

**SOLIDARITY THROUGH VACANCY: DIDACTIC STRATEGIES
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE**

by

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in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Abstract

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This dissertation describes an alternative to an especially influential understanding of how literature promotes social justice. According to this dominant paradigm, literature heightens our empathy through vivid depictions of suffering. Where this mode emphasizes stylistic vividness, I turn to works of fiction and autobiography from the years just before the Civil War to identify a wholly different didactic tradition—one that advances by means of what eighteenth-century critics derisively called *vacuity* or imaginative vacancy. Vacancy, I argue, is a tool for revealing networks of solidarity, distributed in time and space, and inaccessible by means of vivid description. Harriet Jacobs's offers an example of this dynamic in her treatment of violence in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Many other famous ex-slave narrators, such as Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northrup, foreground scenes in which a master beats a slave until his whip drips with blood. Such scenes heighten the reader's empathy through their excruciating level of detail, particularizing the narrated violence until it seems almost present. When Jacobs incorporates the trope, though, she transforms it through generalization, describing how in the aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion "everywhere men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet" and "the consternation was universal" (58). This scene is typical of Jacobs's treatment of

violence elsewhere in her narrative where punishments are not meted out to particular slaves but to groups. Because her writing frustrates visualization and the free play of empathy, Jacobs is able to prevent identification at the individual level and to depict slavery instead at the level of systems and groups. Like Jacobs, the other writers I examine in this dissertation—Rebecca Harding Davis, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne—use vacancy to create alternative didactic forms capable of imagining and promoting solidarity.

Introduction

Imagining Solidarity in America

While living in Rome in the early 1850s, the American artist Hiram Powers sculpted *America*. An ideal nude in the neoclassical tradition, *America* presents the country through the allegorical figure of a young woman. She wears a crown imprinted with thirteen stars and points upward with her left hand, while trampling chains under her left foot.¹ Powers, who originally planned to name the statue *Liberty*, wrote to a friend that he had designed *America* as “an embodiment of our political creed” (qtd. in Wunder 158). Though he never completed the deal, Powers planned to sell the statue to the United States government, who could, perhaps, have displayed *America* as a means for promoting civic virtue. Such an act would have been in keeping with the nineteenth-century’s dominant understanding of didactic art, which prized vivid imagery as the key to promoting moral action.²

About a decade after Powers finished *America*, Abraham Lincoln gave his first inaugural address, which concludes with a very different artistic depiction of the nation. Lincoln tells his audience:

Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne saw the statue in 1858. He writes of it in his notebook: “It has great merit, and embodies the ideas of youth, freedom, progress, and whatever we consider as distinctive in our country’s character and destiny” (14: 436). Though Bill Brown casts this assessment as a “celebration” of the statue (776), Hawthorne seems ambivalent. By saying that *America* represents “whatever we consider as distinctive” Hawthorne touches on the arbitrary nature of the statue’s significance, something Coleridge had noted when criticizing written allegories as the mere “translation of abstract notions into a picture-language” (30). What is more, Hawthorne was a great critic of America’s preoccupation with youth and progress, skewering such values in tales like “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” and “Earth’s Holocaust.”

² The highly influential Scottish philosopher Lord Kames, for instance, thought great art could improve youths’ morals but only by creating “lively and distinct images” (69). A fuller consideration of Kames’s theory of didacticism and its influence in America appears in chapter one.

and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature. (224)

Lincoln's metaphor for America unfolds slowly. The "bonds of affection" from the first sentence become "mystic chords of memory" in the second, which are finally revealed to be strings on an angelic instrument from which the Union rises as a wordless song. It is a complex metaphor, whose central idea ultimately resists visualization.

Just as Powers hoped to instruct the public with his statue, Lincoln hopes to instruct them with his speech. Their modes of instruction, however, are worlds apart. Where Powers embodied the nation, Lincoln disembodies it, rendering America by way of an increasingly ethereal metaphor. Where Powers presented a striking image, Lincoln avoids visual language. Where Powers focuses on the attractiveness of American liberty, Lincoln communicates a sense of wonder at American unity. Lincoln's strategy may seem odd, when set against Powers's more concrete vision of America. However, just at the time of the first inaugural address, there was a great flowering of American literature that similarly sought to inspire unity by driving images from the mind and creating a sense of imaginative vacancy. Writers as diverse as Rebecca Harding Davis, Harriet Jacobs, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne employed similar techniques for producing vacancy as a means for promoting the idea of solidarity, which holds that individuals are necessarily formed in and through society, as constitutive parts of a community that, in turn, is a constitutive part of its members. In this dissertation, I excavate this communitarian tradition and examine the aesthetic implications of its novel didactic mode.

In identifying a communitarian strand of antebellum American thought, I intend to challenge two common ways of thinking about nineteenth-century American literature. First, I reject the premise that the extension of liberal individualism is the central project of the time period, a view popularized by mid-twentieth-century critics (who largely praise the period's purported liberalism) and sustained by late-twentieth-century historicists (who largely criticize it). Second, I diverge from contemporary critics who focus on the transgressive anti-liberalism of nineteenth-century American writers. Instead of arguing that these writers primarily buttressed or subverted a hegemonic liberalism, I show how they used moments of vacancy to imagine and encourage alternative social organizations.

The most influential of the mid-century critics, F. O. Matthiessen believed nineteenth-century American literature to be especially concerned with what Emerson called "the infinitude of the private man" (6). American writers, according to Matthiessen, sought to combine independence with a universalizing ethic of generalized benevolence, and at the center of this work was the "new consciousness" of the individual (6). The ontology developed by Emerson and others generated political consequences. While "former generations acted under the belief that a shining social prosperity was the beatitude of man, ... [t]he modern mind believed that the nation existed for the individual" (6). Though Matthiessen believed that Emersonian individualism was an especially important strand of antebellum American thought, he did not consider it to be the only strand of thought. In his preface to *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Matthiessen imagines the books he

could have written but did not—books which would have taken up different traditions and employed different subtitles like *Art and Expression in the Age of Swedenborg* or *Art and Expression in the Age of Fourier* (viii). Central to the Fourier book, Matthiessen notes, would have been “the anticipation by Orestes Brownson of some of the Marxist analysis of the class controls of action” (ix).

As the twentieth century wore on, scholars grew both more critical of liberal individualism and more convinced of its hegemony. In “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” Sacvan Bercovitch calls the tradition that Matthiessen had identified and helped shape “the American ideology,” arguing that it had been successful on a world-historic scale at infusing a broad diversity of cultural products from across a broad timeframe with the values of “individualism, mobility, self-reliance, [and] free enterprise” (635-636). Just a few years after Bercovitch’s essay, Wai Chee Dimock argued that this American ideology peaked during “Antebellum America, the age of individualism” (11). The ideology’s apogee was achieved by a combination of autonomy and self-government that Dimock calls “the empire of liberty” (37). She points to Melville as the chief theorist of the empire of liberty, but writes that “it was Orestes Brownson who made that doubleness [of autonomy and self-government] most explicit, and most unforgettable” (37). Here, at the end of the twentieth century, even Brownson—the very figure Matthiessen thought could offer an alternative to American individualism—was now considered one its greatest exponents.

Dimock’s transformation of Brownson into a liberal individualist is made all the more confusing, when one considers the 1844 address she cites as evidence. In it Brownson states, “Liberty, rightly understood, is the true end of man. . . . But there can be

no liberty without order” (qtd. in Dimock 37). By *order*, Dimock suggests, Brownson really meant the sovereignty of autonomous individuals, and she proceeds to quote William Ellery Channing and a few others who do seem to think something along those lines (37-39). Brownson, however, emphatically did not support the sovereignty of autonomous individuals. In fact, starting around 1842, the idea became one of his favorite punching bags. Take, for instance, his 1843 essay “Democracy and Liberty” where he asks, “Are the people competent to govern themselves? What we have said concerning the virtue and intelligence of the people, has been said for the express purpose of proving that they are *not* competent to govern themselves” (382).³ Or consider the character Thomas Jefferson Andrew Jackson Hobbs from Brownson’s novel *The Spirit-Rapper*. Hobbs serves as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the radical liberalism of Thoreau and the 1848 revolutions, interrupting the hostess of a meeting to exclaim:

The world can never be reformed by the instrumentality of government....
That is the best government that governs least, and a better is that which governs none at all.... We must get rid of all government, break down church and state, sweep away religion and politics,... and bring back that state of things which was in Judea, “when there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes.” (107)

Far from ensuring liberty, Brownson insists, the sovereignty of autonomous individuals leads to license, violence, and anarchy.

Brownson certainly was no admirer of liberal individualism. But setting him so sharply against that tradition risks distorting his contribution to American thought in

³ The essay took such a hard stance that John L. O’Sullivan, the editor of *The Democratic Review*, followed it up with a lengthy apology, explaining that he only printed the essay because, after absorbing Brownson’s *Boston Quarterly* he was still under contract to print a certain amount of Brownson’s work (387).

another way—by casting him as a kind of gadfly on the periphery of the liberal hegemony. This is a type of distortion to which contemporary critics seem especially prone, praising writers for their transgression and subversion of norms and institutions until it seems that their work is wholly reactionary.⁴ Consider, for instance, The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists’ 2020 Conference, which takes up the theme of “Dissent.” The call for papers announces that the “long nineteenth century was a time of political, social, and cultural volatility, marked by conflict, strife, discord, protest, and disagreement. It was an age of rebellion, riot, and revolution.” Though it goes on to recognize “social movements, such as women’s rights” and “ideological revolt/s, such as communism,” framing these substantive movements as forms of dissent has the, perhaps unintended, effect of preserving the centrality of the tradition these movements opposed. Women’s rights and communism in such tellings become more about deconstructing institutions like the patriarchy or the free market than about establishing an independent set of institutions.

In presenting the communitarian tradition of nineteenth-century American literature, I hope to focus not only (or even primarily) on the writers’ critiques of American culture, but rather on their substantive visions. In the case of Brownson, whose thought I return to throughout this dissertation and especially in chapter two, this substantive vision was based on the idea of solidarity. Brownson first uses the term in an 1842 essay on the thought of the utopian socialist Pierre Leroux. “The mutual solidarity of men,” Brownson writes, “is explained by the law of life [...] the life of each individual

⁴ For recent criticism that privileges dissent, perhaps to a fault, see Holly Jackson’s *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation*, Stacey Margolis’s *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America*, and Jeffery Insko’s *History, Abolition, and the Ever-Present Now in Antebellum American Writing*.

man resides, so to speak, jointly and indissolubly in himself and in all other men. Each man is an undivided and an indivisible part of the life of all men” (121-122). Solidarity, for Brownson, described not only a feeling of unity with others, but an entire political ontology. Once he rejected the self’s sovereign autonomy and began to see the human person as “jointly and indissolubly” linked to others, he had already accepted the key premises that would form the foundation for his most complete consideration of political theory *The American Republic*.

Solidarity was a new idea in the mid-nineteenth-century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, its first use in English came in just 1841.⁵ Given its novelty, the presentation of solidarity required a new mode of literary production. In my first chapter, I describe this new mode, calling it *abstract didacticism* and setting it against the more traditional form of *vivid didacticism*. The chapter advances by way of a case study, comparing, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills.” Where Stowe’s vivid didacticism hopes to expand empathy with clear images of suffering, Davis drives such images out. In her embrace of vacancy, Davis shows how abstraction, the very opposite of vividness, can become a valuable tool for promoting solidarity.

My second chapter, continues this project by tracing the use of abstract didacticism to a, perhaps unlikely, place—the slave narrative. Slave narratives are often thought of as works of liberal individualism, presenting the journey from slavery to freedom as the recovery of what liberal theorists call *natural liberty*. I argue, however,

⁵ According to the *OED* *Solidarity* first appears in English in a translation of Charles Fourier, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that Brownson first discovered the term in the work of another French utopian socialist.

that Harriet Jacobs challenges this understanding of the genre in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In her narrative, Jacobs redefines *liberty* as a state of collective flourishing rather than one characterized entirely by individual autonomy and self-ownership.

Jacobs's conception of liberty has been largely misunderstood by critics. In the first part of the chapter, I offer a reason for this misunderstanding, showing how influential critics have read the slave narrative as a story in which the narrator's natural liberty is regained by way of psychological development toward a Lockean model of the self. In the second part, I examine Jacobs's alternative model of the self, which in many ways anticipates Brownson's *American Republic*. Like Davis, Jacobs describes and promotes this understanding of the self through techniques of generalization and abstraction.

In chapter three, I turn to Herman Melville's *Confidence-Man*, arguing that Melville illustrates and exaggerates the social pathologies of liberal mobility by setting his novel aboard a steamboat. He then uses vacancy as a means for revealing the unspoken desires of his characters while demonstrating the mobile environment's inability to adequately address those desires. Though the novel is often read as deeply pessimistic, I find hope in Melville's catalog of unfulfilled desire, which represents the first step in laying a moral foundation for a genuinely postliberal politics of place.

In my final chapter, I consider the guidebook qualities of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*. Critics who consider *The Marble Faun* a failure often hold its guidebook qualities responsible for that failure. But I make the case that, in his accounts of Roman art, Hawthorne builds a moral argument for his aesthetics, showing how a certain approach to vacancy can point beyond the artwork towards an experience of solidarity. Hawthorne invites us, then, to apply the hermeneutic practices he models in

the guidebook episodes when reading *The Marble Faun* itself. Such practices reveal a new way of understanding the crucial relationship between original sin and the self in Hawthorne's political thought. My dissertation ends with a brief conclusion, where I look past the Civil War to consider the afterlife of solidarity, literary vacancy, and the communitarian tradition I have described.

Chapter 1

Davis: The Case for Abstract Didacticism

Casual readers who look to literature for its moral value are often drawn to vivid novels on the grounds that they can foster empathy.¹ Such a view of literature has a long tradition. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, critics thought the moral power of stories rested almost entirely in their ability to heighten empathy by producing close approximations of real-life experience.² More recently, literary critics and social scientists have claimed much the same thing, arguing that narratives can encourage empathy, but only when readers feel “transported into the story” (Ball and Veltkamp 1).³ In this chapter, I explicate and critique this dominant method, which I call *vivid didacticism*. I then describe *abstract didacticism*, a radically different approach in which writers make their subjects difficult or even impossible to distinctly imagine. My argument takes the form of a case study examining how this dynamic appears in two crucial nineteenth-century didactic texts—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills,” sometimes called “the Uncle

¹ See, for instance, Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race To Global Consciousness In A World In Crisis*, which casts the history of the novel as a gradual progression toward greater vividness and empathy production (311–312). See also, President Obama’s claim that “the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy.”

² This theory is articulated most clearly by thinkers from the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly in their conceptions of real and ideal presence. I will discuss presence, the Scots, and the Scottish influence on nineteenth-century American thought later in this paper.

³ An especially important version of this argument for discussions of nineteenth-century American fiction appears in Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (xvii-xviii). See also the use of Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiment in Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (338–347). For social scientific studies linking literature to an increase in empathy, see Matthijs Ball and Martin Veltkamp’s “How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy?,” Maja Djikic et al’s “Reading Other Minds: Effects of Literature on Empathy,” and David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.” For a critical overview of how philosophical and psychological conceptions of empathy have been used in relationship to fiction see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (3–37).

Tom's Cabin of capitalism."⁴ Where Stowe hopes to encourage empathy with clear images of suffering, Davis drives such images out, aiming to instead help her readers enact an ethic of solidarity. In her embrace of what contemporaries would have called "vacuity," Davis demonstrates how abstraction, the very opposite of vividness, can become a valuable moral tool.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is perhaps the most celebrated example of vivid didacticism in American literature. Though Stowe occasionally dramatizes debates over slavery, the novel's moral energy lies elsewhere, in scenes that make readers see the particular hardships suffered by particular slaves. Such scenes hope to encourage actions on behalf of abolition by leveraging what Stowe calls "the magic of the real presence of distress" to heighten the reader's empathy (118). Rather than changing minds, Stowe is out to change hearts, believing that empathy can overcome misguided principles.

It could be argued that Stowe focused on feelings rather than ideas because she did not believe anyone truly thought slavery to be just. Kerry Larson finds this line of thinking reflected in the novel's characters, among whom, he writes, "It is easy to find examples of people who support slavery but hard to find examples of people who actually believe in it" (13). Larson's clearest example of this phenomenon is Augustine St. Clare, who owns and purchases slaves all while saying the institution "comes from the devil" (Stowe 290). However, two characters Larson passes over more quickly Senator John Bird and the manufacturer Mr. Wilson seem to prove just the opposite of his thesis—

⁴ The line "the Uncle Tom's Cabin of capitalism" appears in several reviews of Tillie Olsen's seminal 1972 edition of Davis's stories. Olsen herself does not make the comparison explicitly, but implies that Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling would not have claimed there was no "Uncle Tom's Cabin of Capitalism" if they had read "Life in the Iron-Mills" (152).

namely, that it is easy to find examples of characters who work to subvert slavery even though they actually believe in it.

Bird and Wilson, who live only a few miles apart on opposite sides of the Mason-Dixon line, are mirror characters. Both are described as holding moderate views in support of slavery, even though they themselves do not own slaves. Both encounter narratives about slaves that ought to change their minds but instead only reinforce their support for slavery. Both, then, have intense encounters with actual runaway slaves that they assist in escaping without abandoning their principled support for slavery as an institution. Bird twice advocates for the Fugitive Slave Law, first in the senate and then later at home to his wife Mary, arguing both times that it is essential for preserving the union. “There are great public interests involved,” he tells his wife, and so “we must put aside our private feelings” (107). In reply, Mary makes up the following short narrative, asking Bird if he would actually obey the law for which he voted:

I put it to you, John,—would *you* now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway? *Would* you, now?
[...] I should like to see you doing that, John—I really should! Turning a woman out of doors in a snowstorm, for instance; or may be you’d take her up and put her in jail, wouldn’t you? You would make a great hand at that! (107–108)

Bird seems emotionally affected by Mary’s hypothetical story and tries, at first, to avoid answering. Eventually, though, he replies that even in such a situation he would turn the slave over to authorities.

Just then, the slave Eliza turns up on their doorstep every bit as pathetic as Mary's description of the hypothetical runaway "with garments torn and frozen, with one shoe gone, and the stocking torn away from the cut and bleeding foot" (109). Eliza's presence compels Bird's empathy, and he weeps as she tells her story. Eliza also inspires morally commendable acts. Bird offers her and her son clothing and shelter and drives them to safety in his own carriage, risking arrest and political disgrace. Throughout the scene, though, it is unclear if Bird has changed his mind about slavery in principle. After all, his argument in support of the Fugitive Slave Law was that the national ill of civil war would be worse than the personal ills suffered by fugitive slaves—a utilitarian calculus which Eliza has not necessarily disproven. What is clear, however, is that Eliza's presence cuts through Bird's flawed ethical principles, prompting him to behave well in spite of himself.

A few chapters later, Bird's Southern counterpart Mr. Wilson sees a wanted poster for Eliza's husband George Harris in a tavern. Wilson, who knew and liked George when he worked in his factory, is deeply interested in the poster. Though the description of George is only eighty words, it contains details that seem engineered to elicit Wilson's empathy, describing George as "deeply scarred on his back and shoulders" and "branded in his right hand with the letter H" (140). Wilson reads this dispassionate description of violence "from end to end in a low voice, as if he were studying it" (140). His close reading, however, does not turn him into an abolitionist. Rather, it seems to reinforce his tepid moral belief that masters should avoid brutalizing their slaves whenever possible, and he endorses the view of a slave owning farmer who argues that one should treat slaves humanely in order to get an optimal return. "Treat 'em

like dogs, and you'll have dogs' works and dogs' actions," the man says. "Treat 'em like men, and you'll have men's works" (141). Wilson replies, "I think you're altogether right, friend" (141).

At that moment, a disguised George Harris walks into the tavern and arranges a private meeting with Wilson. As in the scene between Bird and Eliza, George's presence spurs Wilson to empathic tears and moral actions. Even though he still clearly believes slavery to be just and quotes the Bible in an attempt to convince George to return to his master, Wilson eventually gives George money to assist in his escape, saying, as he hands the roll of bills over, "I *won't* follow my judgment!" (150) Here, as before, presence trumps principle and an intense empathic experience compels a man to act commendably even against his better judgment. Bird and Wilson's stories demonstrate the moral power Stowe ascribes to empathy and presence, but they also raise an interesting question. Why were these characters won over by Eliza and George but not by Mary's story and the wanted poster, the short narratives that described the slaves' suffering? After all *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is itself a narrative. How can it have the same powerful moral effect Stowe attributes to meeting a desperate slave?

The Scottish philosopher Henry Home, better known as Lord Kames, would likely answer that Mary's story and the poster had no moral effect because they were not vivid enough. Kames believed that, because readers are unable to draw sharp mental images from such stories, they encounter them as vacuous propositions, papered over with a "curt narrative of feigned incidents" (71). Kames might see tremendous moral potential in Stowe's novel, however, because of its ability to captivate readers with lively

images. In his influential 1762 *Elements of Criticism*,⁵ Kames coined the term “ideal presence” to describe aesthetic experiences that collapse the distance between reality and imagination and invest art objects with the ability to provoke empathy (which he referred to as *sympathy*) just as effectively as the real presence of a person in distress:

Ideal presence supplies the want of real presence...if our sympathy be engaged by the latter, it must also in some degree be engaged by the former, especially if the distinctness of ideal presence approach to that of real presence.... The power of language to raise emotions, depends entirely on the raising of such lively and distinct images as are here described: the reader’s passions are never sensibly moved, till he be thrown into a kind of reverie; in which state, forgetting that he is reading, he conceives every incident as passing in his presence, precisely as if he were an eye-witness.
(69-70)

Kames draws, here, on his protégé Adam Smith’s understanding of empathy as the foundation of the moral sense—a person’s deep-seated feeling of right and wrong (25-26). For Smith, empathic experiences construct the moral sense by training it to approve or disapprove of various actions. These feelings of approval and disapproval not only help people intuitively distinguish right from wrong, but they also train their passions and, thereby, influence their behavior. Kames shows how the experience of ideal

⁵ The immense influence of Kames and his coterie in antebellum America has been well recorded. For a description of the influence of Kames, Hugh Blair, and Archibald Alison on early American literary criticism see William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought 1810-1835*. For their influence on universities, see Terrence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction*. Both Stowe and Davis were familiar with Kames and his school. For a description of Stowe’s familiarity with the Scots during her time as a student and teacher at Hartford Female Seminary, see David Luis-Brown, *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States* (40). Evidence that Davis read Kames during her years at the Washington Female Seminary appears in Harriet K. Branton, “Sarah Foster Hanna and the Washington Female Seminary” (225).

presence might enter to extend empathy beyond the bounds of direct experience, and he was optimistic about the moral potential of such virtual experiences, writing that by showing “proper discipline” in cultivating a taste for art “every person may acquire a settled habit of virtue” (75). According to Kames, then, a systematic exploitation of ideal presence could theoretically lead to something like moral perfection.

