ABSTRACT

Defining Properties:

Literary Cultivation and National Character in Early American Literature

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Abstract

In the decades following the English Civil War, as the Anglophone world began transitioning to a social order structured by market and finance capitalism, the word *cultivation*, which earlier had referred exclusively to agricultural processes, acquired increasingly figurative meanings referring to the development of an individual’s mind, faculties, and manners. This augmentation of meaning reflected the development of new conceptions of property as an essential feature of personhood that had begun to alter the definition of subjectivity. The circulation of such figurative meanings coincides with the rise of print culture, the development of a literary public sphere, and the professionalization of writing in the eighteenth century. These cultural developments suggest the relative ease with which the new conception of property expressed as literary personality coexisted alongside other forms of capital in Britain. Literary criticism of the last forty years, including the work of Raymond Williams, Clifford Siskin, Jerome Christensen, and Thomas Pfau, has accounted for the many ways in which possessing literary cultivation served the development of a middle-class economy and ideology in eighteenth-and-nineteenth century Britain. Though the figurative meaning of cultivation appears throughout American literature of the long nineteenth century, thus attesting to the concept’s transatlantic migration and adaptation to the socio-political climates of the New World, no significant studies of American literature have considered the role literary cultivation itself plays in shaping American ideas of personality. My study begins to facilitate an understanding of how modern definitions of property affected and effected early American literary culture.

By placing American literature of the long nineteenth century in a transatlantic context, I show how five works by De Crevecoeur, Franklin, Equiano, Brockden Brown, and Margaret
Fuller model the relationship between real and metaphorical cultivation at the level of both form and narrative content. I argue that within these works literary personality appears as a threat to the American character unless it directly facilitates the acquisition of real property. That in an American context figurative cultivation is at all times subordinated to real cultivation suggests a suspicion of intellectual development at the very foundations of American culture. I draw on new work in early American literature, eighteenth-century studies, British Romanticism, and on a tradition of Marxist critique to read American personality not as an exceptional and isolated development of the revolutionary era, but as a transatlantic migration of cultural forms and conceptions that adapt and mutate upon arriving on New World soil. To understand these migrations and mutations, I map the importation of European aesthetic concepts and literary sources within American productions. My readings make sense of the contradictions within the anti-literary American ideology often articulated in the content of works, whose forms nevertheless reveal a comprehensive engagement with literary history. Doing so allows me to demonstrate the complex ways in which early American authors depicted literary cultivation as either a means of acquiring real property or as a moral redress against the self interest of a speculative economic culture.
Dedication

For Mom and Pop. Thank you for supporting me through all this *cultivation.*
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I would like to use the space of this introduction not only to outline in academic terms the scope of my research and its intervention in current literary debates, but also to articulate my personal motivations for this project. This dissertation in its most general sense is an attempt to begin to understand how literary personality figures into definitions of American character. In other words, what can the history of American literature teach us about the relationship between being a writer and a reader and being a “good” American? Can a person dedicate oneself to a life of “letters” and still exemplify the American character? If so, on what terms? I examine this question through the term *cultivation*, which over the long eighteenth century increasingly acquired figurative meanings, so that the term, that until about the time of the English Civil War, as Raymond Williams notes, referred exclusively to “the tending of something, basically crops or animals”\(^1\) now also described the development of an individual’s mind, faculties, and manners. This metaphorical augmentation of the word evidences the emergence and circulation of modern political and economic concepts, specifically egalitarian notions of self-possession and private property that challenged both the political authority of monarchy and the landed aristocracy’s domination of a quasi-feudal economic landscape in England. Through cultivation we can trace how a Lockeian conception of property as an essential feature of personhood begins to define modern freedom as a confused conflation of democracy and capitalism, so that still today western hegemony cannot distinguish political freedom from free market capitalism.

As my readings show, through tracing the term cultivation we see how the modern subject in possession of literary abilities struggles between literary personality as a form of

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\(^1\) Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 77.
capital and literary personality as a means of developing an ethical standard for a world that no longer has what Charles Taylor calls an “ontic logos,”

\(^2\) “that meaningful order of timeless or transcendent values in which the moral existence of specific individuals and historical societies may find its ground.”

\(^3\) The figurative meaning of cultivation appears throughout American literature of the long-nineteenth century, thus attesting to the concept’s transatlantic migration and adaptation to the socio-political climates of the New World. In the readings of early American texts that follow I show that individuals in possession of literary cultivation continually struggle with its dual status as both an ethical ground and a modern form of mobile capital, so that the intellectual development assumed necessary for an individual’s disinterested participation in a liberal democracy finds itself continually in danger of capitulating to commercial interests.


\(^4\)—suggest that this project—my research into the historical origins of American attitudes towards literary production—is a personal form of circular argument. During the four years before graduate school I waited tables in San Francisco while writing my first novel. In literary social circles my own “professional” situation was not unusual. It seemed that anyone who took literature seriously could not make a living from writing. With the hope of attaining stable teaching positions many writers I knew were finishing their PhDs in English, or considered beginning one. Some had dropped out of graduate school and decided to take low-end office work, which allowed them to write on the job when no

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one was looking. Some had essentially stopped writing imaginative works and focused on more ‘practical’ academic careers. One poet I knew became a psychotherapist. Many went to library school. Some of my favorite writers worked in Silicon Valley and were also the anonymous authors of the manuals for software most of us use on a daily basis. These were the only writers I knew, besides those with inheritances, who managed to own houses in the Bay area. One of the most productive writers in the community, who had not only published many novels and collections of poetry, but also edited the works of several forgotten American writers, and co-wrote the biography of the poet Jack Spicer, a central figure of the Berkeley Renaissance and the New American Poetry, earned his living as the office manager for a San Francisco janitorial company. I had visited him at his office once. The walls surrounding his desk were covered in framed book jackets, awards, and announcements of his publications. His portrait was on the cover of a culture magazine that hung framed directly above his desk.

The academy, as a creative writing professor once described to me, was a ‘get out of jail free card,’ at least at the Master’s level. Most every writer over thirty had completed an MFA in Creative Writing, an essentially useless degree except that one could usually earn it on fellowship, so that one could write for two or three years, while receiving a modest income, teaching experience, and health insurance. Some people went into student debt for this degree. That fact pained me because the degree mostly qualified one for adjunct teaching afterwards, something I also did in addition to waiting tables. I made more money at the restaurant, but at least once a week I got to use my education to make part of my living. Some people got lucky with an MFA. If they published enough books after earning the degree, they could sometimes get a tenure track job. This scenario was hailed as the ‘dream job,’ but when the dream came true, it usually required that one leave San Francisco.
Most of this information I know is not surprising to academics in the humanities, except that among writers a PhD in English was seen as the practical choice comparatively speaking. The PhD in English, we joked, was an MBA for poets. After I won two awards for my novel and earned a total of $2,100 in award money and sales, I thought it wise finally to make the practical choice. As either a graduate student or an adjunct I knew it would be five or six years before I might be eligible for a tenure-track job. The time it would take to complete the degree, I assumed, would be equal to the time I would need to write another book, if I continued to waitress and adjunct. As a graduate student, however, I would have the time to read and gain a deeper understanding of the history of literature, something I felt I desperately needed. And, unlike an adjunct, I would have health insurance. Also, the popularity of MFA programs had flooded the market. English Departments could now demand that their “Professors of the Practice” have the highest terminal degree. I write this not to suggest that my decision to earn a PhD was motivated solely by economic decisions, but to underline the fact that anyone wishing to dedicate herself to literature in America grows keenly aware of the fact that there are few “career” avenues available, that a vocation generally thought to be noble, at least at cocktail parties, makes it difficult to pay the rent. I knew through lived experience that to cultivate oneself figuratively poses limitations on one’s abilities to cultivate real property, to support oneself financially through one’s “specialization.” The following chapters attempt to understand the history of a contemporary fact of American cultural life, one in which I am very invested.

In a sense, the terms of my dissertation were put in place for me one evening while I was serving dinner to the owner of the restaurant where I worked. As I set down his plate, he turned to his wife and said, “Honey, did you know that Maggie and I are the only two Ivy Leagurers in the whole restaurant?” He, a graduate of Dartmouth College, had inherited his
father’s thirteen McDonald’s franchises and was now expanding into finer dining.

Alternately, my European parents, who had sent me to a prestigious private school thinking that an elite education would ensure my social and financial success in the world called me once a week to tell me in their thick Polish accents, “You did not go to Brown to be waitress.” Clearly cultural capital in the States did not translate into material capital in ways that made sense to my European family.

My earlier studies in Romanticism and eighteenth-century aesthetics suggested that these personal experiences were to some degree evidence that European notions of cultural capital did not retain their value on the other side of the Atlantic. I know from my reading, for instance, that European narratives of the long-nineteenth century often stage literary cultivation as central to individual and national development, and, particularly in English and German literature, played a relatively uniform and positive role, an essential part of a rising middle-class’s social, political, and intellectual capital. The work of scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Clifford Siskin, and Jerome Christensen chronicles the formation and effects of the literary public sphere in Europe. Through their work we see how the rise of print culture, writing became a profession of its own, suggesting the relative ease with which the new conception of property in person expressed itself as literary personality and coexisted alongside other forms of capital in European culture. We also see how literary personality continually attempted to differentiate itself from other forms of property by operating as a disinterested and virtuous voice in the civic sphere, wishing to imitate a fading conception of Republican virtue, a role that it could never fully play due to its dependence on a capitalist marketplace.

Habermas in his focus on the democratization of Enlightenment rationality through the creation of a literary public sphere helps us to see that literary cultivation from the start
attempted to operate as a modern ground of ethical civic disinterest. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* he argues that through a democratization of rational debate resulting from the nobility’s move away from a court-centered existence into town life we begin to see the emergence of the eighteenth-century literary public sphere. Because “the bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class” now had access to members of an educated aristocracy through such institutions as the English coffee houses this burgeoning ‘middling class’ “learned the art of critical-rational public debate through its contact with the ‘elegant world.’”5 As the nobility began to separate itself “more and more from the court” the town itself became the “life center of civil society,” not only economically speaking, but as the center of civic debate, of debate about itself. “Institutions such as the coffee houses, the salons, and the Tischgesellschaften (table societies),” Habermas argues, offered a middling class the opportunity to model public discourse on the manners of “the heirs of the humanistic-aristocratic society.”6 This town-centered life of ‘conversation’ instantiates “an early public sphere” through the nobility’s inadvertent bequeathal to those of lesser social rank the means by which to take civic life into their own hands. Habermas’ story suggests a relatively problem-less transition of civic authority from the court to the town, as if such public debate expressive of Enlightenment rationality easily democratized into a virtuous self-rule. As he moves to a discussion of print culture we see, for instance, in his description of Addison that such democratization of cultivation served chiefly as a modern ethical ground free from the influence of church authority: “[Addison] worked toward the spread of tolerance, the emancipation of civic morality from moral theology and of practical wisdom.

6 Ibid, 29.
from the philosophy of scholars.”

What is striking about Habermas’ analysis is his understanding that the rational debate proliferating through print culture remained uncomplicated by the market capitalism that made printed materials so easily available, as if the public sphere’s origins in rationality could hold in check any civic actions motivated by economic self-interest.

What is important in Habermas’ discussion is his understanding that the European middle-class, as it slowly emerged as such over the course of the eighteenth-century, modeled itself upon aristocratic culture in such a way that metaphorical cultivation in Europe continually attempted to establish itself as the moral ground of disinterested civic virtue for a burgeoning modernity. Other critics have elaborated this aspect of Pocock’s famous history of republicanism through analyses of the moral issues informing aesthetic philosophy, showing that culture persistently endeavored to embody the virtuous disinterest, which had earlier defined the neo-classical conception of the aristocratic landowner’s role in public life. For instance, Linda Dowling in her account of Shaftesbury’s struggles to find a moral ground for modernity through the development of aesthetic taste describes the philosopher’s predicament as the impossible task of transferring a classical conception of civic responsibility into modernity’s evacuated definition of the human subject: “Even as Shaftesbury struggles to relocate what he believed to be the innate and disinterested human moral capacity to the newly shrunken realm required by Locke’s epistemological revolution, then, he continually strived to invest that realm with the larger dimensions of the older transcendental order of the ontic logos.”

Shaftesbury’s solution, of course, was an appeal to the aesthetic realm, making beauty a natural sense that analogously proved the existence of an innate moral capacity. Cultivation as a form of mobile property embedded within the

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7 Ibid, 43.
personality of an individual, however, seems to have never quite managed to operate as the moral ground Shaftesbury searched for in the context of a capitalist marketplace.

As we see in Clifford Siskin’s *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830* and Jerome Christensen’s *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career*, literary cultivation adapts to market capitalism and evolves into several forms of professionalism due primarily to the pressures imposed by commercial publishing. Siskin’s ultimate argument, that writing as a technology took hold in England in the early eighteenth century and ultimately changed “society’s ways of knowing and of working” by helping inaugurate “modern disciplinarity, on the one hand, and modern professionalism, on the other” helps us to see that once subjected to the laws of the market, writing emerges as a variety of specialized labors. Where in Habermas’ model cultivation appears as a democratization of aristocratic independence free from the specialization of labor, here in Siskin, though the literary public sphere continues to define the eighteenth-century, the discourse it produces does not necessarily promote the health of civic life, but rather simply constitutes it in the form of culture: “that writing was work that worked on an individual level and a national one, producing cultured individuals privileged in sharing a national culture.” Where Habermas’ argument idealizes the democratization of civic discourse through the literary public sphere, Siskin suggests that writing as a form of capital begins to regulate one’s entrance into civil society itself by creating divisions of social class based on one’s ability to correctly rehearse culture through literacy.

