

All four of the poets I have treated managed their literary careers in the midst of this developing literary marketplace. All four also faced the expectations placed on young men of the middle classes: the need to earn a livelihood through respectable white-collar work, characterized by mental rather than physical skills. Livelihood issues overlapped with social concerns: a young man was required to prove himself able to provide not only for himself

⁶⁰³ Cf. Whalen, *Poe and the Masses*; Sellers, *Market Revolution*; Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*; Gilmore, *American Romanticism*; Wilson, *Figures of Speech*.

but, eventually, for a family. Moralists warned that young men who did not settle into a conventional marriage would be vulnerable to sexual, social, and economic dissipation which would tear at the fabric of republican civilization. With an emphasis on mental rather than manual work as the sign of middle-class masculine achievement, clear, upright thought would contribute not only to the young man's moral health but also to his economic success. The rational management of the passions would benefit a man individually and best fit him for service to his colleagues and, ultimately, his republic.

Toward that end, during the antebellum decades, ministers and moralists produced a host of advice books intended to preserve the character of young American men. Concerned with protecting their hoped-for readers from dangerous influences, these authors offered their own texts along with other similarly 'safe' reading material as sources of proper thought as well as guides to proper behavior. These self-help manuals and the uplifting literature they endorsed dovetailed with the concerns of early American literary critics, who also understood their responsibility to lie in the moral guidance of American readers. Both groups sought to function as sources of influence and instruction, and drew on key developments in the transportation and communications industries to extend — they hoped — their influence over American readers and, intentionally or not, to promote the literary products they believed to be most conducive to virtuous character development. As the literary marketplace developed, the language spoken in it remained republican. Authors and publishers alike juggled profit motives with moral uplift: how find a book or an author possessing the right balance of sensation and sentiment?

Strongly influenced by Scottish common-sense aesthetics, early American literary critics praised poetry for its ability to fuse affect, intellect, and instruction. These critics' emphasis on the proper effect a poem was to have on its reader subtly erased any effort put

into aesthetic production, stressing instead the benefits to be gained from aesthetic consumption. As British and German thinkers began to popularize Romantic emphases on spontaneous expression and emotional subjectivity, American critics and readers continued to direct attention to aesthetic reception, focusing not only on the emotional responses of readers but also on the highly receptive and spontaneously creative sensibilities of the artist as well. While Romantic theory placed more emphasis on the mind of the poet and provided greater cultural scope for the highly emotional ‘poetess’, for male and female poets alike popular beliefs about the Romantic poet’s spontaneous and ‘feelingful’ composition undermined the conscious craftsmanship attributed to poetry under older neoclassical poetic models.

Consequently, while poetry continued to be valued for the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral services it could provide its readers, it was increasingly dissociated from any labor involved in its production. While poets like Bryant and Longfellow remained personally aware of the labor involved in poetry making, their public presentations of themselves as poets and critics contradicted this private knowledge and helped to render the phrase “poetic labor” an oxymoron. These two poets’ reputations were based not so much on their financial success (minimal in the case of Bryant) as on the general perception of both men as wise and morally upright seers, men of great vision and feeling, characteristics attributed to them by virtue of the poems associated with them — not by the work represented by those poems.

Bryant’s and Longfellow’s poetic careers also represented diffused reworkings of a Protestant work ethic which obscured the connection between mental labor and its products. If Bryant increasingly erased the labor of revision and praised the services provided by poems rather than by poets, Longfellow separated literary labor from its ends by

mystifying his own compositional processes and presenting poets as visionaries rather than craftsmen. More than Bryant, Longfellow also blurred the line between writing poetry and being a poet by failing to identify “poet” as a distinct vocational goal even as he published poems calling for action and labor. The broader message of these poems reflected Longfellow’s growing inability to see “poet” as an economically viable and achievable career goal. Calling for action for its own sake, labor done for labor’s sake rather than for the achievement of any particular, productive goal, his poems fit into a broader discourse of uplift and masculine achievement while also revealing a darker side to those ideals. The work he did portray was valued for its abstract moral benefit and not for its actual products. By obscuring the connection between poetic labor and tangible poems, Longfellow endorsed a conception of mental labor which obscured the goals of such work.

For Longfellow, Bryant and Poe, the goal of “being a poet” came to parallel the unspoken goal of “making money.” Both were seen as desirable goals when properly qualified by references to higher ends: the national good, the public good, the moral good of American citizen-readers. Poets and businessmen characterized their activities as service to American consumers, and framed their vocational identities in terms of republican virtue and liberal gain: wishing, in other words, that the pursuit of one’s own interests would contribute to the larger public good. Liberal market ideology rested on a republican consensus, assuming that a larger public good exists and can be achieved through mass pursuit of individual aims.