Stowe herself seems committed to producing vivid fiction that can spark an ideal presence, employing stylistic techniques borrowed from Kames and Hugh Blair, whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* offers a praxis of Kames’s theories.⁶ As Kames and Blair recommend, Stowe uses present tense liberally—both in climactic action sequences, as in the celebrated description of Eliza crossing the Ohio River (81-82), and also in descriptions of important characters and settings, as in her early sketch of Tom and his cabin (30-31). She also often uses deictic phrases to create the illusion of immediacy—as if she were pointing the reader to a scene happening just across the room. Take, for instance, her frequent use of the phrase *sits there*. At various points in the novel she describes Mary Bird as “the delicate woman who sits there by the lamp” (117), introduces Rachel Halliday “as she sits there in her little rocking-chair” (176), and points to a disguised George Harris “who sits there with his arms folded over his broad chest” (500). In each case, and in many similar cases, the *there* does not refer to a particular place in the setting Stowe has just described, but rather *there* points readers to a particular place in their world as if they could peek just above the pages of the book and see the character *sitting there*, just beyond them.

⁶ Kames offers some advice for authors who hope to create an ideal presence with their writing, outlining, for instance, how to use present tense to best effect (72–74). A method for producing vivid writing is much more fully described, though, in Lectures XVIII and XIX of Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.

Theo Davis argues that devices like the use of present tense and deictic phrases call attention to their artificiality and “figure experiences at once engaging and distanced,” reminding readers that the narrated events, while striking, are mediated by fiction (140). While this may be the way some readers experience the text, it is doubtful that Stowe employed these techniques to imbue her fiction with a kind of estrangement effect. Rather, it is more likely she was trying to make her fictional accounts seem ideally present. This is, after all, the effect Kames and Blair attribute to these techniques in the texts Stowe used when she taught composition at Hartford Female Seminary (Luis-Brown 40). Blair, for instance, in describing a figure of speech he calls “Vision,” declares that present tense can make an event seem “as actually passing before our eyes” (192). He goes on to write, “This manner of description, supposes a sort of enthusiasm...and, when well executed, must needs impress the reader or hearer strongly” (192).

Stowe’s contemporary readers were strongly impressed. As Barbara Hochman relates in her thorough study of the novel’s reception, antebellum readers of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were absorbed with the novel and identified strongly with its characters. Readers routinely “devoured” the large, two-volume novel in just one or two days, and passionate reactions to the novel were recorded in diaries and discussed in letters across the nation (14-19). These powerful encounters with Stowe’s story, however, carry something of a mixed moral legacy, leading to both desirable and undesirable results. Kenneth Warren gives a representative shape to this dichotomy, when he notes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* inspired both Henry James and Thomas Dixon, author of the white supremacist epics *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman*, to become novelists. Warren points out how such contradictory reactions to the novel are unintentionally encouraged by Stowe’s lack of

realism. Her choice to separate Tom entirely from the corruption and hypocrisy of his environment left the novel open to the interpretation that Stowe was simply misinterpreting her data and that Tom's virtues were actually the result of his life of slavery (71-72).

As Warren's reading suggests, the complicated legacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* points to fundamental concerns with the political ontology of a didactic mode whose chief end is the extension of empathy. The argument that empathy is necessarily a moral good presumes that it works in conjunction with a well-formed moral sense. A vivid novel broadens the range of our experiences and extends the reach of our moral emotions. This invitation to extend empathy is an unmitigated good if you think, like Lord Kames and Adam Smith, that we will naturally be drawn to and mimic commendable actions and disapprove of and shun wicked ones. If you do not—if you believe with evolutionary biologists that we are primarily motivated by self-preservation or with Christian theologians that we are naturally bent toward sinning—then, as Richard Posner contends, “empathy is amoral” and its effects are not necessarily beneficial (19). Rather, readers who cultivate moral judgment based on the dictates of empathy might become what Joshua Landy calls “moral wantons,” people who are “easily swayed from one well-meaning but unnuanced value judgment to the next” (37).

The engaged reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who identifies with the slaves in their struggle against the wicked Simon Legree, might later pick up *The Leopard's Spots* and identify with members of the Klu Klux Klan in their struggle against the same character when he reappears as an opportunistic advocate for Reconstruction. This particular example of moral wantonness may seem far-fetched. Who, after feeling empathy for

Eliza Harris during her escape from slavery, could later empathize with the segregationist aims of clansmen? It is important to note, however, that, as Melyvn Stokes has shown, contemporary reviews of *The Leopard's Spots* often heralded it as a companion piece to Stowe's novel rather than a simple renunciation of it. For example, one reviewer in the *Atlanta Journal* wrote of *The Leopard's Spots*, "It is an epoch-making book...a worthy successor to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" (qtd. in Stokes 41). Faced with the complex reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe herself seems to have grown uncomfortable with the philosophical presumptions of her vivid didacticism. As Maurice Lee notes, Stowe's later work "faces up to political facts that defy her sentimentality" and then "traces these topics into the labyrinth of Calvinist theology" (88). Certainly, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe made less use of the real presence of distress.

Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron-Mills" proposes an entirely different way of creating a didactic effect. Instead of making her characters seem as immediate and present as possible, Davis intentionally obscures the most dramatic moments of her story, inviting experiences of what Kames derisively called "vacuity." Kames first uses the term when describing "ideas raised by a cursory narrative," which "being faint, obscure, and imperfect, leave a vacuity in the mind" (71). He then later uses the term to describe a stage erroneously left empty in the middle of an act. A good play must keep up a continuous stream of action, Kames contends, for "even a momentary vacuity makes an interval or interruption" that ruins the unity of the drama (683). In the same way, a story ruins its effect when it allows the stage of the mind to empty of images, for vacuity disrupts the trance-like experience of an ideal presence. Such a story, Kames argues, "is

never relished: any slight pleasure it affords, is more than counterbalanced by the disgust it inspires for want of truth” (71).

Kames assumes both that the state of vacuity is easy to cause—even by accident—and that it is repellent. In “Life in the Iron-Mills,” Davis challenges both of these premises, strategically manufacturing moments of vacuity to draw readers into an experience of moral abstraction. The result is a strange didactic mode, which tries to inspire moral action even as it frustrates the free working of empathy. Davis’s tactic has long gone overlooked, likely because her novella begins with aspirations of revelation and vividness that recall Stowe. Early on, Davis tells the reader, “I want you to hear this story... I want to make it a real thing to you” (4). About halfway through the novella, however, her style grows more circumspect and obscure. Notably, this pivot onto the way of abstraction comes after a scene in which Davis gives an ekphrastic commentary on the weakness of vivid art.

In this scene, a group of three distinguished men go on a tour of an iron foundry. Davis is careful to present her tourists not only as particular characters, but as types representing various faculties of human agency. She signals this through a dialogue in which the characters suggest that the factory owner Kirby represents “the pocket of the world,” the kindly Doctor May represents “the heart of the world,” and the intellectual Mitchell represents the “mind” of the world (17–18). These three allegorically significant characters encounter a gigantic sculpture of a woman carved out of a scrap metal called *korl*. The first glimpse readers get of the sculpture is of “the white figure of a woman...in the darkness—a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning” (14). Davis later gives this less dramatic

description of the sculpture: “There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (15). This is a new way to sculpt a woman. As Dana Seitler has noted, the figure has only its nudity in common with the demure, neoclassical sculptures that were then in vogue like Hiram Powers’s *America* and *The Greek Slave* (542-543). Whereas these sculptures look down and are characterized by their repose, the korl woman looks out and gestures desperately toward its audience. It is Blair’s trope of “Vision” sculpted into metal—an argument shorn of ornament and left only with the vigorous announcement of its “one idea,” which it articulates through the unity of its various parts (Blair 213).

Even though Davis describes the sculpture as making a profound moral statement by way of a gripping image, two of the men on the tour are unable to see any great significance in the sculpture at all. Once he learns that the korl woman was carved by Hugh Wolfe, one of his poor Welsh foundry hands, Kirby dismisses it as an annoyance. Meanwhile, Doctor May sees the sculpture as an anatomical curiosity with a surprisingly accurate “sweep of the muscles in the arm and hand” (15). Only the intellectual Mitchell properly appreciates the sculpture. It first takes hold of him when he is suddenly arrested, “start[ing] back, half-frightened” and “stopping short” (14). After he overcomes this initial surprise, Mitchell still seems to be held in a reverie. “The figure touched him strangely” (15), and he is uncharacteristically quiet as Kirby and May discuss the piece. After they demonstrate their inability to see the sculpture’s moral significance, Mitchell speaks out in a rare burst of emotion: “May,...are you blind? Look at that woman’s face!

It asks questions of God, and says, 'I have a right to know.' Good God, how hungry it is!" (16). Though the sculpture failed to produce an ideal presence for two of the tourists, it has finally succeeded here. Its striking form has collapsed the space between art and reality and guided Mitchell's mental associations in such a way that he empathizes with the human figure represented by the statue.

If the story were to follow Kames's moral sequence of taste, we could expect this aesthetic experience to stir up Mitchell's passions, infusing his emotions with a desire for justice and leading him to perform some moral action. What happens, though, is just the opposite. Each tourist is asked by the others to intervene somehow for Wolfe by helping him hone his skill or gain financial independence from the degrading work of the foundry. And each man, in turn, refuses to help, with Mitchell's response seeming particularly impotent. He leans against the foundry wall and "indolently" looks back at the works with "insufferable disgust" (18–19). Mitchell's taste for art, far from leading to Kames's "settled habit of virtue" or even Landy's "wantonness" has cultivated a moral malaise. He reacts emotionally to the artistic representation of suffering but is unmoved by suffering itself. The scene calls to mind William James's anecdote about the theatregoer who weeps "over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coach-man is freezing to death on his seat outside" (125).

As though she were writing in response to Mitchell's cultivated passivity, Davis's prose shifts at this point, exchanging an aesthetics of presence for stylistic strategies that thwart visualization. Take, for instance, this passage from just two paragraphs before the foundry tour: "I want you to come down and look at this Wolfe, standing there among the lowest of his kind, and see him just as he is, that you may judge him justly when you hear

the story of this night” (11). The present tense and deictic technique is reminiscent of Stowe, and it seems calculated to help readers imagine Wolfe as though he were present. Compare it now with this description of Wolfe, which comes immediately after the tour:

He shook his head doggedly, and the woman crouched out of his sight against the wall. Do you remember rare moments when a sudden light flashed over yourself, your world, God? when you stood on a mountain-peak, seeing your life as it might have been, as it is? one quick instant, when custom lost its force and every-day usage? when your friend, wife, brother, stood in a new light? your soul was bared, and the grave,—a foretaste of the nakedness of the Judgment-Day? So it came before him, his life, that night. (19)

As in the earlier passage, Davis makes liberal use of the second person, seeming to encourage empathic association with Wolfe. But here it is much less clear how that association could take shape. The long question begins with a slightly jarring departure from parallelism in the list “yourself, your world, God.” It then ends in perplexing ambiguity. It is not clear at the end if “the grave” relates to what came before it, if like the soul it is being bared; if it relates to what comes after it, if the grave is a foretaste of Judgment Day; or if it relates to nothing at all, if the grave is the beginning of an incomplete thought that Davis interrupts with the dash in order to offer a summative conclusion. Each of the three readings is possible, but none of them is particularly satisfying. Most importantly, no one could read the above passage and visualize it, and Davis does not ask readers to try. Instead, in Davis’s narration, Wolfe experiences a generalized epiphany—one emptied of specifics to become universal.

Davis's increasingly opaque style continues when she moves from describing Wolfe's thoughts to describing his actions. Take, for example, the scene in which Deborah listens to Wolfe in his cell just before his suicide. Davis writes:

Deborah, crouching nearby on the other side of the wall, heard no noise. [Wolfe] sat on the side of the low pallet, thinking. Whatever was the mystery which the woman had seen on his face, it came out now slowly, in the dark there, and became fixed,—a something never seen on his face before. The evening was darkening fast. (30)

Davis manufactures the scene in such a way as to resist the facilitation of an ideal presence. The “something” on Wolfe's face seems to be an important mystery, connected perhaps to the “terrible dumb question” Davis references in her beginning paragraphs (4). There, Davis offered images that symbolized the dumb question—“the negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden” and the “masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground” (3). Here, she creates a representative image, the look on Wolfe's face, and then makes that image impossible to visualize. The look that had never been on Wolfe's face before, and it now appears in absolute solitude and silence in a darkened cell in a darkening city with only the vaguest of descriptors—“a something”—to hint at what it might be.

Along with these generalized and vague descriptions, Davis changes her narrative strategy. She begins telling more and more of the story through mediation and sometimes refuses to tell the story altogether. For instance, not only does Davis not tell us the details of Wolfe's arrest and trial, but she berates her readers for wanting her to do it. “Do you want to hear the end of it?” she asks. “You wish me to make a tragic story out of it? Why,

in the police-reports of the morning paper you can find a dozen such tragedies” (25). Wanlin Li has argued that Davis uses these aggressive direct addresses to encourage greater imaginative rigor. And so when Davis seems to simultaneously challenge the reader to look away and to give up on communicating a vivid picture, she actually does neither. Rather, according to Li, Davis employs the direct address as a device for further engaging her audience and making her writing more vivid, because by distancing a contrived, hypothetical audience Davis inspires her real audience to commit and recommit to reading the novel with more empathy (196-197). According to such a reading, the novella invites readers to help produce the story, calling on them to substitute their own experiences of reading a squalid newspaper story for a description of Wolfe’s arrest and trial.

Such a theory is complicated, however, by clues that Davis is actually sincere in her refusal to tell the story—that, rather than playing a game of bait-and-switch, she truly wishes the reader to pass over seemingly important details of the plot. This is suggested when Davis moves from the arrest and trial to tell the story of Wolfe’s sentencing. Here she gives a few details, but only through the mediation of Dr. May reading about it in the paper. He says to his wife: “You remember that man I told you of, that we saw at Kirby’s mill?... Here he is; just listen:—‘Circuit Court. Judge Day. Hugh Wolfe, operative in Kirby & John’s Loudon Mills. Charge, grand larceny. Sentence, nineteen years hard labor in penitentiary.’” (25–26) The details in the newspaper’s clipped prose do not draw a picture. It does not help or encourage the reader to see Wolfe’s face and thereby feel empathy for him. Rather, it forms the sort of “curt narrative” that Kames thought “is never relished” because it is not able to imprint an ideal presence onto the reader’s mind

(71). It is less detailed even than the short narratives that proved insufficient at swaying Senator Bird and Mr. Wilson's support for slavery. Davis, however, deliberately uses the report's brief and abstracted language to describe a pivotal moment in her text.

On the heels of this curt narrative, Wolfe's suicide, which lasts four paragraphs and forms the story's climax, is told through increasingly distant forms of mediated narration. Davis first tells directly what happened in Wolfe's cell—he sharpened a bit of metal and looked at his arms. She then moves one cell over to describe the clicking sound Deborah heard. Next, she tells what Deborah might have seen happening if she had been able to see into the cell, and what Wolfe could have been thinking as he dies (31). Even in this highly-mediated and subjunctively narrated frame, Davis continues to add distance between her ostensible subject and the narration, focusing less on what physically was happening and more on what metaphysically might have been happening. Did the moon's light bring “with it calm and peace, who shall say?” (31) Could “a Voice...have spoken for it from far-off Calvary, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!’ Who dare say?” (31–32)

This sort of narration seems to deliberately obstruct the fluent workings of the imagination, as Hugh Blair would have understood the word, making it increasingly difficult to visualize Wolfe's suicide as though it were “actually passing before our eyes.” (192). While the suicide is told through increasingly uncertain and complex forms of mediation, Deborah's conversion to Quakerism is hardly told at all. Davis hurries over it in a few words, writing, “There is no need to tire you with the long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love, needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul” (33).

“Life in the Iron-Mills,” which opens by self-consciously announcing its goal of producing an ideal presence veers off into an embrace of vacuity. Davis begins with a focus on sight. “Can you see how foggy the day is?” she asks, before scolding readers who “do not see it clearly” (4). But she ends by using generalizing descriptions, narrative lacunae, and labyrinthine modes of mediation that make her story increasingly difficult to visualize. This is, no doubt, part of the reason critics have had such difficulty assigning a genre to “Life in the Iron-Mills,” and have long debated if it is a work of sentimentalism, romanticism, realism, or naturalism.⁷ Dana Seitler cuts through the discussion of genre by contending that the novella is a work of “ungenre,” that its power comes from its gestures toward an imaginary form of art that is capable of building new social orders and that is unimaginable using contemporary aesthetic modes (531). According to Seitler, Davis tries “to think beyond the thinkable” and her form is driven by “an impulse to move beyond itself” (544, 545). From this perspective, the story is ultimately “an exhortation for a prospective aesthetic event” and is fittingly represented by the closing image of an unfinished statue pointing toward the breaking dawn (545). Like Seitler, I think “Life in the Iron-Mills” calls for an inventive aesthetic form that is capable of inspiring moral and social development. However, I do not think this form is quite as inscrutable as Seitler makes out. Rather, Davis practices the genre she calls for, leveraging vacuity to create an instrumental moral effect, an abstract didacticism that pushes readers beyond sensory experience to an encounter with impersonal moral principles.

Davis’s approach holds some premises in common with what Paul Bloom terms “rational compassion” in the subtitle of his book *Against Empathy*. As “Life in the Iron-

⁷ For a succinct review of this critical controversy see Joe Fulton “Sounding the ‘Muddy Depth of Soul-History’: Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Influence on Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” (38–39). Fulton himself places Davis in the romantic tradition.

Mills” unfolds, Hugh Wolfe dissolves, transforming from a traditional literary character with distinct physical features, thoughts, and experiences into a faceless type with general thoughts and typical experiences. Wolfe begins as a particular person. He becomes a generalized person, a newspaper story, a statistic. Bloom would likely appreciate this transformation. In his book he argues that focusing on statistics rather than particular stories that evoke empathy could provide a more rational basis for moral decision making. It is impossible to forge an emotional connection to statistics, he suggests, because of “the innumerate nature of our feelings” (89). Still, he argues, statistics can form a just and even, in some cases, inspiring basis for moral action. Bloom tells stories of people who are motivated to perform effective acts of philanthropy by analyzing numbers rather than viewing narratives. He tells of one man who donated his kidney to a stranger after reviewing the statistics on organ donation. The man remarks that people who do not understand his decision actually “don’t understand math” (238). Similarly, a rigorously philanthropic woman reports, “Numbers turned me into an altruist” (238). People who make determined moral decisions based on mathematical calculation are “unusual,” Bloom writes, but he hastens to add that “the capacity to engage in such reasoning exists in all of us” (238). By emptying her main character of his defining characteristics, Davis may seem to encourage just this type of reasoning, reinscribing the affective content of the beginning of her novella onto a generalized plane—investing impersonal statistics with something of the urgency readers take from a personal story. Her writing elsewhere, however, suggests otherwise.

In her 1877 essay “Indiscriminate Charity,” Davis, like Bloom, rejects empathy as a basis for moral decision making, arguing that moral questions should be considered

“gravely and calmly, uninfluenced by...mawkish sentimentality” and particular stories of suffering. But even as Davis rejects empathy, she also rejects statistical calculation, calling the “cold-blooded logic” of utilitarianism as “narrow and unjust” as the unreasoned inclinations of empathy. Instead, Davis urges her readers to try to see the poor as God might, according to “that reality of human brotherhood which Christ taught.” While admonishing her readers to adopt a more unconcerned generosity and to give directly to the needy, Davis makes it clear that her system of “indiscriminate charity” is grounded in abstract theological principles—“the teaching of the Nazarene”—rather than pure sentiment or pure reason.

Davis’s style of vacuity does not help the reader visualize her story and empathize with Hugh Wolfe. Rather, it removes particularities in an attempt to invigorate the abstract moral concept of “human brotherhood.” As I pointed out earlier, during the climactic scene of Wolfe’s suicide, the reader does not empathically feel what Wolfe feels. For Wolfe’s feelings, like his thoughts and appearance, are lost to Davis’s narration. What emerges instead is human brotherhood—the reality Wolfe holds in common with the reader, who will one day be like him, a “dead figure that never should move again” and “a dumb soul...alone with God in judgment” (32, 31).

In the conclusion of “Life in the Iron-Mills,” Davis records two responses to Wolfe’s statue-like corpse. One is the official response of “the coroner and his jury, the local editors, Kirby himself, and boys” from the town (32). They look at Wolfe “knowingly” according to the particularities of his life and death and according to his subordination to them in various social hierarchies (32). The other response comes from a woman “a Quaker, or Friend,” who as she looks at the corpse tells Deborah, “I know

Hugh now” (32). This knowledge is of a different character, based not on Wolfe’s particular qualities, but on the general quality of humanity that adheres even to his corpse. This Friend promises Deborah she will give Wolfe a decent burial, performing one of the few acts of kindness described in the novella.

Here, in the conclusion, Davis holds the Friend out as a model, much as Stowe points her readers to the moral heroism of a character like Senator Bird. These two examples crystallize key differences between the authors’ didactic approaches. Bird is moved by his empathic encounter with Eliza’s particularized distress, and so Stowe tries to give her readers similar encounters with desperate slaves through the medium of ideal presence. The Friend, on the other hand, performs humble but necessary acts of kindness upon seeing Wolfe’s impersonal corpse. Davis wants her readers, like the Friend, to *know* the Christian concept of brotherhood and she tries to activate this feeling of solidarity with moments of vacuity through which readers might encounter her story from an abstracted distance. The goal, then, is not for readers to feel as Wolfe might feel, but rather to understand their underlying unity. Whereas Stowe hoped to inspire correct action that cuts across moral judgment, Davis encourages her readers to feel the wonder of the moral principles they already tacitly affirm.

Davis’s rigorous commitment to vacuity in *Life in the Iron-Mills* fuses the common desire for literature that activates moral values with the uncommon evocation of impersonality that Sharon Cameron has noted in some of the most ambitious works of American literature. For Cameron, the impersonal text uses aporia as a means to create a uniquely vacant perspective, so that “the perception of difference, of polarity—in its most extreme form, of contradiction—[becomes] a means of emerging from a point of view”

(14). The theoretical value of this perspectiveless perspective is in its speculative potential. Cameron argues that impersonality can serve a phenomenological and epistemic function, creating moments in which “nothing and everything are almost made perceptible” (52). Davis takes us in a different direction. For the moments of vacuity in her story are tokens, not of philosophical utility, but instrumental moral value.

In the past few years, academics from across the political spectrum have become interested in using literature to bring people together. On the left, Joseph North has urged literary critics to resist the atomizing drift of neoliberalism by using texts to develop “new methods for cultivating subjectivities and collectivities” (20).⁸ On the right, Patrick Deneen has identified much the same problem and calls for universities to give students a humanistic education “fitting for a *res publica*” (112). In light of this challenge, professors of literature might turn to especially vivid texts, encouraging their students to, in the words of E.J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann, “Make America Empathetic Again” (219). But the challenges for a republic of empathy would be manifold (as even Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann admit). Perhaps the most important of these obstacles is the tendency of empathy to reflect, rather than challenge, the prejudices that often cloud moral judgment.⁹

But literature can also help us construct new collectivities by inspiring readers with an understanding of their fundamental connection to others. Davis’s theological grounds for such solidarity may have less purchase today than it did when she published her story in 1861, and contemporary thinkers might develop a grounds for collectivity

⁸ See also North’s discussions of collectivity elsewhere (176, 209).

⁹ For a more expansive discussion of this problem see Bloom (30-32).

based on some foundation very different from “the reality of human brotherhood which Christ taught.” It would surprise me, however, if the literary means of producing this new solidarity did not share formal elements with Davis’s didactic method—focusing on the impersonal rather than the particular and the abstract rather than the vivid.