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11 Siskin, 2.
12 Ibid, 6.
Emerging from its originary noblesse oblige writing begins to reproduce the same class boundaries that the literary public sphere appeared initially to break-down, so that, as Siskin describes, “a market of readerly domains was constituted and matched hierarchically to levels of writerly expertise.”\(^{13}\) As “culture was divided tastefully into high and low as serious writing and reading was marked off from mere entertainment,”\(^{14}\) periodicals such as Addison’s *The Spectator* in the first half of the century and philosophical aesthetics in the second half aided in making culture a way of maximizing the value of the property held in one’s own person. The result was a mobile marker of class displayed in the form of aesthetic discernment that “perform[ed] [the] critical task of naturalizing socioeconomic difference as ‘refine[ments]’ of ‘Taste.’”\(^{15}\) The morality implicit in exhibitions of taste (for they were assumed to display innate sensibilities) became synonymous with the behavior of the wealthy and upwardly mobile. This division between high and low literature, Siskin argues, helped establish the modern conception of authorship. As laborer the eighteenth-century author on the one hand produced commodities in the form of books, while “on the other, he or she perform[ed] the function of capital, facilitating the appropriation of surplus value by relocating it ideologically within the individual.” Siskin’s succinct description of the author function in Britain suggests that the personality of the author operated as the embodiment of capital itself, but a form of capital that could reduce the same individual to wage laborer, a producer of surplus value.

Jerome Christensen’s analysis of David Hume in *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career* instantiates Siskin’s description of the eighteenth-century British author as a site in which literal and metaphorical forms of property enable one another’s

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 160.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid, 160.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid 162.
reproduction. Christensen’s overall project intends to show that Hume, who in his philosophical work conceived of “social reality…as discursive through and through,” so that his career as a ‘man of letters’ “exploited, facilitated, and epitomized the operations of the commercial society which it persuasively represented.” Christensen’s focus on Hume as a man of letters offers us an example of another personality fostered by Britain’s literary public sphere, one that aims to resist the specialization and disciplinarity described by Siskin, but still operates under the same commercial laws. If the man of letters specializes in anything, Christensen emphasizes, it is generality, and what this generality, this lack of specialization, attempts to replicate is both the independence of the aristocracy and the Enlightenment thinker. Christensen’s description of Hume’s attempts to create such independence through literary production accentuates both the corruption of the quasi-feudal world to which the Enlightenment responded and to the product of the Enlightenment, the man of letters, who Hume exemplified: “It is the singularity of the Enlightenment man of letters that his lack of anything in particular is the condition of his art of the general, of his ability to form by affiliation a class that could reasonably hope to dominate not by virtue of a God-given right or a historically sanctioned prerogative but by means of a refined and refining pose.” By emancipating himself from the irrational tyranny of political and religious institutions the man of letters both frees himself and theoretically avoids the replication of such political forms of domination. But as implied in Christensen’s use of “refined and refining,” and as we already saw in Siskin’s references to “taste,” the problem of class transfers itself to the metaphorical category of culture through the exhibition of taste.

16 Christensen, 3.
17 Ibid, 3.
18 Ibid, 6.
Hume in Christensen’s narrative represents a midway point, where the term man of letters still suggested an “authorial independence from court and church”\(^\text{19}\) rife with republican idealism. Soon Romantics such as Coleridge would understand the man of letters as simply “a wage slave to anonymous capitalists.”\(^\text{20}\) Christensen’s reading of Hume’s commercial handling of his philosophy suggests, however, that corruption emerges in the man of letters himself precisely because independence in modernity by definition is expressed as economic self-interest in the form of the Author’s incessant self-reproduction “through different agents in different packages to different markets at different times.”\(^\text{21}\) Hume’s career displays the modern contradiction of independence in a capitalist market system, for culture as a form of neo-classical republicanism cannot separate from self-interested, commercial publication: “The disinterested propagation of ideas, which was the aim of the republic of letters, was never separate from the individual’s ambition for the success of his own writings.”\(^\text{22}\) Hume’s decision “(made roughly around 1762) to write no more books at all but to devote the rest of his life to the correction of the editions of his work that continued to pass through the press” shows that the commercial press as the means of production for the republic of letters reduced ideas to real commodities possessed by their producer. Hume does achieve the “independence which is the true measure of the success of a man of letters, an autonomy which elevates him even above the monarch,”\(^\text{23}\) an independence supposedly signifying a political freedom achieved through the emancipation of reason from the Old World order, but in fact signifies neither intellectual nor civic, but economic freedom.

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\(^{19}\) Ibid, 8.
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 9.
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 122-123.
\(^{22}\) Ibid, 127.
\(^{23}\) Ibid, 134.
Through Habermas, Siskin, and Christensen’s accounts we see the pressures that the political and economic structures of European modernity place upon literary cultivation as an extension of an individual’s personality. Plagued by confused definitions of independence, literary cultivation alternately attempts to replicate aristocratic political and economic freedom, and Enlightenment intellectual independence. Because it must do so under the auspices of a commercial publishing industry structured by capitalist market relationships and because linguistic performance can never rid itself of socio-economic signifiers that stratify British political life, literary cultivation never quite achieves the ability to work “as an alternative construction of human motive and energy, in contrast with the assumptions of the prevailing political economy.”

The Romantics, however, as we see in Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads and Shelley’s Defence of Poetry, continue to argue for cultivation through poetry as a means of expanding the depleted definition of human subjectivity that has emerged through industrialism and the capitalist marketplace. Wordsworth’s manifesto in particular argues for poetry as a means of returning individuals to a species identity as human beings, rather than the professional identity they have acquired as specialized labor within the modern economy: “The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man…”

Again, however, this species identity locates itself in the individual profession of the poet.

What scholarship over the last several decades has shown, and what I have tried to briefly outline above through three individual studies, are the complexities and contradictions of literary cultivation and personality as they emerge in the eighteen century in

25 William Wordsworth, Poetical Works quoted in Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 41.
a British context. The work of Raymond Williams, Clifford Siskin, Jerome Christensen, Thomas Pfau, and many others has accounted for the numerous ways in which possessing literary cultivation served the development of a middle-class economy and ideology in eighteenth-and-nineteenth century Britain, while it also attempted to position itself against the capitalist culture that appeared to reduce the definition of human subjectivity itself to *homo economicus*. The wide scope of this research, however, suggests that in a British context literary cultivation in general was never questioned as a valuable aspect of personality, even if the terms of its value varied.

Though the figurative meaning of cultivation appears throughout American literature of the long-nineteenth century, no significant studies of American literature have considered the role literary cultivation itself plays in shaping ideas of American personality. This study begins to facilitate an understanding of how modern definitions of property affected and effected early American literary culture. By placing American literature of the long nineteenth century in a transatlantic context, I show how five works by De Crevecoeur, Franklin, Equiano, Brockden Brown, and Fuller model the relationship between real and metaphorical cultivation at the level of both form and narrative content. Despite the deep engagement with European literature these early works display, the purported value of literary cultivation as an extension of national character, as an example of model citizenship, within the works themselves is less predictable than within European texts. Crevecoeur’s Farmer James, for instance, fears that his children would ruin their economic future, if they read anything other than the Bible, while the family in Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, on the
other hand, grows murderous due in no small part to the fact that their father “entertained no relish for books.”

Though the forms of these works reveal a comprehensive engagement with English and European literary history and draw on various literary traditions, including Augustan poetry, early modern Protestant conversion narratives, and Shaftesburyan and early British Romantic aesthetics, the texts themselves often seemingly contradict their rich intertextuality by promoting an American personality that is anti-literary. By mapping the migrations and mutations of European aesthetic concepts and literary sources within American productions I demonstrate the complex ways in which early American authors depicted literary cultivation as either a means of acquiring real property or as a moral redress against the self interest of a speculative economic culture. Ultimately, I argue that within these works literary personality appears as a threat to the American character unless it directly facilitates the acquisition of real property. That in an American context figurative cultivation is at all times subordinated to real cultivation suggests a suspicion of intellectual development at the very foundations of American culture.

My work benefited greatly from recent studies in Early American literature and culture, which variously analyze the cultural exchanges produced by eighteenth-century colonial networks, especially Susan Scott Parrish’s American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World, Ralph Bauer’s The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s as of yet unpublished work on transatlantic print culture. The larger historical scope of their studies support my own findings unearthed at the level of the symbolic through formal analysis.

Edward Cahill’s Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early

United States published this past year as I was just beginning my chapter on Margaret Fuller’s use of the British picturesque aesthetic in *Summer on the Lakes* makes an important intervention, demonstrating through a grand narrative the pervasive use of European aesthetic theory throughout Early American literature and print culture, an argument I make here through focused readings of individual works of literature. The carefully edited and thoroughly annotated edition of Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* by Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, which argued heavily for the novel to be read in the context of world literature, may have been the inspiration for this project as a whole, for as I was reading *Wieland* for my exams I thought it strange that no Americanist had yet presented an argument for Brown’s use of a contemporary German author’s name for his American family. Barnard and Shapiro’s edition let me know that I was onto something, and that they were working on it, but there was plenty more to be done. I hope the following chapters add to this burgeoning interest in aesthetics in Early America and make a cogent case both for the historical we find in the formal and the necessity of reading American literature, or any other literature for that matter, beyond an isolationist conception of ‘national literature.’

In my opening chapter, “Crevecoeur’s Georgic Fields: The Limits of Literary Cultivation in *Letters from an American Farmer*,” I challenge traditional readings that see Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) as a sentimental depiction of American exceptionalism and more recent ecocritical studies that understand the text as a non-fictional account of eighteenth-century agricultural practices. I show that in the text’s initial letter literary cultivation emerges as a direct threat to the American farmer for it represents an aristocratic ideal to which he feels he has no rightful access, a sign of leisure that threatens the cultivation of his real property, i.e. his farm, and a reminder to a feudal European past that oppressed his ancestors. Specifically, I show that the content of James’s minister’s
speech against the Grand Tour in the opening letter presents literary cultivation as a continuation of aristocratic principles and, hence, antithetical to American values. The ideological content of his argument, however, is ultimately overturned, for the text stages this speech through a vocabulary rich with allusions to the classical and Augustan tradition of georgic poetry. Because of the disconnect between narrative content and its formal presentation the speech functions for readers as an analogy for the characters’ cultural blindness—their inability to see America’s slave economy as a continuation of oppressive feudal practices. The success of this critique pivots on the reader’s ability to recognize the transformation and transposition of an earlier Classical and British literary form, the Roman and Augustan traditions of georgic poetry. At the level of artifice, then, Crevecoeur’s Letters argue that consciousness of specific literary traditions does not eo ipso amount to the continuation of an oppressive aristocratic order, as James and his minister claim, but deploys literary history as a vehicle by means of which to establish new forms of historical self-awareness and political self-critique.

In my second chapter, “Writing as Self-Possession, Self-Possession as Generic Limit: Franklin, Equiano, and the Form of Eighteenth-Century American Autobiography,” I take up two eighteenth-century examples in which literary cultivation functions as a sign of an individual’s self-possession, his ability to be the master of his own person and property. By reading Olaudah Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself (1789) alongside Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography (written 1771-1790; pub. 1814) I show that within the narratives of these texts and through the material production of the texts themselves Franklin and Equiano express an understanding of writing as a means to economic self-actualization for men possessing no material property. Reading Equiano’s Interesting Narrative alongside Franklin’s Autobiography, I
argue that the traditional generic differences between slave narrative and modern biography result from the writing subject’s right to property. Where the two texts differ formally results from each writer’s access to modern property law, ultimately a question of race. Franklin’s seemingly effortless rise to economic and social prominence through self-cultivation within the context of a nation-state creates a narrative that posits the modern subject as a self-authoring individual in a secular world. Equiano, on the other hand, adapts the form of the Protestant conversion narrative for his autobiography, for by retaining a transcendental sphere, he attempts to protect his own subjectivity in an Atlantic world that does not recognize his ‘universal rights’ through national citizenship. A sign of literary cultivation, the art of writing affirms both his literal and figurative mastery over his own person. At the same time, the fact that such self-authorship is framed within a normative transcendental order also contests the authority of the political system that enslaves him. Though for both writers literary cultivation functions as a form of improvement, for Franklin autobiographical form confirms an essentially Lockean notion of autonomy, whereas Equiano’s autobiography aims to demonstrate his own human reason so as to be granted that very same self-possession denied him by slavery.

Chapter Three, “Charles Brockden Brown: The Romance Writer as Virtuous Patriot,” explores Brockden Brown’s theory of fiction as an argument for American literary cultivation aimed at counterbalance to the self-interest of the young nation’s speculative economy. I argue that German literary culture of the second half of the eighteenth century enabled Brown to envision the American writer as a secular moral authority. Specifically, through tracing Brown’s references to German literary life in his essay “Walstein’s School of History” (1799), I argue that the veil of eighteenth-century German literary culture enabled Brown to propose the American romance writer rather than the religious minister as a
national guide against speculative self-interest. I show that sophisticated rhetorical strategies allowed Brown to avoid potential controversy in American circles by presenting his decisively secular and radical political argument not as a new proposition for U.S. politics, but as an established fact of German cultural life. Drawing on Shaftesburyan and early British Romantic aesthetics, and also on the ideal of Bildung associated with Weimar Classicism, Brown’s theory of fiction conceives literature as a moral institution designed to reinvigorate the early eighteenth-century project of civic republicanism. Ultimately, I argue that Brown’s knowledge of the political role German writers played within Enlightened Absolutism enabled him to envision literary cultivation as a necessary component of American political life.