Yet this willed fusion of the individual and the public good also required the apparent suppression or sublimation of more explicitly individual goals or dreams, a subjugation made apparent in the figure of the male poet. If American critics and readers based their valuation of poetry on its ability to carry affecting and uplifting sentiment, a

successful poet would channel his own dreams of fame, influence, and even income through this 'higher' valuation of the poet's works. The trick lay in identifying one's own dreams of success with the needs of American readers. If Longfellow stands as the best example of this identification, Bryant, Poe, and even Very also attempted similar projects. If all four worked to shape a vision of poetic success around the limited commercial market for American poetry, all four also sought, in a variety of ways, to create or cultivate an audience capable of appreciating (and perhaps even purchasing) their poetry. In the end, Bryant and Longfellow stood as models of successful poets in their own time, but their success hinged on their association with morally affecting poetry which blended emotional appeal with calls to upright thought and action. The moral and emotional service their poetry performed for their enthusiastic readers consequently remains an important way of measuring their success. And the early trajectory of Bryant's public poetic career set the tone for an understanding of poetic labor which limited — and no doubt continues to limit — the economic viability of poetry as a vocation in the United States.

In contrast, the careers of Jones Very and Edgar Allan Poe represented radically different conceptions of poetic success and poetic failure. Each sought to cultivate and accumulate an audience for his poetry; each hoped to influence readers' beliefs about the uses of poetry; and each separated conscious effort from poetic production. Very had consciously worked to prepare his mind to receive God's will, and believed that God's words were reward for that work. Much as Longfellow would, Very used his poetry to offer his own emotional and intellectual self-management as a model to readers. For Very justification of poetic labor elided with the issue of obedience to God: directed to write poetry by God, Very had no choice but to become a poet.

Very's collaboration with Emerson on the publication of his essays and sonnets also revealed the dangers inherent in the myth of poetic spontaneity. While Emerson believed that Very's sonnets needed conscious revision, Very argued that his poems should not be subjected to earthly labor precisely because they were not his poems. To Very, the sonnets had been finished, through him, by a truly invisible hand which had directed his. Emerson's insistence that Very — or, finally, Emerson himself — polish the sonnets was an insistence that the poems be reconnected to the physical being who created them: to Very himself. In spite of Emerson's original suggestion that Very "make the bookseller give you bread"⁶⁰⁴ for his sonnets, Very remained unmoved by the more secular hand of the market, seeking an audience only as a means of spreading his tightly ordered Words. He would be supported by his schoolteacher sisters for the rest of his life. Very did not successfully engage many readers, probably because his specific message diverged significantly from the more diffused Protestantism in Bryant's and Longfellow's work; nevertheless, Very's goals matched the ethos of service represented by Bryant's and Longfellow's poetic identities.

Unlike Very, Poe did very much need bread from his writing. When his early volumes of poetry brought him none and he faced disinheritance and poverty, Poe turned to journalism, tale-writing and critical work to eke out a living for himself and his household. As a poet his moment of greatest success was the publication of "The Raven" in early 1845, which, although reprinted heavily, earned Poe about nine dollars overall.⁶⁰⁵ Having learned that poetry did not pay, Poe sought instead to establish himself as an influential critic of poetry, appointing himself the task of educating readers to identify and appreciate the 'best' poetry. Effort for Poe went into critical labor. Defining the critic's responsibility as the rational measurement of the sentiment inspired by given poems, Poe used his own

⁶⁰⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jones Very, Concord, MA, November 18, 1838, in Letters, 7:326.

⁶⁰⁵ The figure is from Meyers, Poe, 186.

emotional responses, however, to guide his readers' reactions, a practice which undermined his stance of objective authority. And by repeatedly asserting the essentially intangible nature of poetic sentiment, Poe had set himself an impossible task: the rigorous measurement of an entity he claimed was immeasurable. While on the one hand this definition seemed calculated to place Poe in an unassailable position (who could argue with ineffability? how do you catch a cloud and pin it down?), it detracted from the poet's role in the production of poetry. The "burning thirst," the deeply emotional longing which Poe characterized as the stuff of poetry, would be translated by the true poet into "the Poetry of words" through processes Poe identified with phrases like "the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty."⁶⁰⁶ In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe wove between axiomatic statements and affectively charged effect, linking mechanical combinations of sound with specific emotional states to be triggered in the reader. The essay concluded with a collapse into the poem itself, the emotions in the text exceeding the ordering frame of the essay's original presentation of a poet at work.

As Charles J. Peterson wrote to James Russell Lowell, Poe was "a splendid fellow but 'unstable as water.'"⁶⁰⁷ As a model of masculine achievement, in his own time, Poe was a failure: a reputation blotted by ongoing poverty, emotional outbursts related to problems with alcohol, the death of his child bride, murky relationships with sensitive poetic women, all followed by a squalid death. On his own terms, he had also failed to realize his own particular dream: a journal of his own which would allow him to instruct American readers in the proper understanding — his — of poetry and the service it could provide readers. He yearned to create a role for himself as a definitive and defining voice in American letters. Yet his very inability to master unruly emotions and drives made him a less than useful

⁶⁰⁶ [Poe], review of Ballads and Other Poems, in Works, 11: 71-72, 75-76.