Chapter 2

Jacobs: From Slavery to Solidarity

Critics have long observed that slave narratives are works of liberal individualism.¹ This is for good reason. Many narrators seem to understand their escape from slavery to be a recovery of natural liberty—the kind of individual autonomy liberal theorists believe to exist in a state of nature.² Henry Box Brown, for instance, begins his narrative asking how he could be born a slave, given his innate “right to liberty” (1). Was *slave* stamped somewhere on his body? Did an angel descend at his birth to officially declare him a slave? “No,” Brown explains, “but I was a slave because my countrymen had made it lawful, in utter contempt of the declared will of heaven, for the strong to lay hold of the weak and to buy and to sell them as marketable goods” (1). For Brown, liberty is natural, while slavery is socially constructed. His narrative, then, records the recovery of natural liberty by a process of shedding the degraded forms of Southern

¹ I use the term *liberal* here to describe a political philosophy emphasizing natural rights, limited government, and free market economics. By *liberal individualism*, I mean the sort of atomistic anthropology such a politics tends to assume—the classic example being the understanding of the self arising from the “state of nature” theory in Thomas Hobbes’s (92-95) and the most famous modern version being the “original position” thought experiment in John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (12-13). For liberal individualism’s connection to the slave narrative, see Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History.” Bercovitch argues that Frederick Douglass espouses “the American ideology,” an umbrella term for such values as “individualism, mobility, self-reliance, [and] free enterprise” (635). He calls attention to “the liberating appeal for Douglass of [a] free-enterprise ideology” that defines freedom in terms of “self-possessive individualism” (648). Though the only slave narrative Bercovitch mentions is Douglass’s 1845 narrative, a more comprehensive analysis appears in William L. Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South: A Generation of Slave Narrative Testimony, 1840-1865*. Andrews uses similar language to describe the genre as a whole, writing: “The stories of triumphant African American self-reliance featured in mid-century slave narratives lionize the elevating self-efforts of particularly outstanding individuals” (62).

² For the antebellum understanding of *natural liberty*, see the second definition of *liberty* in Noah Webster’s 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language*: “Natural *liberty* consists in the power of acting as one thinks fit, without any restraint or control, except from the laws of nature. It is a state of exemption from the control of others, and from positive laws and the institutions of social life. This *liberty* is abridged by the establishment of government.” For a comprehensive (if somewhat polemical) discussion of the importance of the term during America’s colonial history and in the United States’ founding documents, see the first chapter of Joe B. Fulton’s *Lost Liberty*.

slave-holding society. When Brown achieves his liberty, emerging from the box in which he was shipped from Virginia to Philadelphia, he describes the moment as a kind of second birth, a “resurrection from the grave of slavery” into “the possession of my natural rights” (57). By suggesting that the path to liberty is one of social disengagement, narrators like Brown follow the great liberal philosopher John Locke, who often used the stark language of liberty and slavery to compare the free choice of unencumbered individuals with the uncritical acceptance of social tradition.³

Though liberal individualism seems to loom large in the philosophical background of slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* can help us understand the genre in a radically different way. Jacobs reverses the dynamic described above, portraying slavery primarily as a state of social privation and liberty as a necessarily social phenomenon. While recounting her aunt’s funeral, for instance, Jacobs tells how “Northern travellers, passing through the place, might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the ‘patriarchal institution.’ . . . *We* could have told them a different story” (132).⁴ Jacobs proceeds to undercut social conceptions of slavery by focusing on how Linda (her pseudonymous narrator) is unable “to come out and look on the face of her departed friend” for fear of “the tortures that would be inflicted on her” (124). Here and elsewhere, Jacobs presents slavery not as a social institution but as a state of enforced atomism. By dwelling on

³ See John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1: 116, 2: 447). For a discussion of Douglass’s second narrative and Lockean self-reflection, see Maurice S. Lee’s *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-1860* (100-20).

⁴ Jacobs’s reference to “Northern travellers” may allude to the narrator from “The Night Funeral of a Slave.” “Night Funeral” was a fairly popular proslavery story told from the perspective of a Northern traveler for whom the “powerful emotions” elicited by a slave master’s eulogy prove that “the negroes of the South are the happiest and most contented people on the face of the earth.” Jacobs’s employer Nathaniel P. Willis (the Mr. Bruce of *Incidents*) published “Night Funeral” in 1849 and Jacobs almost certainly would have read it (Yellin 109).

slavery's profoundly antisocial nature, Jacobs anticipates one of Locke's harshest nineteenth-century American critics Orestes Brownson, who objected to slavery on the grounds that it denied "the solidarity of the race," which he believed to form the foundation of "all true civil society" (224-225).

Jacobs's divergent conception of slavery is arguably why it is so difficult to point to a precise moment in *Incidents* when Linda achieves her liberty. Linda flees her master Dr. Flint about halfway through the narrative, but her liberty is deferred when she is forced to hide in a small garret outside of her grandmother's house for nearly seven years. She escapes the garret to Philadelphia and New York, but is disappointed to find that the North is not the "free soil" she had "*then* believed it to be" (133). Both before and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Linda is oppressed by Northern racism and hounded by Southern slave catchers. Readers might expect Jacobs to offer a less ambiguous account of Linda's liberty in the final chapter, which bears the promising title "Free at Last." But even the conclusion defers liberty to later date. It first tells how Linda and her children are bought from the Flint family by Linda's northern employer. "I and my children are now free!" Jacobs finally writes, before continuing: "We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition" (167). The narrative ends with the celebration of an important milestone—the security of Linda's self-possession—while simultaneously recognizing that this is not the full realization of her liberty from slavery.⁵

⁵ Likely, the feeling that Linda's legal freedom is but a diminished form of an ideal liberty would have been amplified had Jacobs ended *Incidents* with an essay on John Brown as she had originally intended. For a discussion of the radical resonance some antebellum reviewers found in *Incidents*, see Caleb Smith, "Harriet Jacobs among the Militants: Transformations in Abolition's Public Sphere."

Directly after suggesting that Linda's liberty is still incomplete, Jacobs writes, "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own" (167). In the narrative, these two points—Linda's partial dissatisfaction with her freedom in the north and her sadness regarding her alienation from her family—are presented merely as consecutive facts. In the following essay, I draw a causal relationship between them, showing how Jacobs's conception of liberty entails the proper functioning of particular social forms, family being the most important. For Jacobs, liberty does not merely involve the recovery of natural, individual autonomy. It is not, to quote Locke, the "power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of [one's] own mind" (1: 315). Rather, liberty describes an appropriate state of social obligation, a type of human flourishing that honors the individual's fundamental social solidarity—her necessary formation in and through a particular community.

Jacobs's conception of liberty has been largely misunderstood by critics. In the first part of this essay, I offer a reason for this misunderstanding, showing how influential critics have read the slave narrative as a story in which the narrator's natural liberty is regained by way of psychological development toward a Lockean model of the self. In the second part, I examine Jacobs's alternative model of the self, which is constituted in such a way that liberty is inseparable from communal flourishing. I argue that Jacobs resists the leveling universalism of liberal ethics, while challenging the parochialism of some communitarian thinkers. Though *Incidents* may be the best example for illustrating this divergent tradition in the slave narrative, it does not stand alone. Rather, as I suggest in the conclusion, a better understanding of Jacobs's project reveals her conception of liberty to be at work across the American slave narrative, challenging the common

assumption that the genre is primarily concerned with individual autonomy and recasting its grand narrative as a journey from slavery to solidarity.

Our dominant mode of reading the slave narrative can make it seem like liberal individualism is the genre's only source for understanding the self. Indeed, for some critics, the slave narrative is a kind of technology for fashioning a liberal identity. In his seminal essay "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," Houston A. Baker contrasts slave narratives with canonical autobiographies by white writers like Jonathan Edwards and Walt Whitman. White autobiographers, Baker argues, invented modes of self-expression by adapting old forms to meet the needs of their new country. Slaves, however, faced a much more fundamental problem. Baker writes,

The slave's task was primarily one of creating a human and liberated self rather than of projecting one that reflected a peculiar landscape and tradition. His problem was not to answer Crèvecoeur's question: 'What then is the American, this new man?' It was, rather, the problem of being itself. (245)

Baker points to Frederick Douglass's apostrophe to the ships as one example of this struggle toward being. The passage opens with Douglass at his nadir, driven by cruel treatment into "a sort of beast-like stupor" punctuated only with brief moments of mental clarity in which he would battle despair and long for freedom (70-71). Douglass tells how, during breaks from his work, he would look to the ships on the Chesapeake Bay and call out:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. (71-72)

Baker reads this passage as the genesis of a liberal self. "When clarified and understood through language," he writes "the deathly, terrifying nothingness around [Douglass] reveals the grounds of being. Freedom, the ability to choose one's own direction, makes life beautiful and pure.... From what appears a blank and awesome backdrop, Douglass wrests significance" (248). For Baker, the key to Douglass's heroic self-creation is literacy, understood both as the ability to read and write and more broadly as the ability to assign significance to experience. Baker makes it clear that Douglass uses his facility with language to embrace an identity based on natural liberty, the belief that "freedom is

the natural condition of life” (249). He passes over, however, the specific way in which Douglass uses language in the apostrophe to develop his liberal model of the self.

Douglass’s psychological development advances through his association with the ships. The relationship is initially one of opposition and longing. The ships are free; Douglass is a slave. Though Douglass wishes to be free and on the ships, the social fact of slavery (“bands of iron”) and the physical fact of geography (“the turbid waters”) make this impossible. But here a curious transformation occurs. In describing the social and physical boundaries that limit him, Douglass begins to separate his sense of self from them. And so the apparently essential nature of Douglass’s identity as a slave bound to a particular master in a particular place is revealed to be made up of mere contingencies that would change were he to travel only “one hundred miles straight north.” As the apostrophe continues, beyond even the portion quoted above, Douglass increasingly disengages from the material and social aspects of his identity, associating himself instead with a rational faculty that treats name, social status, geography, and even age as arbitrary characteristics that his newly liberated self can shed or revise. To return to Baker’s terms, by treating his given identity as “nothingness,” Douglass discovers the liberating potential of self-reflection and emerges with a new understanding of his “being.”

The end result of Douglass’s psychological development is what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called “the ‘punctual’ self,” taking its name from the image of a point (*Sources of the Self* 171). The punctual self arises, Taylor argues, when one disengages from the habits and customs that previously seemed constitutive parts of the self. One is then free to treat these characteristics as objects of control. He writes: “To take this stance

is to identify oneself with the power to objectify and remake, and by this act to distance oneself from all the particular features which are objects of potential change. What we are essentially is none of the latter, but what finds itself capable of fixing them and working on them” (171). Taylor traces the punctual model of the self back to Locke, whom he credits with first identifying the liberating potential of instrumental reason. In accepting as essential only that rational faculty that stands apart from the social and material, Locke discovered the possibility for radical change. Instead of accepting the identity passed down through custom, one could be free to fashion an identity according to the dictates of rational choice and natural, God-given liberty (173-175).

Douglass takes just this turn toward natural liberty in the apostrophe. It is initially tempting to think that Douglass is going to begin a pained theodicy with the questions: “Is there any God? Why am I a slave?” Given the suffering he describes in the narrative, it might seem reasonable for Douglass to question the existence of a good God. But, as the apostrophe continues, it encourages us to read these questions in precisely the opposite direction, with Douglass questioning his identity as a slave because of God’s existence. For if there is a God, who invested humans with natural liberty, then Douglass’s enslavement is an aberration, a social construct obscuring his more fundamental existence as a free man. Such a reading of the questions is encouraged both by Douglass’s enduring piety—notably, he affirms his decision to escape by saying, “God helping me, I will”—and the positive, almost euphoric, turn the passage takes near the end.

In the apostrophe to the ships, Douglass records a method of psychological liberation, a means for reclaiming his identity from his oppressor and remaking it

according to the principle of natural liberty. Critics have since turned Douglass's achievement into a rubric for judging slave narratives more generally. This arguably began in an essay that appeared alongside Baker's—James Olney's "‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." Like Baker, Olney is fascinated by Douglass's heroic self-fashioning, praising it as an "assertion of identity" (157). Also like Baker, he presents identity and autonomy as being crucially linked. "In identity is freedom," Olney writes, "freedom from slavery, freedom from ignorance, freedom from non-being, freedom even from time" (157). For Olney, Douglass's means for achieving this radical autonomy is his "creative memory," which performs a function much like the punctual self, placing the subject on a socially disengaged plane and using instrumental reason to shape a new identity from the raw materials of memory (169).

Olney's essay is valuable for its description of how ex-slave narrators go about fashioning identities that recover their natural liberty. But it is most often cited today because of its assertion that among the slave narratives "none but Douglass' has...any real claim to literary merit" (167). Olney supports this provocative claim by arguing that Douglass is uniquely focused on "intellectual, emotional, [and] moral growth," portraying his psychological development with an especially inventive narrative voice (154). Other narrators, by contrast, describe only "the realities of the institution of slavery" according to a pat formula, and so their narratives are of historical, but not literary value (154).

In the past few decades, most critics who disagree with Olney have sought to broaden his scope, claiming that more narrators than Douglass offer rich descriptions of intellectual, emotional, and moral growth. Though many of these critics have produced

valuable scholarship, they tend to replicate Olney's foundational premise—that slave narratives demonstrate psychological growth according to how well they move toward something like natural liberty via something like a punctual conception of the self. Robert S. Levine, for instance, argues that even in co-authored slave narratives, like those of Nat Turner and Sojourner Truth, narrators develop creative means of fashioning liberal—Levine calls them “revolutionary”—identities, based on social rupture (100-102). Similarly, Mitch Kachun claims that disengaged “creative memory” is much more common in slave narratives than Olney pretends (23-25).

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that liberal self-fashioning is a fundamental feature of the slave narrative genre. Gates traces the self-making tradition back to eighteenth-century slave narratives like Olaudah Equiano's, in which a strong narrative voice guides Equiano's protean journey as he moves from African to slave to sailor to abolitionist. Gates praises Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* as “a representation of becoming, of a development of a self that not only has a past and a present but which speaks distinct languages at its several stages which culminate in the narrative present” (153-154). In Gates's reading, Equiano's narrative works precisely by developing a voice that mimics a punctual model of the self, standing on natural liberty and apart from the various social settings in which Equiano finds himself.

The link between the slave narrative and liberal individualism is such that even when critics explicitly try to reach beyond its limits, they often end up returning to natural liberty and a punctual model of the self. Criticism on Harriet Jacobs is instructive here. Jacobs is often praised for offering a community-focused alternative to the austere individualism of writers like Douglass. Valerie Smith calls Jacobs's narrative “a story of

a triumphant self-in-relation” (33). Similarly, John Carlos Rowe calls attention to how Linda “achieves her freedom through a wide range of social practices” (130), and Carolyn Sorisio speaks of “Linda’s collective identity and destiny” (16). These critics have identified an important aspect of Jacobs’s narrative—namely, the attention she pays to community. But still, they portray Jacobs as developing a punctual self ordered toward the reclamation of natural liberty, though they grant she uses communal means for this development.

Linda, according to such critics, leverages her rhetorical skill and social position in order to gain personal power. Rowe praises Linda’s choice to take Mr. Sands as a lover for its savvy maximization of her autonomy. He describes the episode as the narrative’s exemplar of liberty because of “how much more potentially powerful this decision makes her in her community” (131). Here and elsewhere, as in his claim that Linda learns to view her family in terms of their “political agency” (135), Rowe identifies liberty with personal power and portrays community primarily as a series of relationships entered into for the mutual pursuit and protection of this power. Similarly, Sorisio presents collectivity and liberty as opposing forces in the narrative that Linda is able to ingeniously harmonize. She argues, for instance, that “Linda’s role as a family member often impedes her move toward freedom. However, her family also provides her with collective pride in her own individualism” (12). Sorisio admires Linda’s collective identity insofar as it is useful for “asserting an amorphous and transcendent will that exists outside her slave’s body” (5).

Conversely, those who succeed in firmly situating Jacobs beyond liberalism often do so by emphasizing her negative project, reading *Incidents* as a critique or radical

negation of institutional control. In *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, Lindon Barrett points to several ways in which antebellum American conceptions of the state, the self, and liberty relied on the oppression of African-American slaves. In this vein, Barrett's reading of Jacobs highlights the deconstructive power of her portrayal of Southern society, which was supposedly built on the health of its families. "The central intrigue of *Incidents*," he writes, "refutes promptly the seeming clarity of the nuclear domesticity influencing political agency and intermediate civic agency" (146). Similarly, Saidiya Hartman's reading of Jacobs in *Scenes of Subjection* calls attention to her "implicit critique of the limits of formal freedom" as offered by Northern liberalism (112). Like Rowe, Hartman sees Linda's affair with Sands as a closer approximation of true freedom, but unlike Rowe, she emphasizes its "provisionality"—how it is "estranged from the assured and univocal expressive capacity of the intending subject," destabilizing common conceptions of agency (112). In *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America*, Stacey Margolis points to yet another way in which Jacobs challenges the liberal idea of agency. From her place in the garret, Margolis claims, Linda achieves a kind of viral impersonality—"a radical immobility that produces an equally radical (if ghostly) mobility" (25). For Margolis Linda is something like Melville's Bartleby, embracing self-negation to such an extent that it paradoxically becomes a means of self-replication.

Critics who attend to Linda's collectivity understand it primarily as an instrument for realizing her individualism and autonomy. Conversely, those who attend to Jacobs's critique of liberalism overlook the central role her particular community takes in creating an alternative to the liberal order. In the following section, I make a different argument,

showing how Jacobs's divergent understanding of liberty grows out of her collective understanding of the self, directly challenging those key premises of liberal individualism described above—natural liberty and the punctual self.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent both advances toward liberty and defines it anew by virtue of her solidarity with a particular community. The word *solidarity*, as I use it here, comes from the work of the nineteenth-century editor and public intellectual Orestes Brownson. In his 1865 treatise on political philosophy *The American Republic*, Brownson reimagines the basis of the American state by rejecting the founders' political starting point of natural liberty. He announces this intention with the book's first sentence: "Man is a dependent being, and neither does nor can suffice for himself" (11). For Brownson, humanity's inescapable dependence gives the lie to the idea that individuals enjoy complete liberty in state of nature. Even if it were based on anthropological fact, he argues, a politics that enshrines natural liberty will assert the rights of individuals while undermining the social basis of those rights, ultimately resulting in "license, not liberty" (16). In the place of natural liberty, Brownson posits "a real, living solidarity, which makes individuals members of the social body, and members one of another" (44). According to this conception of solidarity, certain types of social relationships are natural—born with the individual and are not entered into voluntarily. These relationships are not governed by a social contract because neither the individuals nor the community they form could exist apart from one another. Such an understanding of solidarity does not eradicate the individual, nor does it present all of society as somehow immutable. But it does claim that individuals are necessarily constituted in and

through society, as constitutive parts of a community that, in turn, is a constitutive part of them.

Though, as I will show later, Jacobs ultimately troubles Brownson's political application of solidarity, she anticipates his social model of the self. Jacobs offers a striking example of a self formed in solidarity midway through her narrative when Linda visits her parents' graves. After realizing that her young daughter will be subjected to the same battery of violence and sexual harassment she has experienced, Linda begins to plan for her escape and takes advantage of a brief window of leisure to visit the graveyard where her parents are buried. Jacobs writes:

The graveyard was in the woods, and twilight was coming on. Nothing broke the death-like stillness except the occasional twitter of a bird. My spirit was overawed by the solemnity of the scene. For more than ten years I had frequented this spot, but never had it seemed to me so sacred as now. A black stump, at the head of my mother's grave, was all that remained of a tree my father had planted. His grave was marked by a small wooden board, bearing his name, the letters of which were nearly obliterated. I knelt down and kissed them, and poured forth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take. As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house, where, before Nat Turner's time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave. I rushed on with renovated hopes. My trust in God had been strengthened by that prayer among the graves. (79)

The scene shares many superficial similarities with Douglass's apostrophe to the ships. Both narrators start out struggling under the weight of abuse and in a moment of epiphany make definite resolutions to escape. The characters of these epiphanies, however, are quite different. Whereas Douglass disengages from the psychological trappings imposed on him by Southern slaveholders, Linda becomes further enmeshed in what she reveals to be a rich African-American community. The graveyard is thick with associations for Linda, who explains that she has visited the site regularly for over a decade. Domestic and religious society intersect in the setting, calling to mind memories both of her parents and of the church where enslaved parishioners would, as Jacobs mentioned earlier in the narrative, "meet...and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer" (60).

The church and graveyard, however, are ruins of the institutions they represent rather than living examples of them. The church is no longer in use, and the graves of Linda's family suffer from a lack of maintenance. By describing the ruin in aggressive, active language—the church is a "wreck," the inscription on Linda's father's grave is "nearly obliterated"—Jacobs emphasizes the unnaturalness of the decay. The evils of slavery are folded into the background of the scene in such a way that they appear only as disruptions of what ought to be a thriving locus for the town's African-American community. Jacobs moves beyond a simple reflection of, to quote Olney, "the realities of the institution of slavery" (51), drawing the reader's attention instead to the sort of community that slavery destroys through privation. As Jacobs creatively traces the faint and sometimes erased outlines of Linda's family heritage and of her civic society more

generally, these social forms are shown to be a constitutive part of Linda's self-conception, participating in her, just as she participates in them.

Though the church and graveyard lie in ruins, Linda's visit momentarily returns them to their proper uses. She venerates her parents at their gravesides and prays to God just outside of the empty church. As though in response, the community represented by the setting revitalizes Linda's will, filling her mind with "renovated hopes." When Linda hears her father's voice, it literalizes what may have seemed figurative in her earlier account of how she sometimes heard her mother's voice during her struggles with the Flints (79). But at the same time, Jacobs's tentative framing of the experience, in which Linda only "seemed to hear" the exhortation, leaves the passage open to both spiritual and material interpretations. Linda may have encountered a ghost or she may have willed herself into hearing her father's voice. The ambiguity of whether the voice comes from inside or outside of her mind reflects the capaciousness of Linda's subjectivity, suggesting that, just as she inhabits the graveyard, the graveyard inhabits her.

The integral relationship between Linda and the community represented by the graveyard is felt throughout *Incidents* and is reflected even in Jacobs's narrative style. Her abstracted renderings of violence, for example, further emphasize Linda's solidarity by weaving her story into the general experience of her community. Many ex-slave narrators try to make moments of violence as particularized as possible. The trope of the bloody lash, in which the narrator's master beats a slave until the whip drips with blood, is one tool for crystallizing scenes of violence into compact moments of visceral emotion. Early in his narrative, Douglass tells how his master whipped his aunt "upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood.... Not until overcome by fatigue, would he

cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin” (19). Solomon Northrup goes into similar detail in his narrative, telling how his jealous master scourged the innocent slave girl Patsy, until “the lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground” (257). Henry Bibb’s narrative is permeated with the whippings he received and witnessed, and he too hones in on the image of the bloody whip. He tells how his second master kept him “running from under the bloody lash” and meticulously describes how the chief antagonist of his narrative Deacon Whitfield whipped Bibb and, later, his wife with a “gory lash” (16, 132, 146-147). Each one of these narratives emphasizes the vividness of their visual descriptions. Douglass dwells on the psychological effect of witnessing his aunt’s whipping, repeatedly remarking on how it has been etched into his memory. “I well remember it,” he writes. “I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing” (19). Early editions of Northrup’s and Bibb’s narratives included illustrations on the pages facing the most detailed descriptions of scourgings to aid in their visualization.