In “An American Picturesque: Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes,*” the final chapter, I argue for Fuller’s travel narrative from 1843 as an example of literary cultivation in the service of American expansionism. Placing Fuller within the context of the British aesthetic tradition of the picturesque, I read her extensive use of picturesque codes and conventions as a transformation and continuation of the English eighteenth-century aesthetic practice, which enabled a rising middle-class to “possess” English land through the development of literary and painterly sensibilities. Fuller’s adoption of the picturesque, I show, enables her own literary cultivation to mediate an imaginary and subjective possession of formerly Indian land and thus serves as a psychological means of expanding real national territory. I argue that Fuller’s extension of European literary tradition into an American sphere as expressed through the excessive literary citations within the text aestheticizes her encounters with native Americans and permits her to imagine her encounters as an expansion of poetic tradition rather than as a hostile political act. Fuller’s dependence upon European literary traditions in order to mediate her quasi-colonial position in formerly native
territories presents a compelling example of intellectual cultivation in service of New World expansionism
Limiting the Muse: Writing, Vocation, and Property in Crevecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer

“Who would have thought that because I received you with hospitality and kindness, you should imagine me capable of writing with propriety and perspicuity?”
—Farmer James

“We might posit, then, a third level of reading where the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him…One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak. He makes himself poet, visionary. Thus, invocation is a figure of vocation.”
—Jonathan Culler

The opening epistle of Letters from an American Farmer takes as its subject matter no fact of American agricultural life, but rather functions as lyric apostrophe in prose, transforming Farmer James not into a poet, but a writer adequate to the task of defining the American personality in written correspondence to a British aristocrat. Over the course of this first letter we see the farmer accept his calling to be the writer of the text at hand and we can read the text’s opening question as the first action towards that end. But unlike Homer, whose first line seeks the aid of the Muse in composition (“Sing to me of the man, Muse…”), or Rilke whose invocation syntactically resembles James’s first line, but mourns modernity’s loss of a world in which there is the possibility of seeking metaphysical assistance ala Homer (“Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic/orders?”), James’s

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opening neither invokes his muse nor doubts his muse’s existence, but rather, like Mary visited by the Angel Gabriel questions his own adequacy towards producing the word.

As the epigraph from Jonathan Culler above suggests, lyric apostrophe in its invocation of a transcendent sphere functions as a type of speech act that results in constituting the poet as a prophetic or vatic figure. But *Letters from an American Farmer* in its opening line replaces lyric verticality with the horizontal of epistolary correspondence. What kind of vocation, then, is Farmer James entering when he begins his correspondence with an English aristocrat? My answer to this question and the basis of the argument I wish to make here is that the vocation is simply an economic one. Within this opening letter the purpose of James’s correspondence, the diegetic function of the exchange between Farmer James and Mr. F.B., becomes clear: both parties wish to enter this correspondence because it holds for each of them the possibility of developing their real property. For Mr. F.B. this means attaining both information about the colonies and botanical samples, while for James the correspondence means access to scientific knowledge that may help him capitalize upon the natural resources of his land. The reader of the letters, who, like the reader of a lyric poem, overhears the speaker’s address to an invisible and absent “you” (Mr. F.B.’s letters do not appear in the volume) observes the American farmer as synonymous with possessive individualism, a political personality defined chiefly through property: “The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind.” This initial chapter of *Letters from an American Farmer*, then, adapts lyric models to a

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5 For more on the relationship of colonists to the London-Based scientific community and how botanical samples from the New World were exchanged as commodities see Susan Scott Parrish’s *American Curiosities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Ralph Bauer’s *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

proto-novelistic form in its initiation of James as narrator and representative American. Where traditionally the epic is the literary genre associated with narratives important to the history of a nation or people, Letters’ prose form, its decidedly non-epic structure, forces us to consider what Georg Lukacs in The Theory of the Novel calls its “historico-philosophical realities.” Its very existence as prose form already anticipates some of the aspects of national character the text promises to define.

We can, for instance, read the difference between the classic examples of lyric apostrophe above and Farmer James’s opening question, the fact that his words do not attempt the creation of a transcendental correspondence but a transatlantic one, as an adolescent modernity’s still hopeful view of a cosmic totality collapsing into the worldly contiguity of economic relationships. James’s letters are not yet exactly the “transcendental homelessness” Lukacs uses to describe the novels that follow Crevecoeur roughly a century later. Instead, James’s words above evidence what Max Weber calls “Luther’s Conception of the Calling,” a transformation of the traditional Catholic understanding of Beruf (vocation or calling) as a religious disavowal of the world into the mundane Protestant notion of calling: “The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon an individual

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8 Ibid, 41.  
9 The German *Beruf* illustrates more clearly for us Weber’s description of the transformation of the concept of a “calling” in a post-reformation world. *Beruf* with its root word *Ruf* (call or cry) parallels etymologically the English words *vocation* and *invocation*—each of these words has at its root the notion of a voice. It’s this relationship to the voice, the calling out, that makes lyric apostrophe both *vocation* and *invocation*. Contemporary German, however, uses the word *Beruf* interchangeably for *vocation*, profession, or career. Though the English *vocation* could be used as a synonym for profession, it still retains in standard usage the notion of a stronger spiritual calling to a person’s life work. For example, in German we could describe any medical doctor as having a *Beruf* (profession), but in English the choice to describe a medical doctor as having a *vocation* implies a special dedication to the field. *Vocation* in English still retains some notion of being divinely ordained for a specific role in a social or religious order.
by his position in the world. That was his calling.” This transformational notion of worldly duties as a fulfillment of religious obligations is according to Weber the underlying ethic that creates the spirit of capitalism, “the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself.” Seeing James’s opening line as a collapse of lyric invocation into Luther’s mundane and proto-capitalist calling begins an examination of what I contend is one of the implicit arguments of *Letters from an American Farmer*: poetry is excluded from the definition of American personality because it is at odds with the spirit of capitalism.

Both James our narrator and his minister, who James cites extensively in his letter, profess literary cultivation to be antithetical to American character for both economic and psychological reasons. Ultimately, however, the text critiques this rejection of literary cultivation as ethically dangerous for the national character. The text wages this critique of its character’s ideologies through its structural transpositions of lyric modes within the introductory letter. By establishing intertextual relationships between its own aesthetic presentation *Letters* places itself within a western literary tradition and questions its characters’ claims that America is in fact ‘a new past,’ and that its foundation upon a philosophy of possessive individualism precludes it from mirroring and repeating the violence of Europe’s feudal economy. The irony established through the presentational surface, one which firmly places its American narrator’s rejection of the past within a European poetic tradition, enables readers to proceed through the text aware of James’s blindness to the continuities between the colonists’ former ‘enslavement’ in a feudal system and their implementation of a slave economy in order to convert their own earlier oppression into a political self-mastery. The fact that this critique succeeds only through the

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11 Ibid, 51.
reader’s ability to identify the transformation and transposition of earlier European literary forms within *Letters* suggests that a consciousness of literary tradition is not the continuation of an oppressive aristocratic order, as James and his minister claim, but a means through which to establish a historical self-consciousness that serves as a viable mode of political self-critique.
What is American Cultivation?

“Who would have thought that because I received you with hospitality and kindness, you should imagine me capable of writing with propriety and perspicuity?...It is true I can describe our American modes of farming, our manners, and peculiar customs with some degree of propriety because I have ever attentively studied them; but my knowledge extends no farther.”
—Farmer James

Beginning with the text’s opening question we can read the entirety of James’s first letter as the process of being called to the vocation of writing, one that is not so much a literary enterprise, as an economic one. Through deliberating the pros and cons of entering into correspondence with Mr. F.B., James, his wife, and minister revise British intellectual cultivation as they understand it into an acceptable American model. From their discussion we can glean that this revision amounts to an amendment of a classical liberal education—what Martha Nussbaum calls the “higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship”12—into a curriculum for economic liberalism, suggesting an implicit reduction of the American farmer as defined by James to homo economicus. Until listening to the words of his wife and minister, James is unable to accept the idea of himself as a writer and it is only by the end of the letter that the text itself changes from consisting mostly of a transcription of the words of his wife and minister to the written meditations of James himself.13 Only once writing is figured as a means of developing real property rather than a sign of literary cultivation can James begin to produce the words of these letters himself with confidence. In this first letter the characters present

13 To highlight that much of the letter is transcribed, long sections of it are formatted as a script, where the speaker’s name precedes her actual words. For example, “MINISTER: I do not very well know…”
writing as an activity that holds the possibility of either metaphorical or real cultivation. They present us with a clear division of those parts of British culture that may be kept and those that must be rejected by the American farmer. This turning at times towards and at others away from English culture functions as a central trope throughout the entirety of the *Letters* and is signaled in the minister’s labeling of James’s writing practice as “conversation.” James’s conversation does not exemplify Enlightenment conversation as a means of exchange to develop an individual’s rational capacities, but rather conversation here becomes a peculiar rhetorical operation that highlights both the root word’s notion of turning and the text’s function as a kind of denuded lyric.

In looking at the epigraph above taken from the first paragraph of the first letter in Crevecoeur’s collection we can begin to read James’s own understanding of his limitations as a writer and thus his concerns about his own adequacy to represent the American farmer as a coherent political class to an English aristocrat. If we mine the rhetoric of this short passage we begin to see that the central concern of Letter I—the question of the farmer’s ability to write this text at all—emerges from Mr. F.B.’s confusion of two definitions of culture: the literal cultivation of land for agricultural and all that this might entail, and the metaphoric cultivation of one’s own intellectual abilities, represented here specifically as the ability to communicate one’s knowledge through writing. These two sentences, which appear to function simply as direct, everyday speech and shy away from any figurative uses, nevertheless utilize a vocabulary that begins to signify the complicated ways in which the literal and metaphorical definitions of cultivation compete to define Crevecoeur’s farmer as a representative American.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) *Letters* within the discipline of American Literature has often been understood as the first work of the national literature. Albert Stone, the editor of the Penguin edition which I have used as my source text, echoes this view in his introduction: “American literature, as the voice of our national consciousness, begins in 1782.
James’s opening implies that English conceptions of cultivation do not directly transfer to the American farmer. In these first sentences he interrogates the Englishman’s assumption that an American farmer is intellectually cultivated, i.e., must write well enough to engage in a literary correspondence, simply because he has the means of property to host a foreigner. Simply put, the former guest’s request for a written exchange, for James, emerges from a false proposition of sorts, a proposition that might read something like this: ‘If James the American farmer possesses the means to house me, then he must also possess the means to write well.’ James is apprehensive that Mr. F.B. assumes a level of education that James does not have, just because he owns a farm. Despite James’s discomfort with Mr. F.B.’s assumption, the formulation of the farmer’s question suggests the logic of the proposition. We learn through James’s locutions that intellectual cultivation is a form of property which emerges from the attainment of cultivated lands, another form of property. If one is wealthy enough to welcome a guest “with hospitality and kindness,” then one is wealthy enough to write “with propriety and perspicuity.” The etymologies on both sides of this equation conflate for us these two forms of culture. To be “hospitable” is literally to have a hospice, a piece of real estate, in which to offer someone shelter. To write “with propriety” is to write both with “correctness or purity of diction,” and to write as someone with “a landed property or estate.” This also suggests that as a man with an estate one’s

with the publication in England of Letters from an American Farmer.” (7) That the prestigious English publisher Davies & Davis initially printed the work and French publishers demanded a French edition from Crevecoeur shows, however, that not only Americans, but Europeans viewed the work as a portrait of the new nation. Crevecoeur’s text in the Post-World War II era was often taught at the high school and college level in abridged form. The chapter, “What is an American?” often anthologized as if it represented the ideology of the text as a whole, served to bolster Cold War patriotism with its declarations of American superiority: “Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, no great manufactures employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury.” (67)  


writing should demonstrate an “Appropriateness to circumstances or conditions; suitability, aptness, fitness” to one’s rank.

As James’s wife warns, “‘James, would’st thee pretend to send epistles to a great European man who hath lived abundance of time in that big house called Cambridge, where, they say, that worldly learning is so abundant that people get it only by breathing the air of the place?’” His wife’s words underline the fact that a man of property in England gets access to another “big house,” the one of the university, and that entrance (“breathing”) alone transforms his being. Here Lawrence Stone’s essay “The University,” helps us to understand exactly why Farmer James’s wife would express such anxiety about James corresponding with such an individual. As Stone notes, by the seventeenth century though “[p]lebians could acquire gentle status by a university education and a career in the church,” the more important role of the universities in England, was “[to give] the gentry a common educational experience [in order] to create a national elite which was both unified in outlook and culture and clearly distinguished from the rest of the nation.” Training in rhetoric and belles lettres in the eighteenth century marked this “national elite” as distinctly different from those belonging to other social ranks, and those unable to replicate the speech of the educated were often seen as outside of the life of the nation. As Olivia Smith argues, “What we might regard as different types or styles of language were discussed in the eighteenth century as if they were actually different languages…Arguments stressing that vulgar and refined English were the same language were invariably written by radical thinkers.” Smith’s statement implies that one’s own citizenship could be devalued or questioned on the basis of language. One’s linguistic abilities, in other words, decided whether one gained access to

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17 Crevecoeur, Letters 40.
certain economic and political spheres, or if one would be significantly disenfranchised in public life.

Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, which were published in 1783, illustrate the significant power linguistic ability had in determining class boundaries in the eighteenth century. The very fact that Blair’s lectures were given at the University of Edinburgh, where Blair was Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, begins to communicate what was at stake for an eighteenth-century individual in written and oral communication. In his introductory lecture Blair offers a defense of his discipline, first arguing the benefits of direct but eloquent rhetorical styles for those in the sciences and other fields requiring them to present and defend their knowledge in public. For our purposes here, however, it’s Blair’s second reason for the importance of his work:

In an age when works of genius and literature are so frequently the subjects of discourse, when every one erects himself into a judge, and when we can hardly mingle in polite society without bearing some share in such discussions; studies of this kind, it is not to be doubted, will appear to derive part of their importance from the use to which they may be applied in furnishing materials for those fashionable topics of discourse, and thereby enabling us to support a proper rank in social life.20

Here Blair is arguing not simply for correct and eloquent speech as a class marker, but also for the materials through which such educated speech should be displayed, a function that is chiefly social. By knowing “works of genius and literature” a person can enter into conversations that “support a proper rank”—that support one’s entrance and acceptance in “polite society.” Blair’s commentary shows us it’s not only the form of Farmer James’s speech, but the content that matters.

The comments James makes throughout the text about his own book learning and the education he believes his children should receive supports Lee Soltow and Edward

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Stevens’ research into literacy in eighteenth-century America. Until the era of the early republic, religious leaders were the chief advocates of literacy, believing that the ability to read scripture would underwrite morality and social cohesion. Even during the early republican era when many political and social leaders called upon classical republican conceptions of citizenry in their proposals for advancing national literacy, Protestant attitudes towards education dominated the cultural landscape. Though “[e]arly republican sentiments [] testif[ied] to the emergence of a civic-national model for literacy,” “a well-established Protestant tradition [was] shaping attitudes toward literacy and education,” so that few Americans would have understood Blair’s model of Belles Lettres as a model of education and literacy necessary for the citizenry of the new republic.

As Farmer James assesses the extent of his learning, we see that the only books he possesses were bequeathed to him by his father, whose father had brought them over from England, before the family began its life as freeholders in the American colonies, attesting to the fact that polite letters would not socially advance most individuals in the colonies:

My father left me a few musty books, which his father brought from England; but what help can I draw from a library consisting mostly of Scotch divinity, the Navigation of Sir Francis Drake, the History of Queen Elizabeth, and a few miscellaneous volumes? [italics in original]

This passage provides evidence of James’s anxiety about his own abilities to write well. That Farmer James voices a concern claiming his “knowledge extends no farther” than the boundary of his farm and the few books left him shows us that he is both well aware of the social codes of polite British society and also of his inability to fulfill such codes as an

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American farmer. He admits that he can “describe,”\(^{23}\) i.e., “write out of” his experiences, his “peculiar customs,”\(^ {24}\) those customs which relate to his “peculium,” his “private property,” but the development of his mind is defined by the limits of his experiences cultivating his property. He cannot “extend” his knowledge beyond his property line into those spheres of knowledge acquired through books. He, unlike the students of Hugh Blair, is not ready for “polite” company according to current British standards. Where Mr. F.B. assumes that owning a farm implies being educated, James lets us know that having a farm in fact prevents formal education, or, perhaps more accurately, makes it unnecessary. Instead, his farm functions as his sole object of study. For Mr. F.B. developing land leads to developing the mind in many possible directions, whereas for James cultivating land leads to cultivating one’s understanding of land cultivation.

If we return for a moment to the specific titles mentioned by James we see a different kind of evidence that will accrue significance as we proceed through the first letter. At one level, the function of this passage is to underline the difference in education between the American farmer and his British correspondent. That is, James wants to tell us that he is different from an Englishman in this specific American way. Yet, the titles his family retains, on the reign of Queen Elizabeth and the expeditions of Drake, i.e. the history of Britain’s imperial endeavors, underline that Farmer James’ American is still a British colony, albeit not for long. Drake and Queen Elizabeth as political figures, then, represent an economically transformational enterprise that ultimately led to the American possessive individualism praised by James throughout the Letters. The book titles begin to cue us to a verbal gesture


repeated by James throughout the text. Assertions that aim to emphasize an American break with a European past tend also to signify an economic continuity between the continents, calling into question both the claim that geographically America signifies modernity’s radical break and the notion of there being a radical historical break at all. For this reason James’s presentation of his books functions as an example of many paradoxical turns in his transatlantic “conversation”—what he uses to establish America’s separation from Britain and British culture inevitably reveals an American continuation of imperial practices.

James’s notion that literary cultivation is at odds with his economic circumstances seems to align itself with the historical accounts of the eighteenth-century’s emerging middle-class. James’s relationship to intellectual cultivation appears to be an accurate representation of the economic and cultural opportunities for a burgeoning colonial middle-class. The wife’s repeated warnings concerning culture mirror Adam Smith’s, for instance, who in *Wealth of Nations* labels professions related to literature and art as “the most frivolous.”

These professions for Smith include “men of letters of all kinds; players, buffoons, musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers, &c” and are dismissed by him because they are unable to produce surplus value for they result in “nothing which afterwards purchases or procures an equal quantity of labour.” For Smith these professions are economically unviable because by nature they are limited in their material existence to the fleeting moment of performance and thus can never exist as either commodities, or capital: “Like the declamation of the actor, the harangue of the orator, or the tune of the musician, the work of all of them perishes in the very instant of its production.”

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26 Ibid, 331.
27 Ibid, 331.
28 Ibid, 331.
Practically speaking, Smith’s argument held true in America more so than in England. As Kulikoff notes, “during the last half of the eighteenth century, between two-thirds and three quarters of householders [in America] were freeholders…a far greater proportion than in England.”

Roy Porter’s description of culture as commodity in eighteenth-century England, however, suggests that the literary profession, i.e. metaphorical cultivation, did offer an English middle-class economic opportunities. Porter’s citation of Defoe’s portrayal of commercial publishing from 1725 underlines the fact that England’s culture industry offered men of letters a means of professionalization within a commercial industry:

…writing is become a very considerable part of the English commerce. The booksellers are the master manufacturers or employers. The several writers, authors, copyers, subwriters, and all other operators with pen and ink are the workmen employed by the said manufacturers.

The historical evidence, then, signals the economic impracticality of developing literary cultivation in America. A burgeoning culture industry with the literary public sphere at its center may have offered James’s English counterparts an economic incentive to acquire a literary education, one that would have been impractical in the industrially underdeveloped colonies. Where in England agricultural cultivation became a less reliable means of economic support, in America, even if the possibility for land ownership, as some recent scholarship suggests, was exaggerated, agriculture still provided a reliable source of income. These material facts would seem enough to explain James’s portrayal of literary culture as alien to the American farmer.

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Once we begin to examine the wife’s and minister’s statements carefully, a more nuanced stance towards intellectual development comes forth, one that rejects what we would call the humanities, but does accept the study of natural sciences as a legitimate intellectual pursuit. A suspicion towards those fields of study that involve musing upon the past emerges through a discussion of Mr. F.B.’s Grand Tour. James’s wife suggests a kind of decadence in Mr. F.B. when she notes that he “never felled a tree” but has been “to the city of Rome itself...the factory of brimstone at ‘Suvius and town of Pompeii underground...to Paris, to the Alps, to Petersburg,” but it’s James’s minister who is most critical of the Grand Tour. His initial commentary judges the preoccupation of wealthy travelers with the historical past as a useless exercise of both financial and intellectual resources, but ultimately betrays a desire to dismantle the origin narrative of the aristocracy:

I fancy their object is to trace the vestiges of a once-flourishing people now extinct. There they amuse themselves in viewing the ruins of temples and other buildings which have very little affinity with those of the present age and must therefore impart a knowledge which appears useless and trifling.

The minister dismisses the Grand Tour as a “useless” intellectual exercise because of its historical nature. The sites visited on the tour refer to a past, a “people now extinct,” supposedly bearing no direct connection with “the present age.” This attitude we can interpret as a kind of practicality on the part of the minister, a judgment on the activities of a privileged class in the Old World by a man whose economic position in the present does not permit the luxury of contemplating the past simply for educational purposes. We can assume, then, when he uses the word “amuse” here that it carries all of its etymological

32 Crevecoeur, Letters, 40.
33 Ibid, 42.
weight, a “stupid staring,” a “gaping,” an “idle loafing” done by rich young men as they tour ancient sites. When he deems this activity “trifling,” again, the roots of that word, “deceptive” and “laughable,” deepen the minister’s claims for us, as if he were speaking more directly to the reader: ‘Look at those young men, deceiving themselves into believing they are learning something as they stare at those ruins that have nothing to do with the world we live in today.’

We can also read the minister’s critique of the Grand Tour as a challenge to the preservation of the aristocratic class itself. If one of the chief functions of the Grand Tour is to produce a conception of European history through which the genteel English tourist can see himself as the inheritor of a valorized past, then such a tour serves chiefly as a means of self-identification for an aristocratic class. As William Edward Mead notes, by the eighteenth century the Grand Tour was a necessary practice for Englishmen of a certain class: “A man in such a circle who had not seen Paris, to say nothing of The Hague, the Rhine, and, above all, Venice and Florence and Rome, could not aspire to be a leader of fashionable society. Something provincial, some lack of savoir-faire, would inevitably betray him.” In other words, what began more than a century earlier as a mandatory practice for a young gentleman to understand the development of a western culture that resulted in his own privileged position in the world, by the eighteenth century functioned more or less as a required but empty cipher of membership in a particular privileged social class. The minister’s suspicion of the Grand Tour and its preservation of the past for these reasons carries with it a class-based resentment. His desire to dismiss such touring suggests that the

minister might be what historian Isaac Kramnick calls the “radical bourgeoisie,” those members of an eighteenth-century burgeoning “middle class, [for whom] the mystery and awe of ancient institutions and ancient ideas were part of the barbaric feudal past.” The minister’s use of the word “affinity” foregrounds this class critique and the role that tradition has played in securing property for a class from which the minister and the farmer have been excluded. “Affinity,” which literally means a “relationship by marriage,” makes a subtle allusion to the traditional aristocratic practice of securing and increasing property through marriage, so that when the minister denies an “affinity” between the ruins and the present, he attempts to assert the idea that the past has little bearing on his own ability to accumulate property. Denying the validity of the past’s connection to the present is a gesture towards writing a new present into existence by questioning the need to preserve the very social class that emerges and benefits from the preservation of a certain understanding of history.

But the minister’s words also have a direct bearing on our examination of the kind of intellectual cultivation that is suited to the American character. The past for the minister holds no ties to the present, and associatively, contemplation and all things produced from such “amusement” for him is “useless.” Implicit here is a rejection of the aesthetic realm for its proto-Kantian definition of such cognitive activity as a purposeful purposelessness. The minister wants to reject the ‘muses’ for the purposelessness of the knowledge they produce. For the aristocrat the amusements of Italy lead to contemplation, where memory serves musing and all those things inspired by it: poetry, architecture, the liberal arts in general. If memory is mother to the muses, then the past produces through contemplation something we might call a humanist tradition, a body of artifacts, literary or otherwise, which connect

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everything in the present to a past. The minister’s dismissal of the contemplative practice
induced by the Grand Tour, and by implication the humanities, is a rejection of birth rights
for natural rights, at the expense of cultural tradition. Through the minister’s commentary
we can travel a subtle route to liberalism’s dismissal of literary production and the liberal arts
in general. If the minister took seriously the question implied in Lamb’s comment to
Coleridge, “Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with tales and old
wives’ fables in childhood, you had been crammed with geography and natural history! ,” no
doubt he would answer, “a productive member of society, rather than a loafing poet.” For
this reason, the aristocrat’s heritage that functions as his main claim to power is for the
minister false and deceptive. Like James who creates a break between the books he inherited
and his identity as an American farmer, the minister disassociates himself from Europe’s
cultural past.

A passage from Letter II presents us with the significance of both James’s and the
minister’s need to break from the past through the denial of the importance of cultural
objects. In a kind of revision of his earlier description of his educational inheritance
discussed above, James communicates that the most significant marker of his heritage was
no cultural object or education, but the farm itself:

He left me no good books, it is true; he gave me no other education than the art of
reading and writing; but he left me a good farm and his experience; he left me free
from debts, and no kind of difficulties to struggle with….My father left me three
hundred and seventy-one acres of land…

This passage gives us a curious piece of information. We are forced to consider what reading
and writing might mean for a man who has “no good books.” What kind of writer is James
expected to be, if his father over the course of one generation has altered the inheritance

39 Lamb quoted in Isaac Kramnick, Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism, 126.
40 Crevecoeur, Letters, 52.
from a few volumes of “musty” texts to “three hundred and seventy-one acres of land”? If we return to Letter I, James’s wife offers us an alternative definition of writing not related to imaginative literature, but rather to the production of wealth. The writing of certain wealthy Englishmen for James’s wife has nothing to do with memory or the muses or any kind of literary cultivation, but rather marks them as men who do not earn their living through real labor but instead through trade and capital investment:

These Englishmen are strange people; because they can live upon what they call bank notes, without working, they think that all the world can do the same…And now I think on it, when wilt thee send him those trees he bespoke? But if they have no trees to cut down, they have gold in abundance, they say; for they rake it and scrape it from all parts far and near. I have often heard my grandfather tell how they live there by writing. By writing they send this cargo unto us, that to the West, and the other to the East Indies. But James thee knowest that it is not by writing that we shall pay the blacksmith, the minister, the weaver, the tailor, and the English shop.41

What is significant about this passage is the way the wife’s language both differentiates James’s economic position from that of the Englishmen but also implicates him within a colonial system of exchange of which she appears distrustful precisely because it is not founded upon a labor theory of value. For the wife writing is decidedly part of an English imaginary act of a non-literary kind: the seemingly magical accrual of surplus value produced through capital—a wealth earned not through real work but through the symbolic exchange of “bank notes.” She warns James that his epistolary writing would fall on the wrong side of the cultivation line. Because his writing is not the writing of bank notes, she fears it to be a detrimental leisure activity that would take James away from the real labor he must do in order to sustain the farm. Where James must clear real “trees” in order for his property to function primarily as a source of subsistence for him and his family, the Englishmen perform a symbolic labor of “raking” and “scraping” gold into a global network of exchange.