⁶⁰⁷ Charles J. Peterson to James Russell Lowell, 31 May 1842, quoted in Poe Log, 367.

proponent of the “triumph over passion” offered by Bryant or Longfellow. Always rejecting the more conventional advice offered by well-meaning colleagues and mentors, Poe was reached only a limited audience during his own lifetime, becoming more self-unmade than self-made.

By the early twentieth century, Bryant and Longfellow, so popular during the nineteenth century, were increasingly identified among the “schoolroom” or “fireside” poets. Their emphases on poetry’s moral and emotional service, which contributed so strongly to their popularity in their own lifetimes, seemed by the twentieth century to render their poems fit only for schoolchildren to memorize and take to heart. While the schoolroom poets are beginning to receive more critical attention, particularly in terms of their use (or misuse) of Native American, African-American, gender and imperialist themes, these poets in general need more careful location in American literary and economic life. They are examples of what actual nineteenth-century American readers identified as ‘good’ poetry, and spent money to own. I also hope with this project to raise questions about the parallels between male poetic subjectivity and the mental strategies attributed to “self-made” manhood in the antebellum United States.⁶⁰⁸

In contrast to the more conventional schoolroom poets, Poe fell further afield of nineteenth-century American taste. Rehabilitated by Baudelaire and the French Symbolists later in the nineteenth century, Poe’s reputation in the United States continued to be influenced by the unsavory mythology surrounding his life and death, kept in play by Rufus Griswold’s willful distortion of aspects of Poe’s life. His work would finally be embraced by American critics in the late 1940s; even so, debates continue over Poe’s place in the

⁶⁰⁸ See for example Haralson, “Mars in Petticoats;” Gioia, “Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism;” Gruesz, “*El Gran Poeta* Longfellow and a Psalm of Exile;” Gruesz, “Feeling for the Fireside;” Morris, “Bryant and the American Poetic Tradition;” Kinereth Meyer, “Landscape and Counter-Landscape in the Poetry of William Cullen Bryant,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48, no. 2 (September 1993): 194-211.

American literary canon (even as “the canon” itself becomes a contested term). Poe is the object of a daunting and multivocal body of critical analysis. And Poe is a staple of popular culture as well: Poe’s likeness appears in pickle commercials; an episode of the late television series “Homicide” took Poe’s grave in Baltimore as its setting; young people continue to embrace Poe as a “Goth” hero; an early Halloween episode of “The Simpsons” features James Earl Jones and Homer Simpson performing “The Raven,” complete with Bart Simpson’s ongoing commentary on the poem’s failure to inspire the emotion intended (“You know what would have been scarier than nothing? ANYTHING!”⁶⁰⁹). Poe probably would have enjoyed the attention; he probably would have appreciated having some pickles to take home, too. But Poe’s future existence as product spokesman could not have been foreseen by audiences during his lifetime.⁶¹⁰

If Poe was a model of poetic failure at the time of his death, Longfellow lived to see himself recognized as the model of American poetic success. Countless editions of his poetry, in a variety of formats, were published during his lifetime, with one-third of a million copies of his works sold by 1869. His poetry would be translated into twenty-eight languages. In England his poems would eventually outsell Tennyson’s and Browning’s, and three years after his death his bust would be placed in the Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey; Longfellow would be the only American memorialized there.⁶¹¹ Longfellow’s august reputation was based on his poetry’s ability to carry affecting and uplifting messages to its readers; his poetry blended a sentimental images of home and hearth with bracing calls for active effort and moral striving. Yet the action he called for was action without reference to

⁶⁰⁹ “Treehouse of Horror,” *The Simpsons*, episode 7F04, 25 October 1990, [transcript online], *The Simpsons Archive*, 1989- [cited 2000], available from World Wide Web (<http://www.snpp.com/episodes.html>).

⁶¹⁰ On the history of Poe’s reception in the United States, I am drawing from Meyers’ and Whalen’s summaries of Poe’s influence; see Meyers, *Poe*, 266-287; Whalen, *Poe and the Masses*, 3-17.

⁶¹¹ Charvat, “Longfellow,” *Profession of Authorship*, 150; Gioia, “Longfellow in the Aftermath,” 64-65.

specific goals: urging his audience to “learn to labor and to wait,” Longfellow ironically counseled a kind of active passivity, linking labor with patience. Longfellow’s fusion of labor and patience blended physical with mental activity. To labor while waiting connotes busyness for the sake of busyness, or busyness for the express purpose of passing time. And in spite of his reputation as a great American poet, his unusual financial success, Longfellow felt the drag of “something left undone.” He died without having finished what he believed was his greatest work, the project which he published in partial form as Christus in 1872. Longfellow’s reputation was based on his psalms and his patriotically inclined narrative poems like Evangeline (1848) and Hiawatha (1854).⁶¹² Better able than Poe and many others to anticipate the needs of a “Capital Reader,” Longfellow nevertheless demonstrates the limits that actual nineteenth-century readers as well as publishers and critics placed on poetry — as a vocation, as a genre, and as a commodity.

⁶¹² Charvat, “Longfellow,” Profession of Authorship, 140-141, 146-154.

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