Unlike Douglass, Northrup, and Bibb, Jacobs tends to generalize scenes of violence. Perhaps the best example of her method appears in the chapter “Fear of Insurrection,” which describes her town’s gruesome reaction to Nat Turner’s rebellion. The chapter opens with ominous acts perpetrated against a particular group: “Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in an especial manner. In some cases the searchers scattered powder and shot among their clothes, and then sent other parties to find them” (57). When describing the resulting violence, the narration becomes more general: “Every where men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet” (57). And as the scene progresses, violence becomes

more general still as though it were entirely ubiquitous: “All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless.... The consternation was universal” (58). Such arbitrary and abstracted brutality pervades *Incidents*, dispersing a feeling of slavery’s antisocial barbarism into the narrative’s atmosphere.

While the narration of violence in *Incidents* is certainly bold and memorable, it also makes the immediate subject harder to visualize than the crystalline images from Douglass, Bibb, and Northrup. This stylistic divergence goes hand-in-hand with differences between the writers’ didactic strategies and phenomenologies. Whereas other narrators focus on the particular in order to evoke empathy and to help readers vicariously experience the brutality of slavery, Jacobs presents violence at the level of systems and groups in order to illustrate the effect of slavery on the community as a whole. In doing so, she articulates what Charles Taylor has called “background,” or that which “we are ‘attending from’ as we attend to the experience” (“Engaged” 325). The embedded nature of Jacobs’s perceptions means that her experience resists complete articulation and can be only partially described. “Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations” (5), she writes. “No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” (47). Still, Jacobs calls attention to this substratum of her experience, showing how the incidents of her life are necessarily embedded in a larger network of events, feelings, and assumptions. In this way, Jacobs reveals a communal dimension to perception itself.

From my characterization of *Incidents* so far, it may seem that Linda’s solidarity with her community is mostly a matter of sentiment. She hears her parents’ voices and

feels better; she witnesses the brutal treatment of her community and feels worse. In describing Linda's escape, however, Jacobs moves beyond sentiment to convey solidarity's practical efficacy. A few weeks after her trip to the graveyard, Linda flees the Flints and sneaks into her grandmother's house to gather provisions for escape. While she collects her things, a longtime friend appears and asks, "Linda, is you gwine all alone? Let me call your uncle" (84). Linda rejects the offer of help, saying, "I want no one to be brought into trouble on my account" (84). But the protracted escape that follows reveals that others must inevitably participate in the creation of her liberty. From her grandmother's house, Linda goes to the home of an anonymous friend, who conceals her for over a week and nurses her back to health after she is bitten by a snake. When the friend's house becomes too dangerous, another friend shows up to move Linda to the home of a wealthy white woman. When this home grows unsafe, an acquaintance named Peter secrets Linda all over the county, before finally stowing her in the garret hideout behind her grandmother's house where she will spend the next seven years. The garret, ironically, is specially constructed by Linda's uncle Phillip—the very person whose help she initially rejected.

With the exception of Phillip, each of the figures in this long chain of allies is previously unintroduced. Jacobs's method of characterization can sometimes make her narrative seem flat, populated by a host of minor characters, who are rarely described in much detail or given many lines and simply appear when needed and exit once they move the story along. But another effect of Jacobs's technique is to draw attention to the information that does emerge in her sparse descriptions, which often reveal that Linda's various allies owe debts of friendship or gratitude to her family. Jacobs introduces the

wealthy woman who temporarily houses her in this way: “Among the ladies who were acquainted with my grandmother, was one who had known her from childhood, and always been very friendly to her. She had also known my mother and her children, and felt interested for them” (86). Likewise, Peter is first introduced as a family connection, one who had served as an apprentice to Linda’s father. Later, after agreeing to deliver letters for Linda from the garret, Peter reveals a much more substantial bond of friendship, saying, “I don’t forget that your father was my best friend, and I will be a friend to his children so long as God lets me live” (108). Jacobs’s unorthodox style of characterization shifts the readers’ attention from the individual identities of the characters to the way they relate to one another as part of a complex community that spans generations. Notably, the minor characters who enter the story to provide Linda with crucial support, food, care, transportation, and counsel are often related to her in ways that have little to do with her as a mere individual. And so their appearances further embed Linda within a community that began long before her birth and is held together, at least in part, by the generosity of her grandmother, mother, and father.

In describing the web of obligations that link Linda’s community together, Jacobs positions her in what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has called “networks of giving and receiving” (*Dependent* 199). MacIntyre criticizes liberal philosophy generally and Adam Smith in particular for advancing a simplistic account of communal life in which “all social relationships are to be *either* relationships governed by bargaining undertaken for mutual advantage (market relationships provide the paradigm) *or* affective and sympathetic relationships” (115).⁶ What this dichotomy overlooks, he argues, in an echo

⁶ c.f. MacIntyre’s similar (and more influential) argument in *After Virtue* that contemporary moral thought can be reduced to emotive and managerial modes of inquiry (23-35).

of Brownson, is human dependence. In order to survive childhood and moments of illness and distress, but also in order to become an independent thinker, an individual is necessarily dependent on the network of family and friends that care for and teach her. This individual accrues a debt of gratitude to the community that raised her and is morally obligated to repay this debt by offering assistance to others, just as they are obligated to assist her (119-20).

Importantly, for MacIntyre, the resulting network of giving and receiving is different from market relationships. For one, the individual will most likely repay her debt of gratitude by giving to people who did not give to her. Also, her giving is not likely to follow strict reciprocity. It may be necessary for the individual to give more than she received, or alternatively, she may need more from the community than she is able offer in return (99-101). Relationships of giving and receiving are also distinct from those sympathetic relationships that are based on what MacIntyre calls “a blandly generalized benevolence” (119). This is because, rather than abstracting the individual from her community and calling for her to give to others on an entirely altruistic basis, the individual’s moral obligations arise from the needs and requirements of the community to whom she owes a debt of gratitude. Since the individual’s rationality itself grew only through the operation of the network of giving and receiving, she can best understand her autonomy according to her reliance on and responsibility for her community. As MacIntyre puts it, “Acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence” (85).

Linda’s interaction with her community largely bears out MacIntyre’s conception of independence grounded in acknowledged dependence. Linda often relies on the knowledge of her network of family, friends, and acquaintances to make decisions.

Occasionally, others simply make decisions for her—a method Linda sometimes begrudgingly accepts (“I did not like to move thus blindfolded, but I had no choice” [86]) and other times assertively resists (“I now ventured to ask what they proposed to do with me” [96]). Most often, however, decisions are reached through discussion and debate. While members of the community often disagree about the best plan of action, they tend to agree about their ultimate goal, which involves the good of the community over that of its individual members. To use MacIntyre’s terms, they disagree about the hierarchy of “goods,” while agreeing about the preeminent importance of “the common good” (63, 135). That is not to say, though, that these disagreements are minor or even that it is always obvious that the community holds a shared definition of the common good.

One of Linda’s conflicts with her grandmother offers a dramatic example of the tension that can arise even in a community ordered toward the common good. Directly after her experience in the graveyard, Linda returns to her grandmother’s house to secretly pack for her escape. She is caught in the act, and her grandmother reprimands her, saying, “Linda, do you want to kill your old grandmother? Do you mean to leave your little, helpless children? I am old now, and cannot do for your babies as I once did for you” (80). When Linda suggests that it may be best for her children for her to escape, her grandmother replies with the grim maxim: “Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death” (80). Her grandmother frames their disagreement as fundamentally about ends, as though Linda would pursue her private interests to the detriment of the common good, but Linda knows that she too desires the good of their community. She simply sees different means for achieving it. What is more, Linda believes that her grandmother also realizes this. She acknowledges how hurtful her grandmother’s censure

was. “The memory of it haunted me for many a year,” Jacobs writes (80). But at the same time, she notes, “[My grandmother] knew all the while that I loved [my children] better than my life” (80).

A few different versions of the argument between Linda and her grandmother play out during her circuitous journey north. Her grandmother consistently wishes for Linda to stay back in order to best serve the interests of their community, but Linda is drawn away by her conviction that escaping North Carolina is a better means for securing these same interests. Linda’s assertions of independence, then—in escaping from the Flint’s against her grandmother’s wishes or in taking the risky journey to Philadelphia in spite of her grandmother’s fears—are done in service of the very network of giving and receiving that prepared Linda for her independence.

In telling how Linda focuses on the common good of her particular community, Jacobs departs from the universalist ethic embraced by some of her Northern friends like Isaac Post. In *Incidents*, Jacobs refers to Isaac and his wife Amy, who housed her for over a year when she lived in Rochester, as “practical believers in the Christian doctrine of human brotherhood” (156). Jacobs praises the Posts both for their hospitality and for their anti-racism. She does not, however, delve into their religious beliefs, which merged a radical strand of Quakerism with progressive politics and emergent forms of spiritualism (Hewitt 83-84). Around the time Jacobs met the Posts in 1849, Isaac began conducting séances. In 1852, after Jacobs had left Rochester but while she maintained a correspondence with Amy Post, Isaac published *Voices from the Spirit World*, a collection of messages from the spirits of deceased friends and an international cast of

political, religious, and cultural celebrities, including Thomas Jefferson, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Voltaire.⁷

Post's spirits tell how, upon death, they are given new, spiritual bodies, drawn into circles of similar spirits, and given blessings commensurate with their place in the heavenly hierarchy. The organizing principle of the spirit world has nothing to do with fame, accomplishments, or even a traditional catalog of the virtues, but is entirely dictated by the possession of what the spirits call "pure, disinterested love" (52, 104, 205). The more one has acted out of disinterested love, the better one's lot in heaven. Still, the transition from corporeal to spiritual community is not a revolution so much as it is a revelation of how the world has always been ordered. Post's spirits often remark on how disinterested love had been the only important quality during their temporal existence but that the imperfections of earthly society had blinded them to this fact. When the remorseful spirit of John C. Calhoun says that he was wrong to pursue "the stability, the unity, and the harmony of the government" to the detriment of slaves, it is not only because acting more benevolently would have improved his spiritual lot (88). He also regrets how his lack of benevolence stultified his earthly ambitions. "The powers with which I had been favored," Calhoun laments, "had been worse than wasted" (88). Had he leavened his political ability with "love unselfish," he could have combated slavery, improved his country, and hastened "the universal spreading of the principles contained in the Declaration of the Independence of the United States" (88-89). Calhoun's spirit

⁷ For a comparison of spiritualism in *Incidents and Voices*, through the lens of race, see Russ Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. Castronovo is too hard on Isaac Post, claiming on very scant evidence that Post was an opportunistic charlatan and on no evidence at all that he stole from Jacobs's story for a chapter in *Voices* (188-191). Nonetheless, he draws useful distinctions between the abstracted spiritualism of Post and the historicized spiritualism of Jacobs.

seems dumbfounded at his temporal inability to recognize the importance of disinterested love. He blames his shortsightedness on local attachments, a flawed upbringing, and—above all—Southern ministers who fooled him into thinking slavery could be reconciled with the Christian gospel (89-90).

Though he enjoys a higher heavenly status than Calhoun, George Washington's spirit expresses similar regrets. He wishes he had not so single-mindedly pursued the good of his country, but had instead focused on the good of all humanity. Like Calhoun, Washington now regrets his failure to combat the spread of slavery. But he also regrets his role in the military and government, for he has "found Patriotism and Christianity very different things" (32). Like Calhoun, Washington seems surprised that he had ever replaced the highest good of disinterested love with the narrow good of his nation, and he blames social conditions for the mistake. His impulses towards benevolence, he explains, "were very much choked with my educational and sectarian views" (32). According to *Voices*, human flourishing—both in this world and the next—requires one to view others through a lens of impersonal benevolence that is formed only by transcending one's community, with its misguided moral norms and particularized social conditioning. Perhaps this helps explain why Post's spirits seem so undifferentiated. Emerson's critique of Swedenborg's mystical style, "All his interlocutors Swedenborgize," applies just as well to Post (75). Though he makes a few concessions to individuality (for example, Quaker spirits tend to use *thee* and *thou*), all of the spirits from Napoleon Bonaparte to Margaret Fuller utter the same expositions on the mechanics of life after death in the same dry way that Post presents them in his introduction. Though much of the book's

attraction lies its presentation of a diversity of spirits, they seem to speak with only one voice.

So far I have identified three interrelated components to Jacobs's model of the self. First, Linda is fundamentally shaped by the domestic, religious, and civic societies in which she participates. Second, Linda's actions inevitably take place in the context of and in concert with her particular community, a network of giving and receiving that began before she was born. Third, Linda makes crucial choices in communication with and in the interests of this community. Even in her independence, Linda recognizes the debt she owes her community and pursues its common good. So far, Jacobs's model of the self is clearly different from the punctual self proposed by liberal individualism, and it appears largely consonant with Brownson's conception of solidarity and MacIntyre's understanding of the individual's role in a network of giving and receiving. After Linda escapes North Carolina, however, Jacobs extends the theoretical framework in which I have placed her by detailing Linda's solidarity with her community during her experience of diaspora.

In their descriptions of communities of mutual dependence, Brownson and MacIntyre both seem unsure of what to do with people who, for whatever reason, fall outside of the community. While Brownson strenuously objected to slavery on the grounds of solidarity, his concern for solidarity also caused him to caution against extending voting rights to freed slaves.⁸ Because former slaves were reared outside of the

⁸ Brownson sums up his conservative anti-slavery stance near the end of his 1864 essay "Liberalism and Progress": "We are Radical, if you will, in our determination, at the earliest moment it can be legally done, to get rid of the system of slave-labor, but, thank God, a Radical in nothing else, and sympathize in little else with those who are called Radicals" (416).

law, Brownson questioned both their ability to undertake civic duties and their loyalty to the Union and argued for a gradual extension of voting rights. He writes:

Negro suffrage will, no doubt, come in time, as soon as the freedmen are prepared for it, and the danger is that it will be attempted too soon.... The freedmen, without political instruction or experience, who have had no country, no domicile, understand nothing of loyalty or of disloyalty. They have strong local attachments, but they can have no patriotism. (219)

A charitable interpretation of Brownson would note that he treats the incorporation of African-Americans into civic life as an inevitable development that, for the sake of prudence, ought to be brought along slowly. Elsewhere, however, Brownson suggests that he would rather not have to worry about their incorporation at all. In the closing pages of *The American Republic*, which detail Brownson's grand hopes for America's future, he callously muses that "the negro question will be settled, or settle itself, as is most likely, by the melting away of the negro population before the influx of white laborers" (274).

MacIntyre does not share Brownson's desire to simply sweep outsiders away. He explicitly argues that networks of giving and receiving rely on the presence of strangers (123-126). Still, like Brownson, he offers no explanation for how to restore dispersed communities or meet the communal needs of the stranger. MacIntyre argues that hospitality, rightly understood, is grounded in the virtue of *miser cordia* or pity, which responds to serious needs regardless of the needy individual's standing in the community or her ability to provoke empathy. He writes: "What each of us needs to know in our communal relationships is that the attention given to *our* urgent and extreme needs...will

be proportional to the need and not to the relationship. But we can rely on this only from those for whom *miser cordia* is one of the virtues. So communal life itself needs this virtue that goes beyond the boundaries of communal life” (124). In his discussion of *miser cordia*, MacIntyre presents basic hospitality toward strangers as both morally and pragmatically necessary for communal life. Communities that do not care for strangers court a crisis of trust that could threaten to break down their own networks of giving and receiving. What is missing from his account, however, is the experience of the stranger herself, who is at once absent from the community to which she belongs and only socially adjacent to the community in which she now lives. Given the integral relationship between self and society that MacIntyre describes elsewhere, life under such circumstances—even when “urgent and extreme needs” are met—would present serious challenges. Not only would the lack of community saddle the stranger with the affective weight of loneliness, but it would also raise the psychological challenge of living as a self without a society.

In describing Linda’s efforts to reconstitute her community after she escapes slavery, Jacobs shows how the stranger’s needs call for something beyond *miser cordia*. When she arrives in the north, Linda tries to perpetuate her community first physically and then psychologically. One of her first acts is to seek out friends from North Carolina, who, like her, had escaped to the free states. Linda is not able to find them in Philadelphia and shortly thereafter leaves for New York in search of her daughter Ellen. In New York, Linda has better luck finding friends from back home. Notably, Jacobs’s descriptions situate these friends in Linda’s network of giving and receiving. Linda first sees Ellen as she is walking with “the daughter of a woman who used to live with [Linda’s]

grandmother” (138). Linda goes to this woman’s home and, before even seeing her, hears her exclaim, “Where is Linda Brent? I used to know her father and mother” (138).

Jacobs’s description of the diaspora community’s joyful reunion in New York seems almost like a full realization of the potential latent in Linda’s Southern community—a glimpse of what could be but for the social disruption of slavery. Jacobs writes, “There was quite a company of us, all from my grandmother’s neighborhood. These friends gathered round me and questioned me eagerly. They laughed, they cried, and they shouted.... It was a day of great excitement. How different from the silent days I had passed in my dreary den!” (138-139)

As Linda’s life in North continues, though, this fully realized community recedes from view. This is partially due to the further disruptions of slavery. Linda’s reunion with Ellen, for instance, is frustrated by her dubious legal status and Ellen’s quasi-enslavement to Sands’s cousin. But the community is also fragmented by the social and economic arrangements of Northern liberalism. After describing the reunion, Jacobs tells how Linda searches throughout New England for her brother William, eventually learning that he is off indefinitely on a whaling expedition (140). The next chapter, entitled “A Home Found,” does not tell how Linda establishes a home for herself and her family but how she finds employment as a nurse in the Bruce home. For much of the remaining narrative, Linda’s job with the Bruces dominates her social life. When her son Benny arrives in New York, he is unable to stay with Linda at the Bruce’s, and so he goes to live with William, who, back from his whaling expedition, works briefly as an abolitionist before taking Benny with him to the California gold rush.

Jacobs's narration makes Linda's experience of the North seem particularly unsettled and lonely. She quickly passes over moments of stability, and dwells on flux. Jacobs spends only a few short paragraphs describing the months Linda is able to live with both of her children in Boston, and instead emphasizes the dramatic bookends of this episode—a close escape from Dr. Flint in New York and a trip to England occasioned by Mrs. Bruce's death (151). In the chapter "The Confession," Jacobs sums up the time Linda spent living with her daughter in one sentence, "For two years my daughter and I supported ourselves comfortably in Boston" (155). For the rest of the chapter, she focuses on Ellen's unhappy departure for boarding school. Linda's thoughts after Ellen leaves serve as a compact summary of how Jacobs presents the North: "I was alone again. It was necessary for me to be earning money" (157).

As physical manifestations of her community recede, Jacobs turns inward, mentally superimposing her network of giving and receiving over her experience of the North. The clearest example of Jacobs's psychological perpetuation of her Southern community appears at the end of the narrative when the second Mrs. Bruce purchases Linda from the Flints, and Linda reflects on her newfound self-possession. Jacobs writes:

I remembered how my poor father had tried to buy me, when I was a small child, and how he had been disappointed. I hoped his spirit was rejoicing over me now. I remembered how my good old grandmother had laid up her earnings to purchase me in later years, and how often her plans had been frustrated. How that faithful, loving old heart would leap for joy, if she could look on me and my children now that we were free! My relatives had been foiled in all their efforts, but God had raised me up a

friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon. Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred (166).

Linda best understands Mrs. Bruce's act of *miserickordia* by plugging it into her established network of giving and receiving. By acting as a true and even "sacred" friend, Mrs. Bruce extends the community that serves as a constitutive part of Linda's self. In the moment Linda achieves her self-possession, Jacobs focuses not on her God-given liberty but on a God-given friendship, which she folds into the rich social matrix her narrative has developed.

Jacobs turns directly from this moment of gratitude, however, to a sober estimation of what remains to be done. Linda is "as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north," but, sadly, this "is not saying a great deal" (167). The form of liberty Linda most ardently desires moves beyond self-possession to the possession of the basic material goods needed to foster solidarity—"a home of my own" and "a hearthstone of my own, however humble" (167). This goal, which Linda calls "the dream of my life" (167), rests uneasily alongside Mrs. Bruce's benevolence. For, given Jacobs's account of the North, the social and economic structures Mrs. Bruce represents are in some important ways opposed to Linda's ability to build a stable home and to foster solidarity with her community. In Jacobs estimation, a society that cherishes liberty would extend *miserickordia* to the stranger, but it would also foster the social stability and make available the material goods necessary for establishing sites of social solidarity.

Kenneth Warren has observed that “a noticeable feature of the slave narrative as a genre is the fact that it is primarily the tale of remarkable individuals” (184). For Warren, the weakness of this feature is that it narrows our understanding of the fight against slavery—at least in the discipline of literary studies—to a few atypical examples. The classic slave narratives show how a few heroic people overcame slavery, but they do not make it any easier to imagine “the collapse of the system as a whole” (183-184). Like the other ex-slave narrators Warren mentions (Douglass, Josiah Henson, William Wells Brown, and Henry Box Brown), Harriet Jacobs is, of course, a remarkable individual. But by grounding her narrative in a political ontology of solidarity rather than natural liberty, Jacobs moves beyond the individualism that Warren identifies as problematic. Rather than creatively shaping her story in a way that asserts her independence from society, Jacobs shows how Linda is constituted in and through community. Rather than presenting liberty as a form of self-possession achieved upon arriving in the Northern states, Jacobs suggests that the full realization of liberty is a communal experience that requires both legal self-possession and political and economic arrangements in which society can flourish. In her description of her community’s collective opposition to slavery, Jacobs prefigures the moment when, as Warren writes, tens of thousands of slaves “gained freedom by choosing, collectively, to leave plantations and follow Union armies” (184). For much of the 1860s, Jacobs would teach these escaped slaves, sometimes called Contrabands, in the refugee camps around Washington DC.⁹

But Jacobs is not the only ex-slave narrator to understand the self and liberty according to the logic of solidarity. Just as Douglass’s achievement has caused critics to

⁹ For a description of how excerpts from *Incidents* appeared in textbooks for teaching the Contrabands, see Ana Stewart, “Revising ‘Harriet Jacobs’ for 1865.”

read not only his narrative, but the entire slave narrative genre according to terms of liberal individualism, Jacobs's achievement, when properly understood, can help illuminate the collective emphasis of other narratives. Take, for instance, Henry Box Brown's narrative, which I briefly referred to in the introduction as an example of how ex-slave narrators reclaim their natural liberty via social disengagement. Though Brown's framing of his narrative points to the tradition of natural liberty, he also describes both the securing of his liberty and the quality of his life after slavery in the collective terms of a network of giving and receiving. He emerges from the box not only into "the possession of [his] natural rights" but also into "the presence of a number of friends, every one seeming more anxious than another, to have an opportunity of rendering me their assistance" (57). Though the slave narrative genre is, as Warren states, "the tale of remarkable individuals," it is also a record of how these individuals participated in collectivities, achieving liberty through relationships of real, living solidarity.