41 Crevecoeur, Letters, 48-49.
that also involves earning a profit on James. The Englishmen bring in gold from the colonial periphery back to England where they presumably trade this gold for goods which they then export back to the colonies. His wife warns James that his writing is not capable of paying the family’s debts at “the English shop,” the place where James is able to purchase those goods that he and his family are incapable of producing themselves. Her words show us that prior to entering into this correspondence, James already existed within the economic cycle of the Englishmen as a consumer in the colonial store, but in a relatively powerless position, since his money was earned through his own labor and not through the accrual of capital.

But if we return now to the image of the tree, we see that once James enters into correspondence with an Englishman, the tree that at first represented the real labor that James must perform on his farm has accrued an exchange value here through the possibility of writerly exchange. In an aside that interrupts her speech (“And now I think on it, when wilt thee send him those trees he bespoke?”), the wife seemingly inadvertently communicates the existence of a trade agreement between James and Mr. F.B. As a botanical sample wanted by Mr. F.B., a natural scientist, the raw material of James’s farm, an uncultivated tree, has an exchange value that brings James into a more economically empowered position within the colonial network of exchange. If we now return to James’s opening question, we see that it is actually quite logical for Mr. F.B. to assume that because James owns a farm he must also be capable of writing. Though James says he will only “describe our American modes of farming, our manners, and peculiar customs,” the very fact of his owning a parcel of land outright enables him to become a purveyor of goods. The exchange of letters and a botanical sample is the entrance into a system where James

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42 Ibid, 49.
theoretically speaking has the possibility of accruing enough capital to one day write his own bank notes.

The wife’s revision of writing into an act of finance capitalism functions as the first step in the letter’s attempt to split the traditional liberal arts, the marker of freemen and men of leisure, into one domain for those studies that relate to natural science and economics and another for the humanities. We will see below that this split is made according to whether a field bears the potential of developing the material present and future or if it functions as a means of preserving a historical past. To emphasize the fact that the colonial ideology does not reject learnedness wholesale, but specifically a humanist tradition, we must return to the minister, who, immediately following his rejection of the Grand Tour, discusses how the farmers of the colonies might themselves benefit from the arrival of learned scientists from England and the continent:

As it is from the surface of the ground which we till that we have gathered the wealth we possess, the surface of that ground is therefore the only thing that has hitherto been known. It will require the industry of subsequent ages, the energy of future generations, ere mankind here will have leisure and abilities to penetrate deep and in the bowels of this continent search for the subterranean riches it no doubt contains. Neighbour James, we want much the assistance of men of leisure and knowledge; we want eminent chemists to inform our iron masters, to teach us how to make and prepare most of the colours we use.43

Here the minister sets out for us a developmental strategy for the colonies. Unlike the words of Farmer James that often seem to espouse a labor theory of value intended to secure the independence of the farmer, the minister’s vision for the “ages,” demands diligence and toil on the part of the colonists in order that eventually the “future generations” will, like the current English aristocracy, possess “leisure and abilities,” i.e. capital and advanced education, so that they may develop new scientific means to extract and capitalize on the resources available to them through their land. The leisure the minister envisions allows for

43 Ibid, 44.
breaking the surface of the ground “to penetrate deep and in the bowels” of the property the colonists already possess. Such leisure is therefore about building capital, “raking gold” like the Englishmen of the present, and thus forces us to revise our understanding of the American farmer’s attitude towards education. It is not that all education represents a kind of aristocratic decadence, but rather, because the American freeholder has not yet reached the same level of leisure as the Englishmen, an American education should be used as an opportunity to acquire such wealth and ensure the accumulation of capital in the future. The minister understands the liberal American project as one in which a new industrious middle class of people seeks, to paraphrase Isaac Kramnick, not equality but fairness.\textsuperscript{44} It is not that a proponent of liberalism, like the minister, understands a leisure class to be morally reprehensible in a world, where an underclass is necessary in order to create the accumulation of capital that sustains such leisure, but rather that a liberal like the minister believes in a “morally acceptable inequality,” one based on “talent and merit” rather than “aristocratic privilege.”\textsuperscript{45} By piquing the “curiosity” of natural scientists through the wonders of the New World, by entering into a correspondence with Mr. F.B. the minister hopes that James can speed this process of development along by exploiting the leisure of the aristocracy to their own advantage. The minister’s wish for an “eminent chemist” in order to help extract “subterranean riches” helps us understand the economic system at work in the minister’s imagination. Here his earlier use of the word “affinity” with its implications in the field of chemistry attains more meaning. He would like the aristocrat to break his affinities with his own class and instead help the American farmer through his knowledge of chemistry create affinities to a learned class in order to develop his own capital.

\textsuperscript{44} Kramnick, \textit{Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism}, 15.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 14.
His wish for a learned aristocrat “to teach us how to make and prepare...colours” moves figuratively in several directions, alluding both to the search for gold or other valuable minerals and to a heraldic flag. “Colours” as an allusion to precious metals of some sort suggests a future transition to the economy of the colonies. If, as Locke states, “in the beginning, all the world was America...for no such thing as money was anywhere known,” and as the minister agrees, America is the new beginning, the aim here again is not to keep this purer economy, where men take possession of property only according to need, rather than accumulating wealth through capital investment, but to eventually introduce “colours,” of gold or silver as currency. These “colours” of gold and silver will also eventually lead to aristocratic “colours.” To lure a leisured and learned man of science to the colonies provides the possibility of democratizing aristocracy itself, of attaining heraldic colours for one’s family through accumulation of a symbolic currency.

In this opening letter James, then, with the help of words from his wife and minister, takes pains to define for us both the terms of American intellectual cultivation and two different understandings of British intellectual cultivation. Splitting what traditionally were called the liberal arts into two separate categories of learning, James, his wife, and his minister seek to benefit from Mr. F.B.’s knowledge as a natural scientist, but reject his education in literature, the arts, and history as the continuation of an oppressive feudal order. As will become clear below, the Americans privilege those aspects of Mr. F.B.’s education that enable them to capitalize the value of their land, but feel threatened by those fields that we would call the humanities, for the humanities offer a means of understanding the present as continuous with a historical past. From James’s discussion we can extrapolate a new kind of American curriculum developing in this letter, changing the liberal arts into

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something we might call liberalism’s arts, a pragmatic curriculum focusing on developing knowledge in those areas of study that could lead directly to the farmer’s economic well-being through the development of his real property. Once James’s letter disassociates writing itself from any kind of literary or imaginative activity, but instead, like the letters themselves, connects it to a series of economic activities central to the implementation of an imperial system of trade, he quickly is able to abandon the words of his wife and minister and write for himself. The American farmer can write as soon as the writing is an economic rather than an aesthetic activity.
The Transformation of James into A Writer

“MINISTER: You can write full as well as you need, and would improve very fast...It is good for American farmers to have friends even in England. What he requires of you is but simple—what we speak out among ourselves we call conversation, and a letter is only conversation put down in black and whites.”

(italics mine)

I began this essay by positing James’s opening question as an example of lyric apostrophe that has collapsed into what Max Weber calls Luther’s calling. Beginning a discussion of the rhetorical aspects of the text as formal registers of a socio-historical situation enables us to understand the political significance of the divisions that James and the other characters in the opening letter make between British and American culture. As long as writing is associated with the aesthetic realm of literature, James, as the exemplary American Farmer, cannot bring himself to enter into a vocation of writing. Only after the wife and the minister refigure writing into a “worldly duty” of capitalist expansion does James take up the call of written correspondence. In other words, only after it is clear that the musing required to produce an epistolary correspondence with Mr. F.B. does not constitute James into a lyric poet, but into a budding capitalist, can he accept his role as a writer.

Curiously, as a final gesture of encouragement to James, once writing is fully understood to be solely an economically motivated activity, the Minister offers James a generic ascription for the writing he produces. As the above citation shows, he encourages James to understand his writing as conversation. The word choice is crucial for it maintains an etymological connection to lyric production through its root word, versus, but underlines that the verse of James operates upon a horizontal axis, turning back and forth, towards and away from England. The maintaining of a relationship to lyric production through this word

\[47\] Crevecoeur, Letters, 44.
choice highlights for the reader that the *amusement or musing* dismissed earlier by the minister in his criticism of the Grand Tour can be provisionally accepted as an aspect of American character so long as it relates to activities associated with the development of material wealth. *Conversation* as a self-imposed literary genre for James maintains a strong association with his real property. It allows him to imagine his correspondence as a continuation of the spoken words he had already exchanged with Mr. F.B. under his roof. *Conversation* thus continues Mr. F.B.’s crucial assumption about the connection between *hospitality* and writing, something the minister encourages when he asks James to “imagine…Mr. F.B. is still here…Suppose the questions he will put to you…to be asked by his viva-voce.”

By domesticating the writing to the limits of his farmhouse parlor, the minister permits James a kind of lyric imagination in which Mr. F.B. calls to him “viva-voce” not from the heavens of Homer’s muses, but from a farmhouse armchair. Fittingly, the minister figures James’s writing style as a kind of parlor activity, where James handles the tool of the writer’s trade with ease, as if the establishment of an economically productive correspondence has already admitted James into the leisure of another class: “you love description, and your pencil…is not a bad one for the pencil of a farmer; it seems to be held without any labour.”

The transformation of writing into the cultivation of real property further enables the minister to imagine the possible roughness of James’s writing not as a marker of his lack of education, but as an distinctly American aesthetic: “perhaps you will be a more entertaining [correspondent] dressed in your simple American garb than if you were clad in all the gowns of Cambridge. You will appear to him something like one of our wild American plants, irregularly luxuriant in its various branches…” Here, the American farmer

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48 Ibid, 41.
49 Ibid, 46.
50 Ibid, 46.
is likened to a plant, an uncultivated one, the type requested by Mr. F.B. for his scientific studies, conflating the correspondence with the commodity Mr. F.B. desires to acquire from James. The comparison suggests that the uncultivated style of James’s writing through its exotic “luxury” will not be a mark of James’s poverty, but will underline Mr. F.B.’s material wealth through its exoticism. The minister continues and extends the tree comparison to suggest that Mr. F.B. must be bored of the writing he receives from cultivated Europeans: “Were I in Europe, I should be tired with perpetually seeing espaliers, plashed hedges, and trees dwarfed into pygmies.” Here James’s writing then becomes an aesthetic alternative to a style that figures the repressive order of eighteenth-century British landscape aesthetics and all the social and economic exclusions it signified in the century of enclosure and improvements. The “espaliers” and the “trees dwarfed” have had their natural life forces, their “exuberance” thwarted and directed in order to ornament the properties of the rich, while the “plashed hedges” have sealed off the commons. But of course we have fallen into a series of the Minister’s comparisons here and must remember that this “wild” American plant under discussion is not a plant, but James in “simple American garb.” And what the minister is calling James’s garb is actually his writing style. James’s style of writing is then “simple,” “exuberant,” “wild,” “fertile,” and “irregular,” while the European writing is ornate, thwarted, and regulated. James’s writing through its commodification becomes an aesthetic, a marker of American literary cultivation. Writing can only be refigured as an aesthetic by the Americans, if it can function as a commodity that serves as a means of entry into a British colonial system of exchange.