Chapter 3

Herman Melville: Desire and the Blindness of American Mobility

As a political value, geographical mobility engenders the ignorance of its own defects. This is not to say that we are entirely wrong for valuing mobility. Modern liberal societies have been able to make their economies more efficient and help many of their citizens become wealthier by creating policies and building infrastructure that encourage people to travel to where there are jobs.¹ Still, mobility comes with drawbacks, like the disruption of extended families, local political organizations, and other institutions that have traditionally provided people with economic security and social capital.² While some people become more prosperous in a mobile society, others—usually those who are already disadvantaged—become more needy. But the problem is not only this new form of inequality. Mobility also fosters a transactional understanding of the relation between self and society, making us less likely to notice the very problems generated by our emphasis on mobility. As Charles Taylor observes in his 1984 essay “Alternative Futures”: “The link between high mobility—that is, the pattern of ‘hanging loose’ from all partial communities—and the higher overheads of society is generally quite invisible

¹ For a contemporary account linking mobility to economic progress see Enrico Moretti’s *The New Geography of Jobs*. The chapter “The Inequality of Mobility and Cost of Living”—in which Moretti notes the challenges faced in postindustrial cities and proposes providing unemployed workers with “mobility vouchers”—is a particularly good example of what I call the blindness of mobility. Moretti is keen to the market efficiencies mobility provides, but nowhere considers the deleterious effect subsidized mass migration would have on the communities and intermediary institutions that support the workers he aims to help. For an historical account of the economics of American mobility, see Joe Ferrie’s “Internal Migration” in *Historical Statistics of the United States*. For a moral argument in support of mobility—“Mobility does make for freedom”—see Deirdre McClosky’s *The Bourgeois Virtues* (162).

² See the chapter “Mobility and Sprawl” in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, where Putnam links a certain kind of mobility to the dearth of intermediary institutions and social capital in contemporary America. See also, Wilson Carey McWilliams’s “Liberty, Equality, and the Problem of Community,” especially his discussion of the Supreme Court’s “hostility to community” in asserting a “right to travel” (38-39). For a nineteenth-century account of American mobility see Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (942-947), which I discuss later in this chapter. Notably, Tocqueville traces the dynamic Putnam identifies in reverse, arguing that American “restlessness” results from (rather than in) a dearth of social structures.

to us. Ironically, it is just this pattern of hanging loose that makes us less capable of seeing the social costs of our way of life” (202). Taylor points to the Regan-era New Right as an example of how people in a modern liberal state gradually develop this kind of political blindness—living in a way that simultaneously generates and obscures social pathologies (208).

Taylor goes on to identify progressive and conservative options for how the internal mechanisms of a modern liberal state could mitigate the problems associated with mobility. The progressive option is that societies could evolve new kinds of “community identification and solidarity” (223). Mobility, in this case, would be a force for good, enabling new forms of elective social cohesion around liberal principles like “contemporary understandings of citizen dignity” or “a new style of family life” (223). Conversely, and perhaps simultaneously, excessive mobility could give rise to conservative “counterforces,” reviving past values like the citizens’ “attachment to the land” (223). But even if we grant that such developments would meaningfully treat some of the symptoms of excessive mobility, they still would not address the full scope of Taylor’s critique. Remember, he has argued not only that mobility creates problems, but that it forms us in such a way that we no longer recognize the problems it creates.

If, as Taylor asserts, the habitual experience of mobility creates a kind of blindness, then what we need to overcome that blindness are defamiliarizing practices that can take us outside of our habitual experience. I believe literature is one such practice. And in this chapter, I argue that Herman Melville’s use of vacancy in *The Confidence-Man* offers a way through the blindness of American mobility. As many critics have already shown, Melville employs a variety of methods for producing a suite

of literary effects that I have brought under the umbrella of vacancy.³ His characters are flat. His prose can be cryptic and dizzying. His descriptions are often both verbose and vague. His narration advances from episode to episode with little connecting tissue. Far from trying to draw readers into the story, Melville seems to intentionally invite disinterest. While all this is generally agreed upon, there is less critical consensus regarding Melville's purpose.

As I show later in this chapter, some scholars claim that Melville incorporates vacancy into *The Confidence-Man* as a means of endorsing liberal individualism. Others claim that the novel is itself a vacancy—an expression of nihilistic despair. In this chapter, I oppose both of these readings, arguing instead that Melville uses vacancy to draw the reader's attention to the disjunction between the human desire for collectivity and the actions this desire gives rise to in a mobile society. Though he seems to anticipate much of Taylor's critique of mobility, Melville throws cold water on the hope that liberal societies can effectively mitigate the damage caused by mobility through some

³ In one of the earliest critical treatments of the novel, F.O. Matthiessen suggested that *The Confidence-Man* was ruined by its circulating cast of characters, because Melville could use "the mechanical device of having them disembark at the ends of chapters...[to] dodge the necessity of sustaining the implications of any of them" (410). The result of this technique, according to Matthiessen, was vacancy. Melville had created a "two-dimensional travelling salesman's world" entirely devoid of the vivid local color Mark Twain would eventually give to the Mississippi (411). Though Melville begins with "an assertion of the abundance of life on the river," his novel does not help his readers see or experience that abundant life. Instead, it merely gestures toward its embittered author's "bleak sense of existence" (411).

More recent critics have been kinder both to Melville's use of characterization in particular and his production of vacancy more generally. Sianne Ngai writes approvingly of Melville's "throng of functionally analogous characters who endlessly combine and recombine with one another" (51). Ngai credits Melville's characterization with creating the novel's peculiar, "atonal" tone, which she compares to "something like a 'neutral,' if strangely loud or insistent dial tone" (51). Stephen Matterson identifies patterns of vacancy in the novel's prose, remarking, "Even Melville's syntax tends to erase itself; sentences are continually qualified by such words as 'possibly' and 'apparently,' and by the use of double and triple negatives, to the extent that the reader is often left with a feeling that in spite of all the words, no concrete information has been provided" (xxxv). Elizabeth Renker claims that, as Melville made the transition from fiction to poetry, he became less interested in using his writing to evoke imaginary worlds or discover transcendent truths and more interested in the materiality of his craft, in "words as words—particularly as constructed by letters, or characters" and in "the page as a white space on which he placed written letters" (122, 126).

combination of progressive solidarity and a conservative return to tradition. And though it is fair to read Melville's wry satire as pessimistic, he never veers into complete, nihilistic despair. Instead of directing his bile toward the human condition generally, Melville targets particular values and customs and, in his catalog of unfulfilled desire, lays the moral foundation for a genuinely postliberal politics of place.

The episode involving the confidence man and the widow offers a useful example of the interplay between desire, vacancy, and mobility that I am interested in. Like most other scenes in the novel, this one begins with the confidence man striking up a conversation with a stranger by suggesting a point of commonality—in this case that both he and the widow, who he finds reading the Bible, are especially pious. He then repeatedly asks the widow if she could put confidence in him. The widow mistakes the confidence man's talk for flirtation, as he seems to intend, and gives halting, cryptic responses. She is then so shocked when the confidence man asks for twenty dollars and so relieved when he tells her that he is merely an agent collecting donations for a philanthropic organization that she readily hands the money over.

The episode calls to mind the familiar comedic trope of the rich, lusty widow and the conniving suitor. It is the sort of scene Groucho Marx and Margaret Dumont performed over and over again in the 1930s, and its appearance in theater dates back, at least, to the sixteenth century.⁴ In her study of remarriage plots in early modern English comedies, Jennifer Panek ties the trope's ubiquity to the challenges posed by remarriage in a period of strong institutions and thick social norms. According to Panek, a wealthy

⁴ For a discussion of Melville's theatrical influences in *The Confidence-Man*, see Helen P. Trimpi's "Harlequin-Confidence-Man: The Satirical Tradition of Commedia Dell'Arte and Pantomime in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*."

early modern widow “found herself caught in an unhappy paradox,” placed in a unique position to assert her agency in choosing whom to marry, but under societal pressure to forego remarriage in order to appear virtuous (8). In turn, the widow posed “a paradoxical marital prospect” for early modern men, who desired the widow’s wealth and status, but feared being subjected to an imposing wife (80). Though it undoubtedly bore the imprint of the era’s misogyny, the stereotype of the lusty widow cut through these social paradoxes by creating a convenient excuse for the widow and developing a sort of demand that suitors could supply. Dramatic comedies both buttressed the stereotype and offered audiences a language in which to effectively navigate remarriage. Panek writes: “The suitor typically declares his desire for the widow’s money as forthrightly as he (and sometimes, she) declares her need for sexual satisfaction and his ability to provide it, figuring the relationship as an explicit sex-for-money exchange” (82). By presenting remarriage as a typical encounter governed by the frank language of exchange, comedies provided widows with cover from social censure and gave suitors a path for becoming “made men” without sacrificing their “manliness.”

While the essential pieces that Panek identifies—the lusty widow, the conniving suitor, the translation of romance into exchange—are all present in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville reimagines the trope in a few important ways. For one, Melville packs the scene with implication and confusion, rather than frank, clarifying language. The widow’s very lustiness is first conveyed obliquely. After she drops her Bible and the confidence man hands it back to her, her eyes “sparkle,” and the narrator remarks: “Evidently, she is not now unprepossessed” (56).⁵ On the surface, it appears that Melville uses the double

⁵ All quotes from *The Confidence-Man* come from Stephen Matterson’s 1991 Penguin edition unless otherwise noted.

negative for the sake of comic understatement. The lusty widow is actually much more than merely “unprepossessed.” She’s falling in love! But that isn’t the whole of it. Melville makes a habit throughout the novel of describing emotions not as things in themselves but as the absence of neutrality. When the deaf mute becomes weary of the jeering crowd, he is “not wholly unaffected” (10). When the clergyman feels ashamed for lacking confidence, he is “not untouched” (44). The most striking example comes in Melville’s description of the merchant Mr. Roberts feeling pity, which stacks three of these double negatives on top of each other, “[T]he merchant, though not used to being very indiscreet, yet, being not entirely inhumane, remained not entirely unmoved” (29). The phrase describing the widow’s attraction, then—“not now unprepossessed”—follows this trend by presenting romantic desire as the transient absence of emotional neutrality, as though affective vacancy were the standard for human experience that positive emotions merely (and temporarily) occlude.

Vacancy continues to figure in the scene as it proceeds. Dashes, visual representations of halts and silence, dominate the widow’s dialogue. Take, for instance, her reply when first asked if she could put confidence in the confidence man: “Really, sir – as much – I mean, as one may wisely put in a – a – stranger – an entire stranger, I had almost said” (56). The dashes are expressive in spite of the widow’s apparent confusion, signifying her inarticulate desire in the same way dashes later in the novel signify untranslatable phrases.⁶ Conversely, the thoughts the widow does articulate are self-

⁶ Melville uses dashes this way in Chapter 36 of *The Confidence-Man*, where Mark Winsome explains to the Cosmopolitan why he should beware of another of the Fidèle’s passengers:

“I conjecture him to be what, among the ancient Egyptians, was called a —” using some unknown word.

“A —! And what is that?”

“A — is what Proclus, in a little note to his third book on the theology of Plato, defines as —” coming out with a sentence of Greek. (228)

negating. She calls the confidence man “an entire stranger” only to immediately disclaim the phrase as something she “had *almost* said.” When asked to prove her confidence by giving the confidence man twenty dollars, the widow spirals into a nearly complete linguistic breakdown: “She sat in a sort of restless torment, knowing not which way to turn. She began twenty different sentences, and left off at the first syllable of each” (57). Note how Melville foregrounds unexpressed thought, rendering the widow’s confused sputtering as twenty unspoken sentences, one for each requested dollar.

By placing the widow in “a sort of restless torment,” Melville calls to mind Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous account of the “restlessness of spirit” he found in nineteenth-century America (945). Tocqueville thought Americans had no good reason to be unhappy. They were “the most free and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition in the world” (942-943). And yet, he was struck by the feverish mobility of Americans, which gave every appearance of discontent. Tocqueville writes:

[An American] clears a field, and he leaves to others the trouble of gathering the harvest. He embraces a profession, and he leaves it. He settles in a place that he soon leaves in order to carry his changing desires elsewhere. . . . And when, near the end of a year filled with work, he still has a little leisure, he takes his restless curiosity here and there across the vast limits of the United States. He will do as much as five hundred leagues in a few days in order to distract himself better from his happiness. (944)

Tocqueville gives two integrated causes for American restlessness—“a taste for material well being” and “a social state in which neither law nor custom any longer holds anyone

in his place” (945). Since Americans are peculiarly concerned with their own comfort, Tocqueville argues, they rush to accrue material goods as quickly and cheaply as possible. Rather than investing time and effort into a particular place or task, they “continually change path, for fear of missing the shortest road that is to lead them to happiness” (945).

At the same time, the principle of equality leaves Americans with a lack of social structure, opening up new possibilities for the accrual of wealth but also increasing the likelihood of failure. Unlike their peers in Europe, Americans are no longer bound to particular places or professions, but they are also individuated and pitted in competition against one another. As Tocqueville puts it, “The same equality that allows each citizen to conceive vast hopes makes all citizens individually weak. It limits their strengths on all sides, at the same time that it allows their desires to expand” (945).⁷ Ultimately, Tocqueville thought, American restlessness leads to derangement, which explains the country’s elevated levels of anxiety and insanity (947).

Melville seems to follow Tocqueville in connecting the widow’s restlessness to her mobile setting. Where the suitors of early modern comedies used transactional language to navigate their period’s complex social norms, the confidence man’s similar language—his frank request for money, in place of what the widow anticipated to be a request for affection—capitalizes on his period’s scarcity of social structure. Melville captures and exaggerates the anomie of nineteenth-century American society in his

⁷ Orestes Brownson, whose critique of philanthropy I discuss later in this chapter, makes a similar argument against this conception of equality in his 1873 essay “The Democratic Principle,” writing: “Democracy regards the poor as unfortunate, and undertakes to remove poverty by opening to them all the avenues of wealth, and to elevate them by establishing their political and civil equality; and thus leads them...to aspire to social equality.... The evil this causes is immeasurable. It induces not a few to live beyond their means, or to make a show of wealth which they have not; it creates a universal struggle to escape poverty, and to acquire riches as the means of equality and respectability” (507).

characterization of the steamboat *Fidèle*. Though she is data-rich in her varied experiences aboard the *Fidèle*, the widow is information-poor, left with no ready way to contextualize her experiences. The confidence man is “an entire stranger,” and the *Fidèle* is an estranging place (56).

Early in the novel, Melville highlights the lack of solidarity on the *Fidèle* by focusing on how it cycles through its passengers, “[T]hough always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange; like Rio Janeiro fountain... which is ever overflowing with strange waters, but never with the same strange particles in every part” (13). Melville’s atomizing language, which breaks even a stream of water into its individual particles, carries over into his subsequent description of the *Fidèle*’s passengers. Instead of telling how the passengers form associations, Melville focuses on how these associations inevitably dissolve into individuals. The passengers first appear as a “crowd” that fractures “into various clusters or squads,” and eventually dissolves “into quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaires; involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member” (14). The crowd’s dispersal is at once appropriate and morbid. It all proceeds according to “natural law,” but it is that natural law of death and decay, which governs the “dissolution” of bodies. The *Fidèle*, then, functions as a Coleridgean symbol of a mobile society, “partak[ing] of the reality which it renders intelligible” (30). For while a steamboat is one of the technological means for achieving mobility, it also reproduces and amplifies the tensions of a mobile society by holding its passengers, for a time, in a state of concentrated dissolution.

Melville's characterization of the *Fidèle's* passengers reinforces the steamboat's symbolic significance. He first describes the passengers in a list that includes about equal parts old world ethnicities—"English, Irish, German, Scotch, [and] Danes"—and new world stereotypes—"Santa Fé traders," "Broadway bucks," "Kentucky boatmen," "grinning negroes," "and Souix chiefs solemn as high-priests" (14). Melville prefaces the list with a mention of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but ends by calling the passengers "an Anacharsis Cloots congress" (14), referring to a peculiar episode from the French Revolution in which Cloots—a Prussian nobleman and cosmopolitan—brought an ad hoc collection of foreigners to the National Assembly to ratify the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* on behalf of the entire human race.⁸ Melville's transition from pre-modern to radically liberal vehicles for describing the passengers seems significant. The passengers are like Chaucer's pilgrims in their variety, but unlike the pilgrims they do not share a common culture, religion, or destination. Like Cloots's congress, they form an instrumental association, gathering to secure individual advantages in the service of divergent ends. As Charles Taylor might say, they "hang loose."

Let's return now to the widow, who we left in "a sort of restless torment," unsure of how to respond to the confidence man's surprising request for money (57). As I suggested above, Tocqueville's theory of restlessness is helpful for establishing one of the necessary causes for the widow's predicament. The lack of social structure that characterizes her mobile setting makes it difficult for her to contextualize her interaction with the confidence man. But what of materialism, Tocqueville's other engine for producing restlessness? Unlike the miser, who appears later in the novel, the widow does

⁸ See John Carlos Rowe's discussion of Carlyle and Melville's literary representations of Cloots in "*Moby-Dick* and Inter-American Studies" (131-133). Despite his enthusiasm, Cloots was eventually executed by the Jacobins during the last few months of the Reign of Terror.

not seem concerned about money for money's sake. Neither is she particularly focused on material wellbeing. Though, to use Tocqueville's language, she seems to harbor "vast hopes" and to have allowed her "desires to expand" (945), these desires are collective and intangible—oriented, albeit in a confused sort of way, toward the shared good of a romantic relationship. As we have seen, though, the widow's romantic desire is emphatically unexpressed, represented only in the narrator's understated double negatives and dashes and in the widow's sparkling eye and unarticulated statements of affection.

When the widow struggles through her confused restlessness, it is not to finally reveal her affection, but to ask the confidence man: "Tell me, sir, for what you want the twenty dollars?" He replies, "'And did I not' – then glancing at her half-mourning, – 'for the widow and the fatherless. I am traveling agent of the Widow and Orphan Asylum, recently founded among the Seminoles'" (57). At this the relieved widow hands over her money, happy to contribute to "those cruelly-used Indians," but happier still to know the confidence man's "object" (57). He then remarks: "This is an inconsiderable sum, I admit, but... though I here but register the amount, there is another register, where is set down the motive" (57). Melville ends the scene on this note, referring readers up to a register in heaven, in which God records the widow's philanthropy, and down to the novel itself, whose vacancies have registered her tacit, romantic motive.

Melville's intention in conspicuously pairing the widow's public philanthropy with her private motive is somewhat obscure. But two possibilities come to mind. The first, which is consonant with the novel's general pessimism, is that Melville uses the widow as part of a larger project in deconstructing the concept of altruism. According to this reading, the widow does not make her charitable gift out of disinterested concern for

the Seminoles. Rather, she is motivated to cover up for her romantic confusion or is acting out a sublimated erotic desire. Another possibility, which may be compatible with the first, is that Melville uses the widow to illustrate the sort of social incentives the *Fidèle* generates. The intersubjectivity required by an act like remarriage or even courtship is made fraught by the *Fidèle*'s estranging environment. The widow is clearly attracted to the confidence man, but unable to pursue or even articulate that attraction. Meanwhile, the impersonal act of contributing to a charity is both straightforward and, after the dread of intersubjective confusion, welcome.

The widow's charity also brings her back into the realm of practical, material action. Instead of pursuing romantic desire, she directs her resources to support the material wellbeing of people she will never meet. Here, we have a revision of Tocqueville's theory of restlessness. Rather than imagining that restlessness arises from a combination of materialism and mobility, Melville shows how mobility by itself could cause a form of restlessness that, in turn, would give rise to materialism. This may seem like a minor difference, but it is actually quite significant. Tocqueville believes that Americans are naturally focused on material needs, are uniquely uninterested in collective enterprises, and have designed their society to reflect their peculiar national psychology. Conversely, Melville's widow initially desires the sort of relationship necessary for pursuing a common good. But upon finding her desire incompatible with her social environment, she invests in a charity focused on the material wellbeing of strangers. The murmur of thwarted desire, however, thrums in background of her philanthropic action. By suggesting that the inarticulate desire for collectivity ironically undergirds American materialism, Melville offers one plausible explanation for the

phenomenon of American discontent and derangement that Tocqueville found so surprising.

But perhaps I go too far in saying the widow's desire for collectivity is thwarted by the mobile environment of the *Fidèle*. You could read the scene in the opposite direction—with the widow abandoning her personal fantasy to perform a concrete act that increases her solidarity with the oppressed. Though in this instance she has been fooled, the confidence man's very success could be a sign of moral health, both for the widow in particular and for the community represented by the *Fidèle* more generally. In his introduction to *The Confidence-Man*, Steven Matterson identifies a number of nineteenth-century figures, ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to P.T. Barnum, who held that the existence of confidence men in America “testified to the general honesty and charity of society” (xvii). Confidence scams, the thinking went, can only work in places where people are willing to trust and empathize with one another. From this perspective, it is by virtue of falling prey to the confidence man that the widow proves her capacity for fellow-feeling and pro-social action.

You can imagine an even stronger version of this argument that points out how philanthropy itself promotes solidarity by relying on the very forms of mobility Melville criticizes. The confidence man disguises himself as a traveling agent precisely because travel is essential to the work he pretends to perform. It is only by traveling to dozens of communities and pooling their resources that people are able to fund organizations like the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum that provide material aid to the poor. At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned Charles Taylor's hope for new forms of solidarity

that could emerge from the values and affordances of a mobile society. Perhaps that is what we see here. The widow's decision to contribute to the traveling agent's organization seems largely motivated by her empathy for the "[p]oor souls" that the confidence man mentions, people who like her have suffered bereavement but unlike her are destitute and "cruelly-used" (57). Even though it is not real, the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum serves as a kind of virtual community that the widow elects to participate in based on her belief in "contemporary understandings of citizen dignity," demonstrating her solidarity with the most disadvantaged Americans (Taylor 223).

But such an understanding of solidarity—using the word to describe a virtual and elective connection to others—drastically changes the meaning of the term as it was understood in the nineteenth century and as it has been developed in this dissertation. While philanthropic action like the widow's may be effective and even necessary for alleviating poverty, the bond between the donor and recipient does not reflect the embodied mutuality of relationships built on solidarity. Nineteenth-century critics of philanthropy shared this concern, directing their most serious objections towards philanthropy's political ontology—its framing of the relation between self and society.⁹ In the essay "Indiscriminate Charity," which I discussed in Chapter 1, Rebecca Harding Davis asks: "[W]hen a man shifts his personal responsibility for the poor wholly to legal action or organized associations, does he not rob his needy brother and himself of that reality of human brotherhood which Christ taught, and which is, after all, our only enduring bond, the vitality that holds the elements of society together?" Elsewhere in her essay, Davis holds that philanthropic organizations are, in fact, worse than personal

⁹ For an extended discussion of the distinction nineteenth-century figures drew between charity and philanthropy, see Jeremy Beer's *Philanthropic Revolution*, especially the chapter "Enemies of This Ordinance of God American Charity from the Colonial Period to the Civil War" (35-58).

charity at alleviating certain forms of suffering. But here, at the crux of her argument, Davis holds that charity's most important advantage is its production and framing of valuable social interactions.

When, instead of outsourcing care to an impersonal organization, people care for friends and neighbors directly, they create a community of giving and receiving that transcends class distinction and constitutes the social fabric. Davis describes the relationships produced by embodied acts of charity in the language of Christian egalitarianism—"that reality of human brotherhood which Christ taught"—precisely to differentiate it from philanthropy's impersonality. For Davis, a society is held together by its members' sense of mutual responsibility, which in turn, is strengthened by a common appreciation for unchosen characteristics, like inherited values or a shared environment. While personal charity may need to be supplemented by the work of philanthropic organizations, Davis thinks it should never be wholly replaced. For, charity encourages and reflects the idea of solidarity in a way philanthropy cannot.