With the figuration of writing as a sign of economic cultivation, farm labor itself is reinscribed as a leisure activity conducive to imaginative musing. Earlier the American

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51 Ibid, 46.
speakers frequently used ‘the felling of trees’ as a phrase to signify their real labor as property owners in contrast to the learned activities of an English leisure class sustaining itself via capital investments. Now that James has agreed to enter into a conversation with Mr. F.B. plowing as an activity becomes synonymous with the culture and aesthetics of independence and leisure criticized via the Minister’s discussion of the Grand Tour. In a curious gesture, the minister offers plowing as a means of instigating the kind of musing that results in literary production. He offers his own method of composing sermons as a model for James’s writing:

I have composed many a good sermon as I followed my plough. The eyes not being then engaged on any particular object leaves the mind free for the introduction of many useful ideas…it is as we silently till the ground and muse along the odoriferous furrows of our lowlands, uninterrupted either by stones or stumps it is there that the salubrious effluvia of the earth animate our spirits and serve to inspire us; every other avocation of our farms are severe labours compared to this pleasing occupation: of all the tasks which mine imposes upon me, ploughing is the most agreeable because I can think as I work; my mind is at leisure; my labour flows from instinct…

Here plowing permits the minister to “muse” and aids him through its sense of “leisure” to keep “the mind free” and “compose[] many a good sermon.” The free-play of the mind described by the minister signals once again a kind of proto-Kantian aesthetic experience, creating a link between literary production and its ‘musing’ with religious vocation, not unlike the invocation of the transcendental sphere performed through lyric apostrophe. Importantly, the minister describes the other work of farmers as “avocation”—those activities that distract the minister from the real spiritual work that gives his earthly life meaning. This passage in isolation would serve as an example against a Weberian interpretation of James and his community. Given that the minister presents his way of composing sermons as a model for James in writing his letters, however, the passage

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52 Ibid, 47.
conflates these spiritual sermons with the mundane and self-interested aspirations of the letters, evidencing the collapse of spiritual life into material existence. The fact that James has called his minister in for counseling at all in this worldly matter and that the minister has been the character most able to imagine and articulate the economic benefits for American farmers of entering into Britain’s economic network again underlines that the world in *Letters* has abandoned vocation in a traditional sense in favor of economic concerns. It’s no surprise, then, after the minister’s encouragement, that James describes his own plowing as an imperial act: “The father thus ploughing with his child, and to feed his family, is inferior only to the emperor of China ploughing as an example to his kingdom.” Here we might imagine, given the economic hopes placed upon James’s entrance into *conversation*, that the father plowing with his child as a literary image is a commodity in itself. As a self-portrayal within the correspondence the image functions within a circle of transatlantic trade, an emblematic package of an American belief in the value of labor exported by James for consumption by the Englishman. The literary image of the American farmer functions as an exotic specimen as easily traded within an imperial economic network as the exotic botanical samples requested by Mr. F.B. For this reason, the very request for a self-portrayal makes it possible for the American farmer to appear as the “emperor of China” in miniature.

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53 Ibid, 55.
An American Georgic

Above I have argued that the opening epistle of *Letters from an American Farmer* presents literary cultivation as antithetical to American personality. I have also attempted to show that writing can only be accepted as an aesthetic practice by James if such a literary endeavor develops into a viable commodity form suited for trade within a colonial system. In order to make the next point of my argument—that the text ultimately critiques such a rejection of literary cultivation except for economic gain as politically and ethically dangerous—I must ask us to reexamine more carefully the minister’s speech criticizing the Grand Tour. My claim here is that Crevecoeur creates intertextual relationships within the minister’s speech that remain invisible within the diegetic space of the text and thus by definition illegible to both the minister and James. Given that the minister’s speech against European cultural tradition is laden with references to the classical and Augustan tradition of georgic poetry, the speech functions as an argument against itself by way of irony. For the reader to whom these references are legible, it is as if the characters are unable to read their own words through a self-imposed cultural blindness. Thus the intertextual relationships empower the reader in this inaugural chapter and warn her that she finds herself within a text where the speakers willfully choose to ignore, or as implied in the term *conversation*, to turn to or away from certain socio-historical realities. She becomes attuned to the kind of reading practice necessary to navigate the *Letters* and continues with the knowledge that a fair reading of the text demands an awareness both of those things acknowledged and ignored by the narrator.

Before I begin my discussion of the passage itself, it will be useful for us here to rehearse a short history of the georgic genre itself because it provides us with a greater
means of interpreting the socio-historical significance of Crevecoeur’s references. Over the past decade critics within American Studies have applied the term georgic to texts dealing with the use of land for agricultural production. This loose use of the term has enabled scholars, most notably Timothy Sweet, to trace a history of American ecological attitudes beginning with the colonial period, but we must remind ourselves that this label has been assigned to such texts with twenty-first century critical hindsight and does not necessarily express the original author’s own awareness of his or her participation in a georgic tradition. Though Crevecoeur’s text is often discussed with this distinctly Americanist understanding of the georgic in mind, the allusions to georgic poetry in Letters from an American Farmer self-consciously reference an eighteenth-century English literary tradition, one that would have been known to any well-read English speaker on either side of the Atlantic, but remains elusive to most twenty-first century readers.

The popularity of the georgic as a poetic form in the long-eighteenth century stemmed from the late-seventeenth century translation of Virgil’s Georgics by John Dryden, which spawned English imitations and a general interest in the classical form. Kevis Goodman in her recent study on the georgic also shows that as a mode, what she defines as “a rhizomatic underpressance,”54 rather than a full-fledged genre, the georgic influenced literary production through the Romantic period. Though not the earliest example, Virgil’s Georgics is arguably the genre’s most famous and influential one. His text written between 37-30 B.C. as a didactic poem in four parts both offers practical prescriptive advice for cultivation (“when to plant, how to test the soil, how to graft, what to do about sheep-scab,

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how to deal with a swarm of bees”)\textsuperscript{55} and portrays farming as a virtuous labor foundational to securing civic stability and peace. Chalker notes the political motivation behind Virgil’s text and the importance of the relationship between peace and agricultural development for Virgil: “[t]he poem is a response to the national and political situation of Rome in the period from the death of Julius Caesar to the Battle of Actium and it is prophetic of the Augustan peace…an ideal as yet unrealized.”\textsuperscript{56} Certainly this political function of the georgic would have resonated with Crevecoeur as he attempted to portray the small-scale farmer as an exemplary American character. James as narrator makes an argument for the civilizing effect of independent farming throughout \textit{Letters}. In “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” he argues for instance that farming keeps his family from adopting the seemingly more primitive Indian hunter-gather social formation—something into which the frontier settlers are at risk of devolving because they must survive by hunting: “As long as we keep ourselves busy in tilling the earth, there is no fear of any of us becoming wild; it is the chase and the food it procures that have this strange effect.”\textsuperscript{57} Likewise, the plantation owners threaten the development of modern civilization with their aristocratic-like decadence and reliance on “poor slaves, from whose painful labours all their wealth proceeds.”\textsuperscript{58} As a representative of a middling class the independent freeholder moderates what James sees as the underdevelopment of the frontier and the decadent, overdevelopment of quasi-aristocratic plantation life. James’s view of the socio-political benefits of the farmer we might say is a

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Crevecoeur, \textit{Letters}, 220.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 168. James throughout the text ignores or underplays his own use of slave on his farm. My contention ultimately is that his inability “to read” his own participation in a slave economy is the result of his rejection of literary culture, for the rejection of literary culture is ultimately a rejection of a historical consciousness. I develop this point more explicitly below in my reading of “On Charles Town and Slavery.”
Virgilian view of the virtuous farmer adapted to modernity’s middle-class philosophy of possessive individualism.

The tension between agricultural and literary cultivation that I have been arguing as central to understanding *Letters* has traditionally been an overt feature of georgic poetry. A key characteristic of Virgil’s *Georgics* specifically is its discussion of “the nature and function of poetry itself,” “the relationship between literature and public life, poet and statesman,”\(^{59}\) i.e., the relationship of literary to national character. Also, in classical and Augustan georgic verse the artifice often demands a kind of literary cultivation seemingly at odds with the poetry’s agricultural subject matter. Kevis Goodman by stressing the importance of “Virgil’s generative pun” on *versus* for it refers to “both the furrows of the field and the lines of verse on the page,”\(^ {60}\) emphasizes that georgic verse has always taken both poetry and farming as its subject matter. And critics as early as Addison have noticed that Virgil’s *Georgics* are just as much about the labor of poetry as the labor of farming. Addison specifically notes the class issues implicit in the poet’s labor of transforming farming into material adequate for poetry: “Similarly, the ‘low phrases and terms of art that are adapted to husbandry’ must be banished and more elevated circumlocutions sought out. These will give the verse ‘greater pomp and preserve it from sinking into the plebian style.’”\(^ {61}\) Goodman describes how the *Georgics* themselves required a different kind of cultivation than the one they describe. Loaded with allusions to previous classical works and displaying “a glittering verbal teckne” the *Georgics* “were understood by the linguistically self-conscious seventeenth century to…stimulat[e] a work of reading that was not assumed to be the same as the work it described.”\(^ {62}\) Though

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\(^{62}\) Ibid, 21.
Letters appears in prose and attempts to imitate the speech patterns of a farmer, to some degree Crevecoeur continues this feature of the traditional form, albeit in a less ostentatious manner, through extensive intertextual relationships, alluding to

My point here is not to argue for labeling Letters a georgic poem in prose, but to uncover the georgic strains at work within the initial letter and their implications in understanding the work as a whole. In recent years there have been many useful studies showing the many eighteenth-century genres employed within Letters. Crevecoeur does not give any of these literary genres primacy in his composition, but rather deploys them on an as-needed basis within his complex political allegory. It seems that rather than argue for the primacy of one generic form or another within the text, it is more useful for scholars to simply identify the different generic strains at work within the text, for only by identifying the codes of the genres are we able to begin the task of interpretation.


Despite expounding on the georgic influences within the text, I am not arguing for the georgic as a generic ascription for Letters as a whole. Rather, I agree with David Carlson that it is a political allegory, albeit one that deploys the strategies of many eighteenth-century genres on an as-needed-basis.
Virgilian Turns

“Here everything would inspire the reflecting traveler with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement… there the half-ruined amphitheatres and the putrid fevers of the Campania must fill the mind with the most melancholy reflections whilst he is seeking for the origin and the intention of those structures with which he is surrounded and for the cause of so great a decay. Here he might contemplate the very beginnings and outlines of human society, which can be traced nowhere now but in this part of the world…”
—The Minister

“A time shall come when in those lands, as the farmer toils at the soil with crooked plough, he shall find javelins eaten up with rusty mould, or with heavy hoe shall strike on empty helms, and marvel at the giant bones in the upturned graves.”
—Virgil

In the opening sections of this essay I have shown that James, his wife, and minister reject those areas of a liberal education that perpetuate a consciousness of a European historical past, for such studies, according to their logic, aid in continuing aristocratic dominance of political economy. As the above quote from the minister’s speech against the Grand Tour shows, this rejection of feudalism’s brutality is not staged through a rational critique of historical facts, but through the outright denial of the past’s existence. The minister attempts to diminish the influence of history through a kind of rhetorical geographic erasure. The new world of the American colonies is staged as a new past, “the very beginnings and outlines of human society,” a falsehood made possible by the lack of material reminders, the ruins, seen “there,” back in Europe, but not “here.”

Kevis Goodman identifies an image that stages a similar problem of history at the end of Virgil’s first Georgic, one she calls the “representative anecdote for the pervasive
georgic influence in eighteenth-century poetry.” In singling out this image she begins a persuasive argument that georgics aren’t poems about farming, but poems that deal with the difficulty of understanding history, and the appearance of history in the form of either material fact or cultural artifact. Virgil’s tableaux presents the difficulty of encountering the material fact as history as his speaker imagines a farmer in a distant future turning up the ruins of Rome’s violent present as the incomprehensible markers of the past. But the complex temporality of this emblematic moment, the present imagined as a past in the future, implicates the lines of verse themselves through the pun on versus, making the central issue for Goodman “not that the plough or the pen buries what should be disclosed,” but rather that it stages “the difficulty of recognizing the historical meanings of what does get turned up, not under, by their lines.” In other words, implicit in Virgil’s image is that the poem itself could one day pose for its reader the same difficulty that the ruins posed for his farmer. Given its preoccupation with traumatic history and its role in the ordering of the present, the georgic tradition offers Crevecoeur a rich vocabulary with which to take up the portrayal of what he sees as a middle-class colonial desire to limit and control the influence of history by rejecting cultural traditions.

It’s not surprising, then, that we see a transposition of Virgil’s central image in Letters. Where in Virgil’s poetry history operates along a vertical axis of the plow’s turning over and under, in Letters the prose transforms it to the horizontal axis of “here” and “there,” as if translating history from the metaphorical genre of poetry to the metonymic form of prose rendered the zeitgeist into a spatial reality capable of being left behind. This transformation of the traditionally vertical axis into a horizontal also once again underlines that the purpose

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66 Ibid, 1.
67 Ibid, 1.
of the symbolic arena of the text within the diegetic space of the narrative is ultimately an economic one. Where Virgil places his farmer within a field, unable to make sense of the casualties of the past, the minister imagines himself able to create a new past in the present by circumnavigating such fields of vision, an empiricist’s denial: ‘It didn’t happen, if I can’t see it.’ Here, we might think again of James’s opening claim that his “knowledge” does not “extend” beyond his farm. Such blindness suggests that James, the minister, and his wife remain “strangers to those feudal institutions which have enslaved so many,” but, as Crevecoeur will soon show us in his chapter on Charles Town, such blindness to the “enslaved” past has the strange effect of extending into the present. As the reader carries the reverberations of the minister’s speech with her through the text, she sees the faultiness of the minister’s strategy. The irony in the minister’s speech will soon suggest that those traumas buried with the past will also be denied when they are perpetrated in the present.

Though the ruins in these two passages by Virgil and Crevecoeur echo against one another, Crevecoeur more obviously links his passage to the *Georgics* by infusing the minister’s speech with a Virgilian geography. As the minister delves deeper into his assessment of the aristocratic practice, he reduces the terrain of the journey to include only sites emblematic of the Roman empire, referring both generally to “half-ruined amphitheaters” and to the specific southern Italian region of “the Campania,” where Virgil lived and wrote the *Georgics*. Though Englishmen on the Grand Tour in the latter half of the eighteenth century may have traveled to the city of Naples in the Campania in order to see the newly-discovered archeological sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii (James’s wife has already mentioned Mr. F.B.’s visit to Pompei) the minister’s choice of “the Campania” to describe the region rather than the cities’ actual names would easily have signaled the life of Virgil to any educated eighteenth-century reader. Similarly, by choosing to name “the temple
of Ceres” rather than other more famous sites in Italy, ones which travelers would have been more likely to visit, Crevecoeur elects instead to reference the Roman goddess of agriculture, whose invocation was one of the hallmarks of the poetic genre instituted by Virgil and carried on by his eighteenth-century British imitators, Crevecoeur’s contemporaries.\(^{68}\) Recognizing the minister’s references as literary rather than geographical sabotages the purported function of the speech itself. Instead of functioning as a convincing piece of rhetoric against the need to preserve cultural sites, the passage begins to function on an extra-diegetic level linking the work directly to a western literary movement, both classical and contemporary.