In *The American Republic*, Orestes Brownson draws the distinction between charity and philanthropy even more forcefully, declaring, "Satan is never more successful than under the guise of an angel of light. His favorite guise in modern times is that of philanthropy. He is a genuine humanitarian, and aims to persuade the world that...the soft and charming sentiment of philanthropy is real Christian charity" (229). Though Brownson was certainly adversarial and given to hyperbole, he did not often compare his opponents to Satan, who he, as a Catholic, believed to be a real force for evil in the world. In *The American Republic*, for instance, the charge of Satanism is reserved entirely for philanthropists and Confederates (229-230). Brownson's attack on

philanthropists is made all the more surprising when you consider that he shared many of their policy goals. Like many philanthropists, Brownson opposed Southern slavery and spoke out against the political and economic oppression of the Northern poor.¹⁰ Like Davis, though, Brownson strenuously objected to the philanthropists' political ontology. Philanthropy is so dangerous, according to Brownson, because its philosophical basis threatens to undermine its possible contributions to social progress.

In his novel *The Spirit-Rapper*, which Edwin Fussell notes as a possible source for *The Confidence-Man* (308), Brownson expands on this critique, presenting philanthropy as a species of radical liberalism that divorces the responsibility for human welfare from organic communities and unites it instead to instrumental associations that exist entirely to promote autonomy. In the chapter "A Lesson in Philanthropy," Brownson has Pricilla, a character based on the radical social reformer Fanny Wright, announce:

[P]hilanthropy seeks no individual, no exclusive good, and does not consist in loving and seeking the welfare of our fellow men and women. It is the love of man, not men, and seeks the welfare of the race, not individuals. The welfare of the race consists in progress, which is effected only by free activity.... The only good is free activity, and every conceivable good is included in that one word, LIBERTY. (86)

¹⁰ In *The American Republic*, Brownson presents both race and class-based oppression as sins against the solidarity of the country. "The tendency in the Southern States, he writes, "has been to overlook the social basis of the state, or the rights of society founded on the solidarity of the race, and to make all rights and powers personal.... Hence the people of those States felt no scruple in holding the black or colored race as slaves" (224). Similarly, Brownson supports extending political rights to the impoverished as a means for promoting the common good. "[M]en of wealth... always strive to use [government] as an instrument of advancing their own private interests. They act on the beautiful maxim, 'Let government take care of the rich, and the rich will take care of the poor,' instead of the far safer maxim, 'Let government take care of the weak, the strong can take care of themselves.'... [E]ven universal suffrage is too weak to prevent private property from having an undue political influence" (242).

While the reformers in league with Priscilla all agree that liberty is their goal, they squabble over the best method for promoting it. Some argue that government power needs grow exponentially to ensure that women can enjoy liberty as much as men. Others think that the government needs to be eradicated, returning America to a state of nature. The philanthropists are united, though, on two fronts. First, like Priscilla, they all identify their goal of liberty entirely with autonomy or “free activity.” Second, they all operate—either knowingly or unknowingly—under the influence of the demons that irresponsible spiritualists have introduced into Priscilla’s circle.

Much like Brownson, Melville deliberately pairs the diabolic with the philanthropic. Scholars have already documented the many times Melville alludes to the devil in his descriptions of the confidence man.¹¹ The confidence man’s commitment to philanthropy is even more obvious, becoming perhaps most apparent when he appears as the traveling agent, collecting funds for his asylum and laying out an ambitious plan for a quick end to poverty through a “methodization of the world’s benevolence” (50). In his conversation with the gentleman wedding guest, the traveling agent argues against “the present system of voluntary and promiscuous contribution” in which people care for the poor on a small-scale, asserting that communities should outsource poverty relief and missions work to a massive “World’s Charity” to be supported by a global tax (50). Like Priscilla, the traveling agent turns from individual humans to focus instead on innumerate masses of humanity, describing impoverished people as “eddies and maëlstroms of pagans” or a “mob of misery” (52).

¹¹ See Henry Pommer’s discussion of the many similarities between Melville’s descriptions of the confidence man and Milton’s descriptions of Satan in *Milton and Melville*. See also the similarities between the confidence man and the devil noted in Elizabeth Foster’s introduction to her 1954 edition of the novel and James E. Miller’s “The Confidence-Man: His Guises.”

The World's Charity may first seem like a new form of solidarity—a way for individuals to recognize their responsibility for the impoverished masses. But the traveling agent markets his invention precisely as a means for dispensing with the responsibilities of solidarity. “[T]his doing good to the world by driblets amounts to just nothing,” he tells the gentleman. “I am for doing good to the world with a will. I am for doing good to the world once for all and having done with it” (52). Charity, for someone like Rebecca Harding Davis, is a practice. It takes place over the course of a lifetime, making irregular demands and continually drawing givers and receivers into a community of mutual support. The World's Charity, though, is a tool for extracting oneself from such social encumbrances. Its reason for being is to regularize demands and free givers and receivers from one another—replacing personal charity with impersonal philanthropy. For just one low annual payment, the confidence man promises, you too can be done with the world!

The political philosopher Patrick Deneen recently noted that many of the technologies invented by modern liberal societies work much like the traveling agent's World's Charity. They loudly proclaim a communal purpose, all while quietly undermining actual communities by extracting their users from relationships of mutual obligation. Deneen draws on studies of social media to show how companies like Facebook create connections between users that ignore the “constitutive elements of community, replacing that thicker set of shared practices with the thinner and more evanescent bonds of ‘networks’” (95). People who join Facebook to interact with their friends may eventually find, as increasing amounts of their friendships play out online, that Facebook has largely replaced other modes of communication, thereby becoming

indispensable. As people often worry, when considering their dissatisfaction with social media: “I wish I could just delete my account, but how else can I keep in touch?”

Deneen goes on to consider cultural artifacts we do not typically think of as being technological. He is especially struck by the ubiquity of insurance. House, health, life, and auto insurance all seem to serve communal purposes by supporting individuals in moments of need. One giant insurer announces in its commercials that it is “like a good neighbor.” When I hear that jingle, I think of how my insurers will step in and provide me with money if my car crashes or house floods. I do not, however, think of the extent to which my insurers have replaced my dependence on real good neighbors and my duty to perform real acts of good neighborliness. As Deneen writes, “I am insured against a variety of tragedies but wholly off the hook for any personal responsibility or obligation to anyone else in the insurance pool. My only obligation is a financial transaction with the company providing the insurance” (106). Some Amish communities, Deneen observes, have banned insurance for this very reason, so that each member of the community will maintain their dependence on and responsibility for all other members (106). That works for a tightknit community like the Amish. But for just about everyone else living in a modern society, it would be wildly irresponsible to live without insurance—it has so wholly replaced the social infrastructure that came before it.

Similarly, even as the traveling agent presents his technology as ephemeral, Melville hints at the need the World’s Charity will create for its own persistence. The agent announces that by virtue of its gigantic scale the World’s Charity could dissolve in fourteen years, having quickly met the needs it was created to address. If you send a big enough army of missionaries to China, he claims, you could “[convert] the Chinese *en*

masse within six months” and be done with it (52). Similarly, you could fix the problem of hunger in London with “twenty thousand bullocks and one hundred thousand barrels of flour”—after that “no more hunger for one while” (52). Of course, such a plan is overly optimistic about the capacity of the World’s Charity to make an impact. Countries would resist massive waves of missionaries. The impoverished masses would quickly grow hungry again. But such optimism does not only overestimate the charity’s power. Like Dick Cheney’s claim that the Iraq war would take “weeks rather than months,” the traveling agent’s confidence in his technology papers over the way it would self-perpetuate (qtd. in Richardson 131). After its intervention in China or London began to wane, the World’s Charity would need to increase its efforts to make up for the individual acts of charity it has displaced.

A pattern is emerging. First, a technology, like social media or insurance or philanthropy, presents itself as performing a communal good. Next, the technology erodes the social practices that it first supplements and later replaces. Finally, through this replacement, the technology makes itself inescapable. So far I have focused only on the traveling agent, which is just one of the confidence man’s disguises. But in many of his other iterations, the confidence man offers his fellow travelers technologies that follow a similar logic. Just as the traveling agent hopes to “quicken” philanthropy with “the Wall street spirit” (51), so the Cosmopolitan speaks of how Wall Street’s “joint-stock companies and free-and-easies” are animated by “the humanitarian spirit” (209).

When the confidence man appears as the agent of the Philosophical Intelligence Office, he offers a further example of how finance and fellow-feeling intermingle. “Confidence,” he tells the Missouri bachelor, while pocketing his money, “is the

indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions” (155). Here *confidence* refers to the bachelor’s trust in the technology of the intelligence office—his belief that his money will be used to secure a good young worker and to transport that boy to his farm. Just slightly earlier in their conversation, though, the bachelor speaks of *confidence* to describe his potential relationship with the boy. “Do you think now,” he asks the agent, “candidly, that – I say candidly – candidly – could I have some small, limited – some faint, conditional degree of confidence in that boy? Candidly, now?” (155). Like the widow, the bachelor’s name describes a vacancy of familial relationship. And also like the widow, the bachelor is reduced to halting, dash-filled speeches when he comes to the topic of confidence, suggesting that he attributes some unspoken significance to the word.

The bachelor’s capacity for feeling confidence at all emerges just a short while earlier, when the agent, responding to the bachelor’s belief in total depravity, remarks, “[W]hen I behold you on this mild summer’s eve, thus eccentrically clothed in the skins of wild beasts, I cannot but conclude that the equally grim and unsuitable habit of your mind is likewise but an eccentric assumption, having no basis in your genuine soul” (152). From a logical perspective, this is an absurd line. For one, the novel takes place on April 1, not on a “mild summer’s eve.” But also, the agent’s reasoning relies on a flimsy analogy between the bachelor’s clothes and his philosophy. Earlier in the conversation, the bachelor, who thinks of himself as something of a philosopher, sat as “[s]urly-looking as a thundercloud” during analogical arguments such as this, blasting the agent as mere “punster” who “pun[s] with ideas as another man may with words” (150). But this time something different happens. The bachelor, we read, is “not unaffected” by the agent’s argument (152).

Just as he does in the widow's episode, Melville gestures toward his character's desire through the vacancy of a double negative. And just like the widow, the bachelor seems to hunger for human companionship. Despite his apparent misanthropy, he is naturally drawn into conversation with the agent, and the history he relates of returning again and again to intelligence offices to search out farm hands, none of whom are satisfactory workers, suggests that the bachelor is driven by something more than the need for labor. When the agent, then, responds to the bachelor with trust and affection, the bachelor immediately softens toward his arguments. Early in their conversation, the bachelor points to the various failures of thirty-five farm hands as evidence "that boyhood is a natural state of rascality" (142). But now, when the agent restates this experience in the terms of a gambler's fallacy—"you have struck upon a peculiarly bad vein of boys, so much the more hope now of your hitting a good one"—the bachelor relents, "That sounds a kind of reasonable, as it were" (154). The agent goes on attribute remarkable qualities to the boy he intends to send the bachelor. "Might trust him with untold millions," he assures him (154). The boy is "[u]ncommonly" tall and stout, "a busy bee"—the best boy the agent has ever known (154). Though the agent's claims are based, he admits, on hearsay and phrenology, the formerly suspicious bachelor agrees to take the boy on and hands over his money. His inarticulate desire for human companionship appears to win out over his explicit misanthropy. But as in the widow's episode, Melville refracts the bachelor's desire for companionship through the prism of a technology offering a false form of solidarity. Almost immediately after the agent leaves, the bachelor realizes that he has been fooled. He seems to still have confidence in the financial exchange, trusting that a boy will be sent to his farm. But he loses his fleeting

confidence that the technology can address his tacit desire for companionship and ricochets back into misanthropy, resolving to “be a little splenetic in his intercourse henceforth” (157).

Once again, Melville highlights the perverse incentives of a mobile society. As Wilson Carey McWilliams shows in *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, the Puritans built strong social institutions largely because they, like the bachelor, believed wholeheartedly in the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. For Puritans, institutions like extended families, local political organizations, and churches were essential for overcoming the uncertainty created by original sin (113-114). This communitarian impulse led Calvinist political thinkers, like John Winthrop and John Wise, to “regard the frontier as almost wholly evil...forcing men to a kind of individualism, preventing settled social and civic relations, and hence obstructing man’s hope for excellence” (163). Because the bachelor lives on a remote frontier farm, he has no access to the sort of rich institutions past communities of Calvinists were able to build. When he acts on his mute desire for companionship, then, he is forced to rely on intelligence offices and the “Commissioners of Emigration,” rather than the infrastructure of an embodied community (142). Though he has no real reason to expect better results from the Philosophical Intelligence Office, which promises to combine the bureaucratic impersonality of a traditional office with the sort of specious reasoning and methods modeled by the agent, the bachelor has nowhere else to turn. He ends up locked in a vicious circle. His inarticulate desire for companionship grows until it overcomes his self-isolation and misanthropy and compels him to contact an intelligence office for help. The intelligence office, though, is unsuited

to meet his desire for companionship, which drives the bachelor to even higher levels of self-isolation and misanthropy.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned Charles Taylor's critique of mobility. The problem, according to Taylor, was not just that mobility creates atomism, but that it makes it more difficult for people to recognize that atomism. One possible solution to this problem, according to Taylor, was that mobility could become a means for creating new modes of solidarity by bringing together people around shared values. Melville does not disprove the possibility of Taylor's proposed solution, but he does complicate it, showing how, in the low-information setting created by mobility, organizations that initially appear to enable solidarity could actually turn out to undermine it. Stock markets, intelligence offices, even philanthropic organizations seem to bring people together, and so they appeal to people who desire, without perhaps even being able to say why, human companionship. However, by substituting virtual for actual bonds, these social technologies end up contributing to the very problems they ostensibly address.

Perhaps, then, Melville thinks mobile societies should take the second, more conservative path Taylor identifies—a return to an earlier form of the liberal tradition. Two of *The Confidence-Man*'s most influential critics Richard Chase and Wai Chee Dimock read the novel in just this light, praising and condemning (respectively) what they see as Melville's endorsement of classical, rather than progressive, liberalism.¹²

"*The Confidence Man* is an attack on liberalism" Chase writes in his seminal 1949 essay,

¹² For a recent example of Chase's influence, see the second chapter of Christopher Castiglia's *The Practices of Hope*, in which Castiglia offers Chase's work generally and his essay on *The Confidence-Man* in particular as exemplars for the American critic in the age of Trump.

“[but] it is an attack by a liberal” (136). What Chase means by this is that Melville affirms the moral goals of liberalism—like pluralism, individual liberty, and liberty of thought—while objecting to the prevailing means for achieving those goals. It is precisely because liberty is so important, Chase argues, that progressive liberals should be attacked for their utopian faith in mechanisms for social progress. In a spirited section near the end of his essay, Chase heaps contempt on the “unmanned” left of his own day, arguing that their communist-sympathies and confidence in doctrines of “persecuted Christliness, little people-ism, and short-cuts to international felicity” represented the death wish of the liberal mind (138, 137). Chase argues that, rather than hoping for a communist revolution or building other utopian castles in the sand, liberals should ground themselves “in the best tradition of the American past,” which is characterized in Melville’s work by pragmatism, individualism, and vitality (139).

Chase bases much of his reading on the novel’s final scene, in which the confidence man as the Cosmopolitan dissuades an old man against buying various pieces of equipment from a boy that could protect him from theft. The Cosmopolitan then ominously leads the old man into the dark. “Seen in relation to Melville’s other books,” Chase claims, “the symbolism of this final episode...is clear” (134). The old man represents the American republic, the Cosmopolitan represents soft-minded progressive utopianism, and the “fiery Promethean” boy represents the vital tradition of liberal individualism (134-135). The end of the novel is tragic for Chase, with the confidence man winning the war for America’s soul, so to speak. But Chase finds hope in the character of the boy, who seems to see through the confidence man’s scam and represents an alternative future for American liberalism.

Upon closer scrutiny, though, the boy creates problems for Chase's reading. He seems less like the disinterested hero of America's vital center than the photo-negative of the confidence man. Where the confidence man capitalizes on trust, the boy capitalizes on distrust, which he carefully tends to and generates, inviting, for example, the old man to worry about a lock he just sold him in order to follow up that sale with the sale of a money belt (290-291). After the boy gives the old man a *Counterfeit Detector*, the man calls him a "[p]ublic benefactor" (293). When he tries to use the book, though, it is so complex and ambiguous that he remains just as incapable as before of telling good money from bad. The point of the detector, it seems, is not to help readers identify counterfeit money, but to produce suspicion, driving up the market for entrepreneurs who, like the boy, profit from distrust. Of course, Chase could be wrong about the boy but still right about the novel as a whole so long as Melville elsewhere presents liberal individualism as a superior alternative to the confidence man's dishonest progressivism. Melville's rendering of the Revolutionary War heroes in *Israel Potter* offers something along these lines. John Paul Jones is remarkable for his bravery, energy, and self-reliance. Benjamin Franklin is different, engaging in acts of calculated subterfuge that sometimes ignore or subvert the rights of his fellow Americans.

In *Israel Potter*, Melville offers Jones and Franklin as two clearly distinct American traditions that readers can evaluate and choose between. But, though Melville again seems to present readers with two American traditions in *The Confidence-Man*, they are no longer so clearly distinct. As we have already seen in novel's conclusion, the confidence man's trust and the boy's distrust blend together, when the principles of both characters are revealed to be mere tools for carrying out scams. Similarly, in "The River,"

Melville's discarded prologue to *The Confidence-Man*, he creates a striking symbol of blended traditions. Melville tells how, at St. Louis, the clear and deliberate Mississippi River merges with the muddy and rushing Missouri. Though the river that continues on is technically the Mississippi, it takes on more and more of the Missouri's character as it continues south. "The peace of the Upper River seems broken in the Lower," Melville writes, "nor is it ever renewed" (343). He goes on to reason, "Under the benign name Mississippi it is in truth the Missouri that now rolls into the gulf" (343). The Mississippi has a different character from the Missouri, but it would be impossible, once the rivers merge, to disentangle the two.

Like the river, the liberal tradition Chase wants to recoup has irretrievably merged with the progressivism he rejects in *The Confidence-Man*. At one point in his conversation with the merchant Mr. Roberts, the confidence man, appearing as the man with the traveling cap, praises Roberts for believing in the story of a stranger and for trusting in God. He then pressures Roberts into displaying even more confidence—confidence not only in particular people but in humankind, not only in a personal God but in the impersonal forces of nature and progress. The narrator introduces the confidence man's ambitious turn with this dizzying sentence: "Still, he was far from the illiberality of denying that philosophy duly bounded was not permissible" (80). Once again, Melville piles negation upon negation, making the sentence increasingly confusing as it develops.¹³ The confidence man is defined by what he is not; he is not illiberal.

Illiberality is in turn is defined by what it is not; it is not a particular, presumably liberal, stance toward philosophy. The liberal stance is then cast in the negative; it is a rejection

¹³ The larger context for the scene—in which the confidence man refutes a story he told Roberts while in a different disguise—adds yet another layer of negation.

of free, or even “duly bounded,” philosophical inquiry. Ironically, then, the narrator marks the confidence man as a liberal based on his rejection of the foundational liberal value—the liberty of thought.

Casual readers, no doubt, pass over the sentence quickly, gathering only that the narrator has once again shrouded the confidence man in a cloak of bluster. But the sentence presents more careful readers with a problem. What does it mean to associate liberalism with the distrust of free philosophical inquiry? One way around the dilemma is to ignore it. Most twentieth-century editors of the novel, like those of the Northwestern-Newberry edition, mask the sentence’s confusing implications by simply removing the word *not*.¹⁴ But even so, the specter of illiberal-liberalism reappears. Later in the same paragraph, the man with the traveling-cap objects to “hazardous skirmishes on the open ground of reason” that challenge his Panglossian belief in human goodness, considering “it inadvisable in the good man, even in the privacy of his own mind...to indulge in too much latitude of philosophizing” (81). The illiberality of the man with the traveling cap’s liberalism will simply not go away.

One option for making sense of the man with the traveling cap’s illiberal liberalism is to think that Melville wishes to show how the confidence man’s progressivism has usurped and perverted liberalism just like the Missouri usurps and perverts the Mississippi. Another option, though, would be that Melville is trying to show how the sort of liberalism Chase admires is self-defeating, creating the conditions that make the man with the traveling cap’s illiberalism possible and even, perhaps, attractive. Consider, after all, the context that drives the man with the traveling cap to attack free

¹⁴ In his 1990 Penguin edition of the novel, Stephen Matterson restores the *not* on the basis that it appears in the first edition and that “the emendation [of the earlier editors] is at least debatable” (310).

thought in the first place. He is discouraging Roberts from passing judgment on the faithless wife and negligent mother Goneril. In this instance, at least, the confidence man's apparent illiberalism serves a liberal end. By shielding Goneril from social censure, he is helping create a climate that encourages autonomy, making space for others to live as they see fit without fear of social impediment. Of course, the confidence man should not get too much credit, since he made up the story of Goneril to begin with while disguised as the man with the weed. But it seems here that liberalism has not been usurped by, so much as it has naturally evolved into, illiberalism by extending a liberal value—autonomy in matters of marriage—beyond the limits set up by earlier generations of liberals. If, then, Melville rejects the confidence man's progressivism, as Chase wants to claim, he would also, in this instance at least, have to reject the liberal substrata upon which that progressivism is built. While Melville puts the two traditions of liberal individualism and liberal progressivism on display in *The Confidence-Man*, he shows how these traditions are integrated in such a way that choosing between them is not as easy as Chase would wish.

In *Empire for Liberty*, Wai Chee Dimock offers another way of understanding the novel's relation to liberal individualism, arguing that the narration of *The Confidence Man* mirrors the logic of market capitalism. Dimock writes: "In the freedom and unaccountability of the Invisible Hand, Melville has finally found a model of freedom that suits him, a model after which he can fashion his own authorial hand" (206). For Dimock, liberal individualism does not show up in the novel's characters or themes so much as it *is* the novel itself. The novel is an artifact of Melville's assertion of extreme individual autonomy. Like the capricious and unaccountable force behind the market,

Melville is freed in the impersonal narration of *The Confidence-Man* to present whatever he wants however he wants it. The plot does not need to go anywhere. Characters do not need to signify anything in particular. Melville has the freedom, Dimock notes, even “to contradict himself frequently—one is almost tempted to say, flauntingly” (206).

Dimock sees the radical autonomy of Melville’s narrator as an ultimately ironic accomplishment. On the one hand, it represents the culmination of his life’s work as a novelist, which Dimock believes to have been a prolonged effort on Melville’s part to increase his control over his narratives. But on the other hand, the novel is a failure, for “the market is already doing what he is trying to do: doing it better, more thoroughly, and with an unaccountability even harder to scrutinize than Melville’s own enigmatic performance” (214). In arguing that the novel is at once Melville’s most complete success and an entirely “pointless” venture (214), Dimock follows other critics who, upon noticing Melville’s inventive use of vacancy at the level of prose, treat the novel itself as a vacancy, arguing that Melville wrote to convey his fear “that there is no order to the universe” (Matterson xxxii) or that “[b]eneath the masquerade of *The Confidence-Man*, there is nothing at all” (Rogin 220).

As I hope to have made clear in this dissertation, though, an author’s use of vacancy as a literary technique does not necessarily mean she has embraced nihilism and rejected the possibility of making meaning altogether. Vacancy has uses. And in her study of the novel, Sianne Ngai identifies one use of vacancy in *The Confidence-Man*, arguing that Melville fosters a vacant affect in order “to revitalize a form of ‘disinterestedness’” in his readers, enabling them to achieve a critical distance from a “world...in which the public sphere and the market have become virtually co-extensive”

(86). Ngai believes that Melville's unusual technique creates an aesthetic effect. By defamiliarizing the social experience of liberal capitalism, Melville affords his readers a critical distance from which they can attend to the "simultaneously orderly and noisy character of tone itself" (88).

The value Ngai sees in *The Confidence-Man* can be taken even further. Not only does Melville's use of vacancy create an aesthetic effect by defamiliarizing the novel's mobile, market-dominated setting, but his technique also has political value, on both didactic and theoretical planes. First, the novel's vacancies serve a didactic purpose in revealing the blindness that accompanies American mobility. Melville shows how the passengers aboard the *Fidèle* are not only atomized, but have trouble recognizing their own atomization. When these passengers then feel desire for human companionship they are unable to articulate what they want and are similarly unable to see through the confidence man's technologies, which, while perhaps seeming to address their tacit desires only serve to exacerbate the very conditions that stoke them.

The effect of Melville's novel, however, is different from the work of political theorists like Charles Taylor and Patrick Deneen, who highlight many of the same problems Melville identifies in mobile societies. For unlike philosophical accounts of political society, a novel can create something of the affective experience it describes. Now at first this might seem contradictory. I have been arguing that *The Confidence-Man* defamiliarizes our everyday experience of life in a mobile environment—that it creates literary vacancies, which in turn invite the readers' disinterest. How then could the novel's value be linked to its representation of real world experience? The answer to this question is that Melville defamiliarizes mobility not by creating something entirely

different from everyday experience, but by attending to facets of experience that we typically pass over quickly—moments of social uncertainty, of inarticulate longing, or of confused dissatisfaction. By focusing intently in scene after scene on how the absences of everyday life afford these kinds of experiences, Melville illustrates the disjunction between desire and action in a mobile society, while producing something of the anxiety such a disjunction generates.

While Melville's political project is largely negative—concerned with tearing down the assumptions of American liberalism—his novel has theoretical value in revealing the desires a postliberal politics would need to take seriously. *The Confidence-Man* advances by way of a trenchant critique of both what Chase called liberal individualism and liberal progressivism, rather than positive examples for how to reform society. But we can see, through Melville's criticism, the beginning of a different kind of politics. As Christopher Castiglia has recently argued, "every critique is a determined affirmation, an inverted expression of idealism" (2). In describing the shortcomings of liberalism's political ontology, then, Melville gestures toward a positive project. An America that reformed along the lines Melville seems to indicate may remain mobile, but it would not "hang loose." Rather than seeking only to maximize the autonomy of individual citizens, such a reformed society would find ways to foster the health of the institutions that mobility threatens—extended families, clubs, local political and religious organizations. For it is precisely these sorts of institutions that make possible embodied relationships of mutual responsibility. And it is precisely these kinds of relationships that are able to meet the desires we see animating and frustrating Melville's characters.

Chapter 4

Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Roman Guidebook and the Politics of Art

In one of the earliest studies of *The Marble Faun*, Henry James attributes the romance's popularity to its value as a guidebook. "It is part of the intellectual equipment of the Anglo-Saxon visitor to Rome," James writes, "and is read by every English-speaking traveller who arrives there, who has been there, or who expects to go" (131). In the years following James, most critics have taken it for granted that the novel also works as a guide. A few have gone even further, examining the guidebook qualities peculiar to the early Tauchnitz and Houghton Mifflin editions of the novel, which featured images from the museums and tourist attractions that the characters visit.¹ While these bibliographical studies contain interesting details on the publication and reception of *The Marble Faun*, they do not closely examine the language of the guidebook episodes. So while Hawthorne scholars have established that *The Marble Faun* functioned as a guidebook in its production and use, they have yet to truly read it as one. They have answered the question, "Is *The Marble Faun* a guide?" but have left unanswered the corollary and more interesting question: "What sort of guide is it?"

In this chapter, I read *The Marble Faun* alongside the two guidebooks Hawthorne used in Rome, arguing that he dramatically reimagines the purpose and possibility of the Roman guidebook even as he draws on its generic conventions. Most nineteenth-century authors of guides sought to ground their readers in the context and grand narratives that they believed lent significance to Rome's attractions. But Hawthorne rejects this

¹ See, for instance, Susan S. Williams and Anne Bush on the Tauchnitz edition and Timothy Sweet on the Houghton Mifflin edition. The Tauchnitz edition lends itself especially well to guidebook readings, since readers would buy it in Rome and paste their own pictures or postcards into the novel, using it as a kind of scrapbook for their trip. The Houghton Mifflin edition, by contrast, included photograph prints of Rome.

approach, seeking instead to train his readers to go beyond questions of context and form to discover the experiences of vacancy that Rome makes possible. Such an approach can be read back into the novel itself, in which Hawthorne imagines and promotes solidarity through carefully curated moments of vacancy. Ultimately, I argue, *The Marble Faun's* guidebook qualities help reveal Hawthorne's evolution as a political thinker by highlighting the communitarian implications in his presentation of sin.

The fact that Hawthorne modeled his novel after a guidebook at all is curious, since he was largely critical of guides in his earlier fiction and Italian notebooks. While traveling around Rome in 1858, Hawthorne refers to *The Handbook to Rome and Its Environs* from the London publisher John Murray as “a highly essential nuisance” (14: 123). For Hawthorne, the Murray guide was highly essential because it helped him find his bearings. At the same time, it was a nuisance because it diminished the romance of its subjects. Hawthorne was irritated when he was unable to use the guide, as when, during a short trip outside the city, he found it to offer an “exceedingly vague and unsatisfactory” description of the castles in the Roman countryside (14: 239). But he was even more annoyed on occasions when the guide's superficial interest in establishing facts became obtrusive. While Hawthorne did not actually believe that a certain stone bore the imprint of Christ's feet or that a certain forest held the fountain of the nymph Egeria, he nevertheless objected to the Murray guide's matter-of-fact dismissal of such legends and envied his wife Sophia, who had “poetical faith enough to light her cheerfully through all these mists of incredulity” (14: 123, 206).

While Hawthorne was ambivalent about how his guidebooks described Rome's points of interest, he was especially critical of how they presented artworks. He complains of his friend George S. Hillard's *Six Months in Italy*, for instance, for giving him the wrong impression of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*. "[The statue] did not seem very wonderful to me," Hawthorne writes, "not so good as Hillard's description of it made me expect" (14: 175). In his guide, Hillard praises Bernini's skill effusively, calling the statue, which portrays Daphne's metamorphosis into a tree, "a miracle of manipulation," the result not of art but of "magic" (247). Hillard is especially amazed by the vivacity of the statue, claiming that Bernini's ability to bring a mythical story to life inspires "a sort of incredulous wonder" in the viewer (247). When he sees the statue for himself, Hawthorne is much less impressed, writing in his notebook, "[O]ne does not enjoy these freaks in marble" (14: 175). Hawthorne's earlier writing on travel and museum collections helps reveal why he was so disappointed in the guidebook presentation of *Apollo and Daphne*. Like Hillard, Hawthorne wanted his experience of art to inspire feelings of magic and wonder. But unlike Hillard, Hawthorne was looking for something more than the artist's ability to make a culturally significant subject seem present to the viewer. Similarly, he wanted both more and less from a guidebook than the vivid presentation and contextualization of tourist attractions and famous art.

Hawthorne's critique of guidebooks began long before he even visited Europe—with three tales from the early 1840s that he later collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. In these satirical guides, Hawthorne identifies a number of ways that modern innovations generally and the guidebook genre in particular flatten and artificially simplify human experience. In the first tale "The Hall of Fantasy," Hawthorne's narrator recalls his trip

through an imaginary building that he describes as a sort of stock exchange for creativity. The tale mimics guidebook tours of museums with its organization. First, the narrator describes the building's location. Then he and a friend who acts as guide examine each of the building's rooms, which hold representative collections of the inventors, artists, and reformers of the day. Like Murray's guidebook, which moves through museums room by room giving long descriptions of the most famous works before listing other inventory, the narrator's guide gives an in-depth description of the most important people in each room and then notes the rest in passing. Hawthorne uses the occasion to poke fun at several of his contemporaries. For instance, he tells how Hillard, the guidebook author mentioned above, was welcomed into the Hall of Fantasy for his biography of Edmund Spencer, though he would rather have been admitted for his poetry (10: 636). Conversely, Edgar Allen Poe was welcomed for his poetry and then nearly driven out for his work as a critic (10: 636).²

At the end of the tale, the narrator's guide offers the fiery Baptist preacher William Miller—who predicted the imminent destruction of the world—as the apotheosis of all the movements represented in the hall. The guide reasons that Miller's "one theory...swallows up and annihilates all others," suggesting that all the examples of art and reform that fill the hall are based on similar, if less totalizing, eschatologies (10: 181). Hawthorne's narrator, though, rejects Miller's end-of-times fantasy and as he praises the "very earthliness" of earth, he is ushered out of the hall and back to his dinner table (10: 183).

² These and many other references to particular artists and reformers appeared in the original 1846 version of the tale published in *Pioneer*, but were removed from *Mosses*, making the 1854 version of "The Hall of Fantasy" much more general and gentle in its satire. Poe may have been inspired by Hawthorne's criticism of his criticism when in 1847 he retracted his formerly positive review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, insisting, "[Hawthorne] is peculiar and *not* original" (256).

In the second of these tales “The Celestial Rail-Road,” Hawthorne’s narrator describes a trip through the world John Bunyan created in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. He takes a train along newly laid tracks from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, giving descriptive accounts of the highlights before learning that the people running the railroad actually work for the devil and are secretly taking him to hell. As in “The Hall of Fantasy,” Hawthorne uses the tale to satirize contemporary thinkers and popular reformers. Bunyan’s Giant Despair, for example, has been replaced with a Giant Transcendentalist, who harasses pilgrims by shouting incomprehensible phrases at them (10: 197). Similarly, the formerly debauched Vanity Fair has grown full of churches with pastors like “Rev. Mr. This-today,” who cloak the city’s enduring vanity with a patina of piety (10: 198).

In both tales, the formal guidebook qualities that summarize and systematize the narrators’ experiences participate in their satire. After all, what better mode in which to make fun of the truncated worldviews of modern thinkers and reformers than an emergent genre that strives to fit all the things people should see and the way they should see them into a compact handbook? John Murray wrote in his memoir that his guides helped democratize tourism, making possible the nineteenth-century phenomenon of “traveling made easy” (40). Similarly, Hawthorne’s narrators initially hope that their accounts can help streamline complex practices to bring valuable experiences to broader audiences. But they soon learn that modern innovators, in their rush to make travel or creativity or reform or salvation seem easier, actually diminish the experiences they seek to disseminate.

The final tale collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* “The Virtuoso’s Collection” even more directly resembles the sort of guidebooks Hawthorne used in Rome, since it deals with a collection of aesthetically and historically significant artifacts. Like the “Hall of Fantasy,” its organization resembles Murray’s handbooks, the first of which was published five years before Hawthorne’s story. The narrator first explains how to find the collection. He then describes his tour, guided by the Virtuoso, room by room. As they move through the collection, the Virtuoso provides in-depth descriptions of what he deems most important and then simply lists off the rest of his inventory. The pair starts in the natural history section, where the narrator sees all manner of animals from myth, history, and literature—the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood, St. George’s dragon, Alexander the Great’s horse, Shelley’s skylark, Robinson Crusoe’s parrot, and on and on (10: 478-481).

In each case the Virtuoso explains the significance of the object by connecting it back to one of Western culture’s formative narratives. The items, however, do not make vital connections back to the past or help shed light onto the present. Rather, they seem to function entirely as examples of the collection’s comprehensive scope. The skylark, for instance, does not cause the narrator to think of Shelley’s poem in a new way. It is merely an artifact from the poem—and an ironic artifact at that. Where Shelley’s speaker tells the skylark in the poem’s opening, “Hail to thee blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert” (304), the Virtuoso’s skylark is a stuffed shell of this bird, devoid of any sort of animating spirit. The humor of “The Virtuoso’s Collection” depends on this way of approaching the museum’s inventory. The Virtuoso connects each of his items back to some cultural narrative, trying and failing to capture the narrator’s attention, before quickly moving onto

the next item. Eventually, things begin piling up to humorous effect. By the end of the tale, the narrator has been so besieged with culturally significant taxidermy and other curiosities that he is left numb, unable to enjoy the Virtuoso's impressive collection of sculpture. As he remarks, near the end of the tale "the deep simplicity of these great works was not to be comprehended by a mind excited and disturbed as mine was by the various objects that had recently been presented to it" (10: 493).

In their sections on the Capitol Museum of Rome, Murray and Hillard present its collection somewhat like the Virtuoso describes his. Both guides give geographical and physical descriptions of the building and then list the works in each room of the museum. And both guides devote the bulk of their space to the statue of *The Dying Gladiator*, detailing its physical characteristics and praising the skill with which it was sculpted. They make clear, though, that the statue's real importance comes from its association with Lord Byron, who was inspired by *The Dying Gladiator* while writing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The Murray guide signals this by including all eighteen lines from the poem in which Byron describes the statue. It does not bother to provide a preface or explanation for the long quote, assuming that the reader will already have made the necessary connection (232). After all, as Hillard explains in his guide, the statue's very name was sustained, in part, by its association with the poem. By the mid-nineteenth century, art historians had discovered that the statue likely represented a Gaul rather than a gladiator, but it retained its name largely because of Byron's incredible popularity among Rome's English-speaking tourists (286).

Hillard draws the connection between the statue and the poem much more closely than even Murray does. He praises the statue at length for its ability to draw strong

emotions of pity from the viewer. He then notes that this power comes from its being “indissolubly associated with Byron’s immortal stanza” (288). For Hillard, viewing *The Dying Gladiator* through the lens of Byron’s poem was like confronting a real example of suffering. The poem enacted “something like the miracle of Pygmalion...the marble breast...appeared to heave with emotion, and the drooping brow to be darkened with suffering” (289). This combination of statue and poem almost automatically provokes feelings of sympathy for the gladiator, which in turn encourages viewers to accept the statue/poem’s political message of individualism.³ Hillard claims that viewers, who experience something of the gladiator’s suffering, are in turn drawn to his “manly nature,” his barbaric resolve to act “according to his small light so long as he lived” (289). They are simultaneously repulsed by the strictures of the empire whose brutal conventions snuff out this individual spirit “to make a Roman holiday” (Hillard 288, Byron 114). For both Hillard and Murray, the importance of *The Dying Gladiator*—much like the importance of the animals in “The Virtuoso’s Collection”—comes from its ability to point the viewer back to an important narrative. The Murray guide merely gestures toward the story connected to the statue, while Hillard takes it a step further and pursues Byron’s narrative through the statue to highlight the emotional power and political importance of the famous poem.

Given Murray and Hillard’s reverence for *Childe Harold*, it seems significant that Hawthorne makes no reference to Byron’s poem in the first two chapters of *The Marble Faun*, which take place in the Capitol Museum. In fact, as Hawthorne guides readers

³ The statue’s political message may also have been noticed by a key American architect of liberalism Thomas Jefferson, who in the 1770s made plans to acquire a copy of *The Dying Gladiator* (which he knew by the name “Myrmillo expiring”) as one of the nineteen sculptures in a proposed, but never completed, gallery at Monticello (Howard 593).

through the museum and introduces his four main characters, *The Dying Gladiator* functions primarily as a prop that Donatello uses to shield himself from his friends when they try to look at his ears or to skip around happily when Miriam shows him affection (4: 12, 14). Near the end of the museum tour, Kenyon shares his low opinion of the famous statue, saying, “I find myself getting weary and annoyed that the man should be such a length of time leaning on his arm in the very act of death. If he is so terribly hurt, why does he not sink down and die without further ado?” (4: 16) Though the narrator attributes Kenyon’s criticism to how “sculptors always abuse one another’s works” (4: 16), the line reflects Hawthorne’s own opinion of *The Dying Gladiator*, which he recorded in his notebook (14: 511). It also directly reverses Hillard’s account of how a viewer ought to experience the statue. Instead of seeing the gladiator miraculously come to life, Kenyon wishes he would finally come to death.

Instead of *The Dying Gladiator*, Hawthorne focuses his tour of the Capitol Museum on *The Faun of Praxiteles*, a statue Murray only briefly notes and Hillard completely ignores (Murray 233). In some ways, Hawthorne’s treatment of *The Faun* resembles the standard guidebook description of Roman art. He notes the statue’s formal qualities and praises the sculptor’s technique. He pays close attention to the faun’s features, detailing the particular sweep of his neck and the peculiar shape of his nose (4: 8-9). Like Hillard, who claimed *The Dying Gladiator* reenacted “the miracle of Pygmalion” for sympathetic viewers, Hawthorne attributes a magical, life-like quality to *The Faun* that occurs to viewers almost automatically. “It is impossible to gaze long at this stone image,” he writes, “without conceiving a kindly sentiment towards it, as if its substance were warm to the touch, and imbued with actual life” (4: 9). When he goes on to describe the marble faun’s

“actual life,” though, Hawthorne sharply diverges from his guidebook models. For Hillard, remember, the apparent life of the gladiator draws viewers into the world created by Byron’s poem, forming bonds of sympathy between the viewer and the gladiator and inspiring the viewer to face society with something of the gladiator’s fierce independence. *The Dying Gladiator* is clarifying for Hillard. It takes a remote narrative and makes it present, takes inchoate feelings and hardens them into clear moral resolutions. But Hawthorne values *The Faun* for producing nearly the opposite effect.

Rather than leaping into a famous story associated with the statue, Hawthorne challenges readers to look through *The Faun* and into a “mute mystery,” related to the confusion experienced “whenever we attempt to gain an intellectual or sympathetic knowledge of the lower orders of creation” (4: 10). Something about the statue, Hawthorne suggests, opens up a window into pre-rational, primal modes of thinking and feeling that are distinct from the atomized, pre-political experience posited by social contract theorists. The faun represents neither the harsh barbarism of Hobbes’s state of nature nor Locke and Rousseau’s more appealing representations of natural liberty. Rather, Hawthorne claims that the faun beckons viewers back to a time of prehistorical solidarity—“a period when man’s affinity with nature was more strict, and his fellowship with every living thing more intimate and dear” (4: 10). The faun obviates the kinds of distinctions that the gladiator throws into relief. In place of the gladiator’s minimal model of the self—represented by the “small light” he shines out onto his surroundings (Hillard 289)—the faun exhibits a capacious self that encompasses, rather than illuminates, his environment. If viewers look long enough at the statue, Hawthorne contends,

all the pleasantness of sylvan life, all the genial and happy characteristics of creatures that dwell in woods and fields, will seem to be mingled and kneaded into one substance, along with the kindred qualities in the human soul. Trees, grass, flowers, woodland streamlets, cattle, deer, and unsophisticated man. The essence of all these was compressed long ago, and still exists, within that discoloured marble surface of the Faun of Praxiteles. (4: 10)

For Hawthorne, the marble faun's material quality is valuable primarily because it points beyond itself to this mysterious, Dionysian "essence." And while the statue's material form is necessary for discovering its essence, the two qualities are distinct.

The mute mystery of the marble faun is revealed to viewers who closely attend to its material form. "[I]f the spectator broods long over the statue," Hawthorne reports, "he will be conscious of its spell" (4: 10). But spectators cannot brood too long or the idea generated by *The Faun* "grows coarse" and the statue's materiality reasserts itself, leaving viewers with nothing more than its marble husk (4: 10). As Hilda remarks, just before leaving the Capitol Museum, "I have been looking at [*The Faun*] too long; and now, instead of a beautiful statue, immortally young, I see only a corroded and discoloured stone" (4: 17). Unlike *The Dying Gladiator*, whose worth comes from its striking presentation of suffering and compelling cultural associations, *The Faun of Praxiteles* is valuable because it points viewers beyond itself. It does not present viewers merely with a cleverly carved block of marble or even with the apparent presence of the faun. It presents them with the essence of the faun—which consists in a slippery, almost mystical knowledge of the primal harmony between nature and humanity.

In abjuring the immanent *Dying Gladiator* for the transcendent *Faun of Praxiteles*, Hawthorne anticipates Martin Heidegger's claim that a work of art "is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing's general essence" (37).⁴ But seeing past an artwork's material form and into its essence can be tricky. As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, Heidegger's own treatment of essence "attracts the kind of definitions which negative theology reserves for God" (436). Heideggerian essence "is comprehensible only in the presence of Being...which, however, is an open space, is always an absence, an un-presence and a distance" (Balthasar 436). For Heidegger, describing something's essence involves the paradoxical task of presenting an absence. He writes in "The Origin of the Work of Art," for example, that Van Gogh's paintings reveal something essential about peasants' shoes—the "equipmental quality of the equipment" (34)—but when it comes to trying to describe just how the paintings reveal the shoes' essence, Heidegger is forced to rely wholly on negation and tautology. The revelation is made "[n]ot by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observation of the actual use of shoes...but only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting" until the "being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining" (35, 36). While Heidegger believes the essence of the peasants' shoes to be real, its contours can be traced only through negations that carve a sense of vacancy into the viewer's experience of Van Gogh's paintings.

Hawthorne's account of the faun's essence makes similar use of negation. His description initially offers the kinds of "lively and distinct images" the Scots believed to

⁴ c.f. Marjorie Elder's reading of Hawthorne as a "transcendental symbolist," concerned with revealing "the high Reality shadowed in the things of earth" (67).

be necessary for producing an ideal presence (Kames 69). But he also pays special attention to things that are not there, mentioning features like the “fine, downy fur” that might have coated the faun’s ears or the tail that could have hidden within the faun’s cloak (4: 10). When Hawthorne moves into his presentation of the faun’s essence, he relies even more on negation, insisting that the faun is “[n]either man nor animal, and yet no monster” (4: 10). Throughout the passage, Hawthorne is at pains to distinguish the faun from anything that may seem similar. He advances his description through a combination of comparative negations, compiling a list of things that the faun is similar to but never identical with, carving out a vacancy in which the faun’s mysterious essence seems to gather and integrate the various ideas and objects that lie within its orbit. In “The Custom-House,” the long introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne turned his parlor into a metaphor for romantic fiction, calling the moon-filled room a “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (1: 36). Here, at the beginning of his final novel, Hawthorne offers the marble faun as another metaphor for romance, but rather than relying on the effect of moonlight, Hawthorne produces this neutral territory through the medium of his guidebook narrator, whose apophatic presentation imbues the statue with a sense of vacancy.