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\(^{68}\) For instance in “Windsor Forest” Pope writes “Here Ceres’ gifts in waving prospect stand, And nodding tempt the joyful reaper’s hand.” (l. 39) and Thomson in “The Seasons,” “…what their balmy meads/ Their powerful herbs and Ceres void of pain?” (l. 863)
Turning “There” to “Here”

Earlier I had discussed the rejection of European culture by the American farmer as simply motivated by economics, and though here above I have to some degree utilized a vocabulary of psychology (trauma, denial, etc.) to describe aspects of the minister’s speech, I have yet to discuss at any length the rhetoric of affect presented within this passage and the implied relationship of such discourse to the political structures described by the minister. The structuring device of the minister’s speech, his use of the deictics “here” and “there” to signal the alternative political and historical realities of the colonies and Europe betray a distinctive self-preservational strategy, one aimed at protecting the “imagination” from “painful” sites/sights, and the “mind” from “melancholy.” Though at the diegetic level the reader comprehends history as functioning horizontally in the turns of the minister’s version of fort/da, there emerges through the various allusions to the Virgillian mode another level of meaning, what Jonathan Culler calls, borrowing from Todorov, *vraisemblance*, or the way in which “a text may be brought into contact with and defined in relation to another text which helps to make it intelligible.”⁶⁹ (140) Recognition of this second layer of signification demands that the reader include “the artifice of forms”⁷⁰ to make meaning of the passage.

Contending with *Letters* as a political allegory, the reader observes the trope of *conversation*, the perpetual breaking and coupling between the old world and new initiated by the characters within the narrative space, transformed by the georgic materials at the level of artifice into a vertical field of signification. The minister’s attempt at *conversation* that separates him from the old world in essence transforms the literary space into something resembling the turning up and down of Virgil’s *versus*. At this second level of reading the text inserts

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⁷⁰ Ibid, 140.
quite literally the past into the minister’s present. The reader sees the minister standing in a linguistic field turning up the remnants of a georgic tradition. The text then functions as a kind of allegorical paradigm for the political situation it narrates. The reader comprehends that just as James and the minister are unable to recognize the history turned up in the field of the text, so to are they blind to the entirety of their own terrain. The reader sees that the result of James’s inability to know anything that “extends” beyond his farm also denies him the capacity for self-reflection—something that the reader has been able to do through the possession of literary character, a component of political personality denied by the text’s characters. The text through activating several layers of signification suggests that the character’s inability to see their own involvement in a system of slavery results directly from the rejection of literary character as part of the American personality. The result of this blindness is seen throughout the opening chapters in the characters’ ability to name their own slavery in a feudal past, but never to name their own slaves as such. We have already seen the minister’s use of “enslavement” to describe the past and James himself in “What is an American?” describes the transformation of a German immigrant in America: “from a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man.”71 Whereas when mentioning their own slaves, James and his wife do not transport the vocabulary of slavery from a feudal context to their own. For instance, in warning James about what the neighbors might think if he takes up writing, his wife presents the healthy and kempt look of the slaves as a marker of their own wealth as farmers and as a fulfillment of their paternalistic duties, “[H]ow would’st thee bear to be called at our country meetings the man of the pen?...Better hear them as usual observe...‘Look how fat and well

71 Crevecoeur, Letters, 83.
elad their Negroes are.””72 Similarly, in delineating the productivity of his farm, James lists the attitude and health of his slaves as a mark of his relative success as a freeholder: “Every year I kill from 1,500 to 2,000 weight of pork, 1,200 of beef, half a dozen of good wethers in harvest; of fowls my wife has always a great stock; what can I wish more? My Negroes are tolerably faithful and healthy.””73 In the face of the minister’s speech, the inability of the word “slave” to cross from the “there” of Europe to the “here” of James’s farm operates along the same unsustainable logic as the opening letter’s other claims of the American freeholder’s complete separation from a violent past.

72 Ibid, 49.
73 Ibid, 53.
The American “There” and “Here”

“The following scene will, I hope, account for these melancholy reflections and apologize for the gloomy thoughts with which I have filled this letter: my mind is, and always has been, oppressed since I became witness to it. I was not long since invited to dine with a planter who lived three miles from ______, where he then resided. In order to avoid the heat of the sun, I resolved to go on foot, sheltered in a small path leading through a pleasant wood.”


Above I have aimed to make two significant points concerning the transposition of lyric forms within *Letters from an American Farmer*. My initial claim was that the opening of Letter I collapses lyric apostrophe into a Weberian model of Lutheran calling and that such a transformation of apostrophe from a vertical to a horizontal axis signals that the writing of these letters functions primarily to establish economic relationships. James’s can only enter into written correspondence with Mr. F.B. if the function of the writing is to gain entrance into a colonial system of economic exchange that would allow him to increase his own capital. Central to James becoming the writer of this text is the understanding that the only intellectual cultivation appropriate for the development of the American personality is the study of the natural sciences for they hold the potential to develop the American’s real property and do not subject the American to the painful reminders of a feudal past. The study of the human sciences are rejected for they perpetuate a feudal culture which once oppressed the class of men who now find themselves freeholders in America. This rejection of literary cultivation in order to ensure the development of the American farmers real property creates a relationship between the American farmer and the Old World that operates as a trope of *conversation*, a back and forth that allows the American farmer to feel as
though he can reject certain aspects of European culture and accept those functions of aristocratic culture that enable his own economic rise.

Ultimately, the text establishes intertextual relationships between its own aesthetic surface and the georgic tradition of English poetry in order to critique the farmer’s rejection of a literary tradition, for by rejecting knowledge of the past the farmer chooses to deny that the possibility of his own status as a freeholder in the colonies is coextensive with an imperial economic system emerging from a feudal order. Such a denial further allows him to see his own freedom as a landowner not as a reversal of his earlier subservient existence in a feudal order, but as a new political reality independent from any early historical-political realities. This willful rejection of a cultural past permits a kind of political ignorance of his own present, allowing the farmer to falsely experience his existence as a colonial farmer as separate and disentangles from a network of slave labor.

Above I have shown in my examination of the minister’s speech that the past as the sight of economic oppression is figured geographically, where Europe is a painful “there” left behind for the new “here” of America. In this final section of my paper I would like to examine how this trope of geographical segmentation not only functions within the narrative as a means for the American farmer to separate himself from Europe, but also aims to separate his own operations as a property owner from a domestic slave system exemplified by the plantation culture of the colonial south. As I have argued above, James’s claim that he only has knowledge of those customs related to farming is a claim that his “knowledge extends no farther” than his property line. Crevecoeur tests the implications of this claim most explicitly in Letter IX, “On Charles Town and Slavery” by once again refiguring the trope of conversation, a means of selective rejection and acceptance of social realities, through the literal wanderings of James off his property into the uncultivated space of “a pleasant
wood.” Here, in perhaps *Letters* most famous scene, James encounters the tortured body of a slave still alive “suspended in [a] cage and left there to expire.” Crevecoeur, as if to cue the reader to the repetition of what the minister would have named a feudal violence, has James introduce his horrific description of the slave’s mutilated body with a long meditation against slavery, then, before presenting the reader with the actual description of the encounter, explains that “the following scene will, I hope, account for these *melancholy reflections*.” (my italics) In other words, Crevecoeur has James directly quote the minister’s earlier description of Europe’s traumatic sights: “there the half-ruined amphitheatres and the putrid fevers of the Campania must fill the mind with the most *melancholy reflections*.” Through the direct repetition of the minister’s words James again ignorantly undermines his attempted presentation of his own political reality as distinct and separate from historical system of violence.

In deciding to wander “there” beyond his property line, James must apprehend “here” first hand the “enslavement” that makes possible his own political present. And though in the preceding pages he has attempted the same trope of mastery as his minister, repeating “there…there” as he describes Charles Town’s slavery as if it were just as distant in time and space as the ruins of the Roman Empire, still he cannot avoid his own implication in the matter. Though unable to name his own slaves as such, his encounter with the slave in the woods results from his movement beyond his farm to accept the hospitality of the plantation owner responsible for the torture, where James “intended to dine.” Given that earlier in the text moving beyond the boundaries of his property was figured as the acquisition of literary cultivation, Crevecoeur’s decision to have James encounter the horrors of slavery as the direct result of extending his own movements beyond the real cultivation of
his farm functions as an argument that the American neglect of literary cultivation is directly linked to the perpetuation of slavery in the colonies.

Curiously, despite his literal confrontation with the horrors of slavery, James never quite acquires the ability to see his own participation within the colonial network, despite being able to sketch the systemic nature of the slaves in Charles Town as the result of a global capitalist system: “With gold, dug from Peruvian mountains, they order vessels to the coasts of Guinea; by virtue of that gold, wars, murders, and devastations are committed in some harmless, peaceable African neighbourhood where dwelt innocent people…”

Here gold reappears in the hands of the Charles Town planters operating within the same network earlier outlined by James’s wife in her description of the speculative “writing” of Englishmen, but despite its geographical proximity to James, he still understands himself separate from the system. Unable to make the connection between the minister’s earlier speech of the developmental potential of his own farm to provide such “colours” and his own words in this letter, James continues to believe that the small nature of his own property does not exist within an economic continuum with American plantation life. It is beyond his ken to comprehend that the plantation economy is the systemic telos of entering into conversation with Mr. F.B. As if to underline this fact, Crevecoeur has James move from the terrain of the violence to the comfort of the plantation property in a single sentence: “Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine.”

James traverses a cohesive terrain of various sites of the colonial political economy that had earlier been rhetorically denied through the deictics “here” and “there.” He finds himself at the table of the man responsible for the slave’s torture and seemingly critically writes, “They

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74 Crevecoeur, Letters, 168.
75 Ibid, 179.
told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary.” The reader, however, has already herself traversed the rhetorical terrain of the American farmer’s campaign of self-preservation and can only answer in affirmation the presumably rhetorical question James’s had asked earlier in the letter: “Can it be possible that the force of custom should ever make me deaf to all these reflections and as insensible to the injustice of that trade and to their miseries as the rich inhabitants of this town seem to be?”

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"Ibid, 179.

"Ibid, 170."
A National Formation: Equiano and the Generic Limits of Modernity

“I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning. For that purpose I have often taken up a book, and talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remaining silent.”

——Equiano

Equiano’s ‘talking book’ passage above is arguably the most famous passage from the Interesting Narrative, not least of all because of the pressure that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. places on “the trope of the talking book” in The Signifying Monkey, for he sees in it “the beginning of the Afro-American literary tradition.” Because the talking book appears in late-eighteenth century Anglophone slave narratives by James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, John Jea, Ottobah Cugoana, and Olaudah Equiano, it displays “the extent of intertextuality” in these autobiographical works, marking the beginnings of what is for Gates a national literary tradition. Chiefly, the talking book, both due to its function within each narrative and its migration from text to text, displays the efforts of slaves and ex-slaves “[to meet] the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self.”

4 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Signifying Monkey, 131.
Equiano’s narrative as a *Bildungsroman*, a story that portrays “a dynamic self that once was ‘like that’ but is now ‘like this,’” a process facilitated to a great degree by Equiano’s interpellation into an Anglophone literary culture, Gates codes the narrative as modern. This self-charting of one’s development has been indeed one of the chief marker’s of modern prose delineated in theories of the novel and in studies of both secular and religious autobiography, from critics as varied as Georg Lukacs to Charles Taylor.

Gate’s desire to code the trope in general as modern results, however, in an overzealousness to interpret slave narratives as variations of Enlightenment narratives of rational self-improvement, a pressure that forces Gates to argue the inherent secularity of these slave texts. In his discussion of Gronniosaw, the first author to use the trope, for instance, Gates provides a forcefully secularized interpretation of the talking book, despite its overtly religious character in Gronniosaw’s narrative, where, just as in Equiano’s text, the book that refuses to address the slave is, in fact, his master’s prayer book. In understanding Gronniosaw’s process of acquiring literacy as an “abandonment” of his “African heritage” and the beginning of Gronniosaw’s “strange passage from black man to white,” Gates finds it imperative to interpret the slave’s narrative of westernization as nonreligious, arguing that “the text represents this procedure as if it were a rite of baptism, but a secular or cultural cleansing or inundation that obliterates (or is meant to obliterate) the traces of an African past that Gronniosaw is eager to relinquish.” Gates’ erasure of the text’s religious component suggests that he sees Christianity as antithetical to the intellectual development the narrators undergo as they enter an eighteenth-century literary public sphere and for this

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5 Ibid, 155.
8 Ibid, 139.
reason he as critic succumbs to the pressures of the dominant grand narratives of the
development of English literature itself. By offering secular interpretations of the trope he
adapts early slave writings to fit historical narratives of British prose forms argued by critics
such as Ian Watt and Michael McKeon, among others, which state that during the
eighteenth-century novelistic forms became progressively more secular as they developed
into a technology through which individuals could display modern notions of possessive
individualism. This historical narrative assumes that eighteenth-century Anglophone prose
texts depict a model of literary cultivation symbolic of a development of one’s property in
person, thus marking a significant break from the genre of spiritual autobiography. Gates’
secular reading of the talking book trope, then, suggests that narrators of eighteenth-century
slave texts adapt themselves to conceptions of freedom produced by a capitalist marketplace,
rather than resist such adaptation. Perhaps, given the grand narratives of the development of
western prose, Gates fears acknowledging that slave narratives adapt the conventions of
spiritual autobiography, for to do so is to risk suggesting that the texts do not exemplify
generic developments demonstrative of modernity’s ‘break’ with the past in a field of study
that values texts for their ability to display such historical changes at the level of form.