Later in the novel, when Hilda visits St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, the cathedral is presented much like *The Faun of Praxiteles*. We are told that it gathers and integrates unlike qualities, lending a sense of unity to a diversity of ideas and objects. The (small-c) catholicity of St. Peter’s, which the narrator refers to as “The World’s Cathedral” (4: 354), is practically illustrated by its abundance of confessionals operating

in every major European language (4: 356-357). But the cathedral's effect is not merely a practical matter for Hawthorne. Or rather, he suggests that practical features like the multi-lingual confessionals are the natural outgrowth of the cathedral's imperfectly realized catholic essence, hinted at in Hilda's thought that within St. Peter's "vast limits...there should be space for all forms of Christian truth; room both for the faithful and the heretic to kneel; due help for every creature's spiritual want" (4: 348). Where *The Faun* was an artifact of primal solidarity, St. Peter's creates a feeling of civilized solidarity, a unity not of humanity and nature, but of disparate cultures and religions. At first, it could seem like Hilda longs for simple religious pluralism, wishing that the cathedral could supply enough space for different religions to pursue their different beliefs in peace. But by putting her finger on a singular "help" for a singular "want," Hilda presses beyond basic pluralism to an underlying unity, suggesting that something fundamental about the cathedral cuts through the cultural distinctions produced by different modes of worship—and even different forms of belief—to reveal and minister to their common theological impulse. It is this essential quality about St. Peter's that allows Hilda to see past sectarian differences and ask herself, "If Religion had a material home, was it not here?" (4: 351)

When it comes to presenting the essence of St. Peter's, Hawthorne again relies on negation, carving out a vacancy by distinguishing between two versions of the cathedral that Hilda held in her mind just before and after visiting it for the first time. Before coming to Rome, Hilda imagined St. Peter's to be a kind of manifestation of the Burkean sublime: "a structure of no definite outline, misty in its architecture, dim and gray and huge, stretching into an interminable perspective, and overarched by a dome like the

cloudy firmament” (4: 348-349). This hazy mental image so dominates Hilda’s imagination that visiting the real cathedral is a shock, causing her to dismiss it as an artifact of mere beauty. Though St. Peter’s seems to glitter and glow, Hilda dismisses it as nothing more than a heap of ornamentation that creates the impression of “a great prettiness; a gay piece of cabinet work, on a Titanic scale; a jewel casket, marvellously magnified” (4: 349). Though Hilda comes to this second estimation of St. Peter’s through hard evidence—basing it on her actual experience—we learn that she somehow missed the cathedral’s essence, which is captured by neither the sublime structure of Hilda’s innocent imagination, nor the glittering cabinet of her first experience.

In order to grasp the cathedral’s essential significance, Hilda must visit it several more times. The language Hawthorne uses to describe this process recalls Heidegger’s belief that we can understand the essence of peasants’ shoes “only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh’s painting” until the “being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining” (36). Like the Van Gogh painting, St. Peter’s is its own best interpreter. As Hawthorne writes:

The great church smiles calmly upon its critics, and, for all response, says, “Look at me!” and if you still murmur for the loss of your shadowy perspective, there comes no reply, save, “Look at me!” in endless repetition, as the one thing to be said. And, after looking many times, with long intervals between, you discover that the cathedral has gradually extended itself over the whole compass of your idea; it covers all the site of your visionary temple, and has room for its cloudy pinnacles beneath the dome. (4: 350)

Eventually, St. Peter's grows on Hilda, expanding until it can house even her hazy, imaginary cathedral and serve as "a magnificent, comprehensive, majestic symbol of religious faith" (4: 350). Nothing has changed about the "multiplicity of ornament," which had caused Hilda to at first dismiss its aesthetic value, but the cathedral has transformed Hilda's vision so that she now sees how "each [ornament] contributed its little all towards the grandeur of the whole" (4: 350). St. Peter's education of Hilda proceeds by what now should be a familiar sequence. It reveals its essence neither in her imaginary vision nor in her initial observation. But because the cathedral's essence lies in a space between the imaginary and actual, it is able to bring Hilda's seemingly incompatible visions into an aesthetic harmony that presages St. Peter's significance as a symbol of religious harmony.

Conventional critical wisdom says that *The Marble Faun* is marred by Hawthorne's focus on Roman art and attractions. Susan Williams, for instance, complains that it is "precisely [*The Marble Faun*'s] guidebook qualities...that make it seem to fail as a romance" (118). Many others agree, suggesting that guidebook episodes bog down the novel's plot and perpetuate a reductive form of Victorian aesthetics that treats artworks as mere tools for improving morals and signaling social status.⁵ Though critics are correct to

⁵ See Rita K. Gollin's "Hawthorne and the Visual Arts," which notes that "a recurrent complaint about *The Marble Faun* from the time it first appeared is that its concern with art weighs it down" (130). Gollin goes on to endorse this recurrent complaint, arguing that Hawthorne's "beliefs about art were those of his time" and that his Victorian aesthetic principles caused him to fill the novel with didactic essays that treat art as little more than a tool for aiding "moral perception" (129, 131). See also Les Harrison's *The Temple and the Forum*, which blames "the failure of *The Marble Faun*" on the "culturally authoritative stance taken toward [Hawthorne's] materials" (49). The novel is sapped of its vitality, Harrison suggests, because Hawthorne spends too much time writing about canonical art that is already locked in a system of cultural signification. Richard H. Brodhead makes a similar complaint in *The School of Hawthorne*, suggesting that discussions of art bog the novel down. "Art in *The Marble Faun*," Brodhead writes, "exists primarily as

note that *The Marble Faun* is influenced by the Victorian guidebook in its subject matter and organization, their failure to attend closely to the actual language of the guidebook episodes causes them to miss important ways in which Hawthorne dramatically departs from generic conventions. As I note above, Hawthorne shares heterodox perspectives on individual artworks (think of his brusque dismissal of *The Dying Gladiator*) and orients his guide to a divergent aesthetic criterion. While Murray and Hillard evaluate artworks according to their pre-determined cultural significance, vivid presentation of interesting narratives, and clear communication of moral messages, Hawthorne intentionally frustrates these ends and models a much more ambitious mode of aesthetic appreciation that privileges the experience of vacancy.

Of course, critics could be wrong about the philosophical basis for these guidebook episodes, but still correct in arguing that they ruin the novel by distracting from its plot. Readers who are interested in Donatello's moral transformation or Miriam and Hilda's complex friendship may interpret the novel's long descriptions of museums and churches as little more than a series of digressions. Such an interpretation, however, misses the ways in which *The Marble Faun*'s guidebook episodes are recursive, preparing readers to appreciate *The Marble Faun* itself. For, throughout the novel, Hawthorne includes heavily mediated narration, incomplete descriptions, and gaps in the plot to create vacancies like those he discovered in Rome's art. Take for instance the crucial scene in which the model—a mysterious monk who stalks Miriam throughout the first third of the novel—is murdered by Donatello.

completed artifact, something already made and already designated as of classic value. These artifacts loom over the book's present" (72).

Hawthorne begins by telling how Miriam and Donatello stood talking at the edge of a precipice when, seemingly from out of nowhere, “a figure...approached Miriam” (4: 171). Right after this vaguely portentous preface, Hawthorne retreats from a straightforward narration of the plot to instead describe how his characters remember the episode. For Miriam, it is all a blur, and “in her whole recollection of that wild moment, she beheld herself as in a dim show and could not well distinguish what was done and suffered; no, not even whether she were really an actor and sufferer in the scene” (4: 171). Hawthorne then shifts to Hilda’s perspective, who was just opening a door to join her friends

when she was startled, midway, by the noise of a struggle within, beginning and ending all in one breathless instant. Along with it, or closely succeeding it, was a loud, fearful cry, which quivered upward through the air, and sank quivering downward to the earth. Then, a silence! Poor Hilda had looked into the court-yard, and saw the whole quick passage of a deed, which took but that little time to grave itself in the eternal adamant. (4: 171)

Miriam, who is in the thick of the action, experiences it all like a dream and will later have to rely on the testimony of her friends to recall important details (4: 209-211).

Conversely, Hilda, who stands some distance off and looks through a half-opened door, experiences the scene vividly. But even though readers experience the murder from a limited version of Hilda’s perspective they have far less than even Miriam to go on.

Hawthorne’s vague word choice for key elements of the scene—his description of the model as “a figure” and the murder as “a deed”—makes it impossible to visualize the

action. Meanwhile, the words he chooses to modify Hilda's experience, like "breathless" and "quivering," convey a sense of urgency that is compounded by the quick movement from one perspective to another. This sense of urgency, though, feels disembodied, alienated from particular actions and individual characters. By initially presenting Hilda's perspective through mere sound, Hawthorne creates a sense of mystery, inviting the reader to wonder, *Who is struggling? Who is screaming?* When he then writes about Hilda's sight, however, it is at such a level of abstraction that Hawthorne's narrator does nothing to dispel these mysteries and readers are left in suspense through the beginning of the next chapter.

In short, the murder is presented as a vacancy. Hawthorne arranges the model's death precisely to keep it from seeming to "actually [pass] before our eyes" (Blair 192). Though, in the next chapter, Miriam's first question of Donatello "What have you done?" is rhetorical, readers might well ask the question in earnest (4: 172). While it seems obvious that something important has happened, it is not at all clear just what the important thing was. Even after Hawthorne shares the facts of the event, revealing through dialogue that Donatello threw the model off the precipice at Miriam's silent bidding, the episode's implications are still not clear. Did Donatello actually murder the model, or does he kill him in defense of Miriam? If it was murder, does the non-verbal direction Miriam gave Donatello make her complicit in the murder? By focusing, primarily, on how the killing affects the dynamic between his four characters, Hawthorne leads readers away from these sorts of quasi-legal questions to a consideration of the murder's social effects. Once again, though, it is initially unclear what these effects are.

Hawthorne confuses even some of his most attentive readers. Consider, for instance, Robert Hughes's summary of the murder scene: "When one night Donatello casts this man, Miriam's 'Model,' off the edge of a precipice, apparently with her glance of approval, the company of friends is shattered" (140). The killing "shatters" the group—straightforward enough. But, in the very next sentence, Hughes changes tack, "Miriam, her admirer Donatello, and their two American friends find themselves caught in a confused web of responsibility that entangles them all according to their varying degrees of ignorance and complicity to the murder" (140). In the space of a sentence the group goes from being "shattered" to being "caught" and "entangled" in a shared "web of responsibility."

Hughes is not the only one who seems confused about how the model's death affects the group. Miriam at first thinks that the sin she shared with Donatello simultaneously isolated them from society and brought them closer together. "[H]ow close, and ever closer," she thinks, "did the breadth of the immeasurable waste, that lay between them and all brotherhood or sisterhood, now press them one within the other!" (175) Miriam eventually realizes, however, that their shared sin is actually much less private than their previous innocence and that "an individual wrong-doing melts into the great mass of human crime.... [They] were not an insulated pair, but members of an innumerable confraternity of guilty ones, all shuddering at each other" (177).

Miriam's eventual realization that innocence is a quality of individuals while guilt is a quality of groups is later echoed in Hilda's reflections on sin. She first describes her religious morality as a matter of personal responsibility. "I am a poor, lonely girl," she tells Miriam, "whom God has set here in an evil world, and given her only a white robe

and bid her wear it back to Him, as white as when she put it on” (4: 208). As she reflects on the murder, though, Hilda sees—and grows profoundly discouraged by—a communal responsibility that she previously didn’t recognize: “I understand how the sins of generations past have created an atmosphere of sin for those that follow. While there is a single guilty person in the universe, each innocent one must feel his innocence tortured by that guilt. Your deed,” she tells Miriam, “has darkened the whole sky!” (4: 212) For many, Hilda’s sense of guilt for the model’s murder is one of *The Marble Faun*’s great puzzles, and critics have developed a number of theories as to why it occurs.⁶ Another important puzzle, though—that has received far less critical attention—involves *how* it occurs. How does Hawthorne make Hilda’s vicarious experience of guilt seem plausible to readers?

Here, it is important to remember that Hawthorne presents the murder through a moment of literary vacancy. As in the aesthetic experiences described in the novel’s guidebook episodes, the murder scene seeks to reveal something essential about its subject through a combination of comparative negations, creating a sense of vacancy that gathers unlike qualities together. Hawthorne presents Miriam’s experience of the murder as a near confusion of responsibility and loss. She is not the “actor” of the sin nor is she the “sufferer,” but, at the same time, she feels something like both actor and sufferer (4: 171). Hawthorne then presents Hilda’s experience of the murder through a loose collection of disembodied sounds and sights emptied of personality. There is an awful lot

⁶ For three of these theories see Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby’s *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, Robert S. Levine’s “‘Antebellum Rome’ in *The Marble Faun*,” and Patricia Pulham’s “‘Of marble men and maidens’: Sin, Sculpture, and Perversion in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*.” Weinstein and Looby read in Hilda’s experience of guilt an implicit critique of Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson’s moral aesthetics (126-128). Levine thinks Hawthorne creates Hilda’s innocent guilt as a means for bringing an innocent Hilda to the confession where she remains uncorrupted in order to correct anti-Catholic attitudes in America (22-23). Pulham wonders if Hilda actually feels guilt for harboring a forbidden “love for Miriam” (97).

of noise and then silence, while “a figure” is subjected to “a deed” (4:171). It may be that readers are able to sympathize with Hilda’s idea that sin has “darkened the whole sky,” precisely because of how Hawthorne casts the murder as an intense abstraction, which seems to simultaneously detach and attach to the various characters in both its causes and consequences.

In his 1850 essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Herman Melville writes that “the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul...is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black.” Melville goes on to insist, “[T]his mystical blackness...this great power of blackness derives its force from its appeals to [the] Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin” (243). Given the connection he draws between Hawthorne’s opacity and his belief in original sin, Melville was likely unsurprised a decade later, when Hawthorne presented the shared experience of sin by shrouding parts of *The Marble Faun* in vacancy. What Melville may have found more surprising, though, is the apparent communitarianism of Hawthorne’s characters, as revealed in their reliance upon one another and upon social institutions.

One common reading of Hawthorne’s politics is that his strong sense of original sin made him suspicious of social authority and caused him to embrace a liberal understanding of the self as a bulwark against the misguided efforts of politicians, religious leaders, and social reformers. In her study of Hawthorne’s first three novels, the political philosopher Catherine H. Zuckert argues that Hawthorne writes to encourage a liberal political ontology designed to protect individuals from corrupt institutions. As Zuckert writes in conclusion, “Hawthorne reminds his readers of the psychological truth

on which liberal government is founded. All human beings are irremediably self-interested” (182). In *Nathaniel Hawthorne as Political Philosopher*, John E. Alvis makes a complementary argument, claiming that Hawthorne values religion generally and the doctrine of original sin in particular for “providing a sacred foundation for the natural rights republic bestowed by the founders” (117). In much of Hawthorne’s fiction, the recognition of original sin is a rebuke to utopian efforts at reform and an encouragement to individual efforts towards moral progress. Humanity’s fallen nature cannot be reformed by central planning, but instead requires heroic individual actions. The character who best exemplifies this dynamic is probably Mr. Hollingsworth, the Fourierist and prison reformer who, at the end of *The Blithedale Romance*, gives up his grand progressive schemes to seek atonement for his own sins (III: 242-243).⁷

In *The Marble Faun*, however, sin works much differently. As noted above, responsibility for the model’s murder does not seem to belong to any one character. Rather, to quote Hilda, it has “created an atmosphere of sin” that, like original sin affects everyone. Instead of causing the group to disperse in order to, like Hollingsworth, pursue their salvation individually, the murder forces the group to deal with the effects of the sin through their community. And so, for example, though characters often speak of Donatello’s moral transformation as the result of his sin (4: 434, 460), Hawthorne suggests that it is just as much the effect of Kenyon’s friendship and instruction, which in turn, resulted from the camaraderie they forged under the “atmosphere of sin”

⁷ The conservative thinker Russell Kirk identified a similar sentiment in Hawthorne’s tales from the 1840s, especially “Earth’s Holocaust,” claiming, “This was the substance of Hawthorne’s resolute conviction: that moral reformation is the only real reformation; that sin will always corrupt the projects of enthusiasts who leave it out of account; that progress is a delusion, except for the infinitely slow progress of conscience” (66). Progressives tend to criticize the very traits that Kirk praises as examples of Hawthorne’s political quietism. For such critiques see the readings of “Chiefly About War Matters” in Arthur Riss’s *Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* and the introduction to Larry J. Reynolds’s *Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne’s Damned Politics*.

surrounding their group. When Miriam complains of being “miserably entangled” with Donatello as a result of the murder, Kenyon urges them to overcome their sin by means of this entanglement, by striving “for mutual elevation, and encouragement towards [a life]...of toil, sacrifice, prayer, penitence, and earnest effort towards right things” (4: 322).

The mutual spiritual responsibility the friends feel for one another bears little resemblance to the individualist “Christianity of Locke” that Alvis posits as the foundation for Hawthorne’s politics and which advocated simply personal “adherence to the moral law as determined by reason” (117, 75). Rather, it calls to mind the political theology of the nineteenth-century Spanish thinker Juan Donoso Cortés who draws a distinction between “actual sin,” which gives rise to personal responsibilities and “original sin,” which gives rise to “a responsibility which man shares in common with others...[which] is called *solidarity*” (231-232).⁸ Orestes Brownson, who derived part of his theory of solidarity from Donoso Cortés, believed that people uphold this common responsibility for overcoming original sin by participating in the social institutions of

⁸ It is highly unlikely that Hawthorne would have read Donoso Cortés, whose 1851 *Essays on Catholicism, Liberalism, and Socialism* was not translated into English until 1862, a few years after *The Marble Faun* was written. It is possible, however, that Hawthorne could have seen Orestes Brownson’s 1855 essay “Liberalism and Socialism,” which reviews *Essays on Catholicism* alongside Pierre Leroux’s *Doctrine of Humanity*, with an eye to how each thinker conceives of the idea of solidarity, “Donoso Cortés from the point of view of Catholicity, Pierre Leroux from the pantheistic or humanitarian point of view” (344). Though Donoso Cortés was a reactionary, most famous for his spirited defense of the Spanish monarchy, a curious sympathy exists between his critique of liberal political theology and similar critiques on the left. In Cornel West’s essay “Pragmatism and a Sense of the Tragic,” for instance, West argues that the American liberal tradition of political philosophy has “failed to seriously meet the challenge posed by Lincoln—namely, defining the relation of democratic ways of thought and life to a profound sense of evil” (175). Politics, for West, needs to be about more than simply extending the good of individual liberty it must, rather, organize corporate responses to corporate challenges (179).

family and government, and uphold it best by participating in the sacraments of the Catholic Church (“Liberalism and Socialism” 363-364).⁹

Though Hawthorne is still suspicious of institutional power—especially as it is exercised by the Catholic Church—it is notable that each character in *The Marble Faun* ultimately overcomes the effects of the model’s murder through some institution or institutional practice. Donatello turns himself in to the police. Miriam is reabsorbed back into her powerful family. Hilda goes to confession at St. Peter’s. Kenyon proposes marriage to Hilda. With the exception of the marriage, Hawthorne points to imperfections with each arrangement. The Italian government, Miriam’s family, and the Catholic Church all seem corrupt in one way or another. Still, each institution plays a role in the moral and spiritual development of the characters in a way that would seem impossible from the vantage point of *The Scarlet Letter*, where institutions were characterized by the banality of the Custom’s House, on the one hand, and the severity of the Puritan magistrates, on the other. Here, in his final novel, Hawthorne begins to recognize not only the communitarian implications of original sin, but also the valuable role that even deeply flawed institutions can play in promoting the common good.

⁹ Brownson draws a connection between solidarity and the sacraments before even his 1844 conversion to Catholicism. See for instance, his discussion of the Eucharist in his 1842 essay “Leroux on Humanity” (123-124) and his 1842 open letter to William Ellery Channing “The Mediatorial Life of Jesus,” which invests society with a kind of sacramental quality—being that through which we commune with God (207).

Conclusion

Vacancy's Afterlife

Like his first inaugural address, Lincoln's second includes a metaphor for America in its long closing sentence:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

(687)

In his first inaugural, delivered on the cusp of the Civil War, Lincoln imagined America to be a wordless song played on an invisible harp. On the other side of the war, he instructs his audience "to bind up the nation's wounds." Lincoln's second national metaphor—the nation as a wounded soldier—is vivid, all too easy to picture for an audience at the tail end of a long and brutal war. Lincoln leverages this vividness to elicit the audience's empathy and to call attention to the work ahead. After all, literal care for wounded soldiers is the most crucial component of the more general care for the nation that Lincoln enjoins.

Cody Marrs has described the literary history of the Civil War as "a rupture with a stunning array of trajectories, genealogies, and afterlives" (3). But here we have an example of the opposite happening. Before the war, Lincoln employed the fresh technique of abstract didacticism, imagining and inspiring solidarity by creating a literary experience of vacancy. Now, Lincoln reverts to the vivid didacticism of the early 1850s,

heightening the empathy of his audience by means of “the magic of the real presence of distress,” which might form the basis for individual acts of charity (Stowe 118).

My example of Lincoln is, admittedly, quite modest. But it reflects a larger shift in which post-war America returned to a consideration of what F. O. Matthiessen called the “new consciousness” of the individual (*Renaissance* 6). Key literary heroes from the era model a diversity of methods for breaking away from society. Huck Finn physically escapes Southern society by lighting out for the territory. On a different plane, Lewis Strether mentally overcomes the moral strictures of Boston society while visiting Europe. Novels like *McTeague* and *The House of Mirth* cast the inability to escape society as fundamentally tragic. Meanwhile, American philosophers, in landmark works like William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, reduced institutions to their members’ individual perceptions.¹ A half-century after Lincoln’s second inaugural, his predecessor Herbert Hoover would announce confidently that “American individualism” represents “the only safe avenue to further human progress” (13).

Notably, the post-war resurgence of individualism was accompanied by a return to vividness. In describing the “new realism” that Henry James began developing just after the Civil War, Matthiessen highlights James’s “gift for conveying his characters’ thoughts in terms of visual images” (*Henry James* viii). Writing on American literary realism more generally, Gregory S. Jackson has shown how the movement grew out of earlier didactic traditions rooted in the “spiritual realism” of preachers like Jonathan Edwards and the philosophy of the Scottish enlightenment (1-6, 18). Writers within this tradition—ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to today—exploit rhetorical

¹ See Olaf Hansen’s account of the “aesthetic individualism” Henry Adams and William James developed from their Emersonian inheritance (x). For a concise critique of James’s individualism, see Charles Taylor’s *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*.

“technologies of visual realism, including graphic literary realism, discursively simulated virtual tours, sermonic enactments, and the incorporation of textual illustrations and photography” to render their subjects ideally present to readers (76).

That is not to say, however, that the American concern for solidarity has been irrevocably eclipsed by what Sacvan Bercovitch called “the American Ideology” (635). The idea of solidarity still, at the very least, appears in flashes and circulates on the peripheries of American literature. And when it does surface, solidarity is still expressed through vacancy. Take for instance, Wendell Berry’s treatment of his character Burley Coulter. In many ways, Burley is the absent center of Berry’s Port William fiction, a major character that readers encounter not directly but in mediation, through the testimony of minor characters. Burley’s words near the end of Berry’s “The Wild Birds” speaks to the way his identity has been shaped by—and even expanded to include—his community. “The way we are,” Burley explains, “we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t” (136).

Or consider Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, which tells the story of the sisters Lucille and Ruth Stone. Though Lucille assumes a conventional social role and Ruth becomes a drifter, it is paradoxically Ruth who understands herself according to the idea of solidarity—as fundamentally shaped by her family and community’s past history and current composition. At the end of the novel, Ruth considers how Lucille must intuitively feel her connection to Ruth and their aunt Sylvie even though she has rationally rejected it and likely moved far from their hometown. Ruth casts this intuition as a vacancy, explaining, how Lucille’s “thoughts are thronged by our absence.... [S]he

does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (219). Solidarity, Berry and Robinson seem to suggest, is still best illustrated by abstracting from the particular to reveal how identities are constituted by means of social networks that appear nowhere concretely but haunt the liberal subject with the reality of their spectral vacancy.

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