Through Equiano’s passage above, however, we can begin to revise the history of
modern prose genres to include the autobiographical works of slaves and ex-slaves in which
such adaptations of Christian tropes and conventions work as symbolic political challenges
to the western secular rationality that denied these writers their property in person. This in
turn recovers a model of modern literary cultivation emerging from the literature of the
state-less space of the Black Atlantic that posits a form of liberty disentangled from
conceptions of personhood defined through property. Equiano’s text thus challenges us to
reconsider both the dominant historical narratives of eighteenth-century prose genres that
gauge a text’s modernity according to its progressive secularity, but also to see the limitations of such historical narratives that define generic evolution solely through texts emerging in the political context of specific nation-states, where the modern and theoretically universal rights of man are upheld by civic institutions.

The development of one’s property in person that is the basis of literary cultivation as a form of mobile capital emerges through “the rights which were spoken of in the eighteenth century as natural rights”10 but such rights, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, though abstractly universal “always have a highly specific and socially local character.”11 They only exist if administered through the legislative structures of a particular civic society. Equiano’s political condition as a citizen of no state—the text presents itself as a plea to British parliament for the recognition of his personhood and the personhood of other slaves and ex-slaves—then denies him access to those universal and abstract rights of man that grant property in person, a dilemma that defines many of the episodes in the Interesting Narratives. In comparing Equiano’s model of literary cultivation to Benjamin Franklin’s we begin to see that Franklin’s membership within a civic society that protects his property rights enables him to exercise a modern conception of personhood and thus use literary cultivation primarily as a form of capital. Alternatively, Equiano’s adoption of a Christian ontological order results from his inability to access universal rights due to the fact that no state recognizes him as a citizen. Normally, a text positing such a Christian ontological order according to the dominant theories of English prose genres signals a pre-modern form, but through Equiano we see that his adoption of such an ontology is in fact a product of what David Kazanjian calls modernity’s “philosophical problematic of the relationship between universalism and

11 Ibid, 67.
particularism.”¹² Equiano, as a state-less person, helps us to understand how a religious model of literary personality can challenge, at least at the level of the symbolic, modern conceptions of possessive individualism by positing an ontological order that remedies the inability of modern law conceived of as ‘natural rights’ to operate as a universal.

**What is Improvement?**

In the previous chapter much of my analysis focused on the term *cultivation* and the resonances between its literal and figurative uses in *Letters from an American Farmer*. In both Franklin and Equiano we find instead a parallel term, *improvement*, to denote both real and figurative property and both narrators label literary cultivation as such. Franklin, for instance, in expressing his economical advantages over another person states “My Mind having been more improv’d by Reading…”

Similarly, Equiano writes, “I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction, but had made as yet but little progress. However, when I went to London with my master, I had soon an opportunity of improving myself, which I gladly embraced.”

Staging a youth’s acquisition of literacy as improvement is not unusual in eighteenth-century narratives of development. We see it, for instance, in Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96) and in Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1762). Similarly, the inversion of the concept—middle-class improvement foiled by ‘bad education’—often appears in the Romantic genre of the uncanny, suggesting the social force of literary cultivation as a widespread western form of middle-class improvement. For instance, we find protagonists destroyed by their misguided studies in Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” (1816) and in Mary Shelley’s imitation of such German tales *Frankenstein* (1818).

Though by the mid-to-late eighteenth century improvement came to stand for any advancement, betterment, or simple amelioration of a wide variety of private or public situations, including those of an economic, educational, psychological, political, or moral nature, its “earliest uses,” as Raymond Williams notes “referred to operations for monetary

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14 Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 81
profit...[and in the eighteenth century] it was a key word in the development of modernizing agrarian capitalism.”¹⁵ Williams also writes that from the mid-eighteenth century on “there is the characteristic ‘improve oneself,’ and such phrases as ‘improving reading’ followed.”¹⁶ That it could mean both an individual’s ability to develop capacities within him or herself or the development of real property suggests that its evolution as a term reflects the same socio-economic changes that we see through the term cultivation. The figurative uses that abound in eighteenth-century literature never completely lose their connection to this notion of individual gain and material profit, for even actions deemed moral improvements were often meant to correct the greed or self-interest implicit in forms of material improvements through education or argument.

In British literature perhaps the most common use of improvement refers to the “modernizing agrarian capitalism” described by Williams. Over the course of the eighteenth century radical improvements to the landed gentry’s property often resulted in the severance of an estate’s traditional integrated relationship to the surrounding community, spawning much debate in the literary public sphere. For this reason improvement signified both negatively and positively the new economic and moral philosophy that favored economic self-interest over the fulfillment of one’s traditional duties to the community at large. Discussions in the public sphere concerning what defined proper or improper improvements in reality were debates defining, in the words of Alistair Duckworth, “between proper and improper responses to an inherited culture.”¹⁷ In The Tory View of Landscape Nigel Everett shows us that what was at stake politically, socially, and philosophically for England in the

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¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 133.
¹⁶ Ibid, 133.
debates surrounding improvements to the landscape was essentially the moral ground upon which England would build its future. Generally speaking Tories understood “those who abandoned the landscape to the market were also abandoning the order of civil society to fragmentation.”\(^{18}\) To make decisions based upon a market rationality that ignored communal bonds was to go against the idea that man is “a dependent part of a system, and Self in large part a contradictory idea.”\(^{19}\) For an English landowner to balk on his duties to the inhabitants of the surrounding landscape was to deny his own place in the natural systems of “the whole creation” and thus to renounce the divinity of those “natural systems” that were “the productions of the mind of God.”\(^{20}\) In the Tory view, as Everett shows in his discussion of this tradition of analogical thinking, improvements were to be moral and gentle ameliorations of abuses, conscious of “our imperfect view of things”\(^{21}\) and attentive to the pattern of nature. In other words, in this view improvement could only be seen as actually improving the surrounding world if it aimed to keep in place the ordered chain of being which saw the political and social world as analogous to a hierarchy of a transcendent religious sphere. Though the social and political position of England’s landed gentry and Equiano is incomparable, Equiano’s strategy of adopting a Christian ontology to validate his humanity represents an analogous conservative strategy of fending of the harms of a modern mercantile capitalism.


\(^{19}\) Ibid, 13.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 13

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 17.
Benjamin Franklin & the Modern Model of Literary Improvement

For Ian Watt Daniel Defoe’s prose presents the earliest novelistic evidence of “a confusion of religious and material values,” a result of “the Puritan gospel of the dignity of labour.”22 Specifically, in *Robinson Crusoe* the Protestant work ethic evolves into a privileging of material over spiritual life and the human over the divine: “once the highest spiritual values had been attached to the performance of the daily task, the next step was for the autonomous individual to regard his achievements as a quasi-divine mastering of the environment.”23 Watt argues that Defoe’s materialism does not emerge exclusively from Protestantism’s turn to the mundane, but also results from modern ontology, specifically Cartesian philosophy. Like the Protestant conversion narrative Descartes’ philosophical practice of self-examination makes knowledge and “the pursuit of truth” a private, “wholly individual matter.”24 Defoe’s reliance upon “the pattern of the autobiographical memoir” synthesizes both these religious and philosophical impulses in his fictions by upholding “the primacy of individual experience.”25 Michael McKeon’s work on the novel develops the implications of the Protestant literary self-scrutiny that Watt addresses. In particular McKeon argues that religious literary self-examination served an eighteenth-century progressive ideology by providing members of a rising middle-class who wished to challenge aristocratic ideals of “elevated birth” with a means of documenting civic and economic virtue. Narrative thus served progressive ideologies by accounting for what Thomas Jefferson called “natural aristocracy,” allowing an individual to break class ranks “by upward mobility through state service, private employment, or any other method of industrious self-

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23 Ibid, 73-74.
application.” Such ideas of class mobility required a means of demonstrating that virtue was not a static state determined at birth but could be continually improved and demonstrated through an individual’s actions over the course of an entire lifetime.

Theories of autobiography complement these elements of Watt’s and McKeon’s historical narratives of the novel as a modern genre, suggesting that the generic differences between the two forms, at least through the eighteenth-century, are minimal. Georges Gusdorf in “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” largely held as the inaugural study of western autobiography, also places autobiography’s origins in the tradition of religious self-examination, beginning with Augustine, whose practice in turn evolves into the written form of Protestant introspection exemplified in English literature by Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Like Watt and McKeon, Gusdorf understands the historical telos of eighteenth-century prose forms as the public presentation of an economically-oriented individualism. The self-reflection that begins as a religious practice used for personal moral accountability by the end of the sixteenth century emerges as a mode of self-fascination. For instance, Gusdorf notes, Montaigne “discovers in himself a new world, a man of nature, naked and artless, whose confessions he gives us in his *Essays*, but without penitence.” Such introspection for its own sake enables a solipsistic view of the world which Gusdorf acknowledges serves European capitalist expansion well: “[Autobiography] expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the

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27 Charles Taylor helps us understand the cultural transition marked in the changes from Augustine to Montaigne as one facilitated by the Protestant rejection of the monastic life: “The denial of a special status to the monk was also an affirmation of ordinary life as more than profane, as itself hallowed and in no way second class. The institution of the monastic life was seen as a slur on the spiritual standing of productive labour and family life, their stigmatization as zones of spiritual underdevelopment.” *Sources of the Self*, 217-218
universe.” The economically-oriented vocabulary Gusdorf uses to describe the personality capable of producing secular autobiography makes clear that the once religious first-person form now serves to establish a property in one’s person: “The man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest…In narrating my life…I can preserve this precious capital that ought not disappear.” (italics mine) Phillipe Lejeune’s compact and wry analysis of the genre in terms of human rights in his On Autobiography brings into relief the fact that theoretical conceptions of freedom and self-possession from the revolutionary period onwards in practice defined political autonomy chiefly through property rights: “Autobiography is a human right. Become the owner of your life!” Autobiography in such a political context develops into an exercise of freedom for it displays an individual’s right and ability to possess and capitalize upon his or her own personality.

If we turn now to examine the nature of literary improvement in Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, we find that Lejeune’s emphatic “Become the owner of your life!” aptly paraphrases Franklin’s own declaration of his motivations for writing this work. We see in the text’s opening that Franklin blurs the line between biological life and literary representation, so that the act of Autobiography becomes synonymous with improving his

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29 Ibid, 29.
32 I would argue that this model of writing is the implicit underpinning of Gates’ reading of the Interesting Narrative. In placing Equiano within this history of prose development, Gates wishes to argue that despite being denied the property of his own person in ordinary life, literary life offers Equiano a means of displaying self-possession, publicly. In this way Gates can adapt Equiano to Enlightenment ideals. Given that Gates published The Signifying Monkey during the canon wars of the 1980s, his ‘misreading’ could be an intentional oversight in order to present an acceptable justification for the inclusion of these texts in the canon of American literature.
33 Michael Warner famously argues that Franklin created a republican form of subjectivity by defining his biological life as text. As I’ll argue below, such a reading doesn’t take into account what Jon Mee calls “conversability,” in eighteenth-century society and ignores Franklin’s own stress upon speech and oral conversation in the Autobiography as essential to economic improvement. See
achievements through literary “Recollection,” which as a form of revision ensures a glorified and redeemed afterlife not in the religious sense, but in the form of earthly fame:

…I should have no Objection to a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginning, only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first…The Thing most like living one’s Life over again, seems to be a Recollection of that Life; and to make that Recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in Writing.\textsuperscript{34}

Franklin’s ability to control through writing his earthly afterlife emphasizes how the process of writing itself aided in secularizing an initially religious form. Michael Mascuch in his study of the emergence of modern individualism through the autobiographical form explains that authorship as self-improvement replaces divinity with the writer’s humanity, so that on the page the author becomes his own alpha and omega, the divine creator of himself writ small: “By acting as author, the individualist self becomes its own telos: it constitutes a beginning and an end in itself.”\textsuperscript{35} Completed during Franklin’s “Country Retirement” the act of Autobiography grants Franklin the hindsight to organize the episodes of his life into a logically sequenced narrative of economic self-creation that culminates in a “State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World.”\textsuperscript{36} Writing through its ability to ensure the ‘durability’ of Franklin’s reputation insures the value of the Franklin name for his son, to whom the book is dedicated and who inherits the social capital of the family name. Through writing, the narrative of Franklin’s humble origins transforms into an inheritance, one that instantiates the validity of the egalitarian market system it describes. Franklin’s self-creation,

\textsuperscript{34} Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 567.
\textsuperscript{36} Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography, 567.
as he claims early in the narrative was an intellectual self-development achieved primarily through writing: “Prose Writing...was a principal Means of my Advancement.”37

The “advancement” through “prose writing” that Franklin describes, however, is not one of literary fame per se, but rather something akin to facilitating a social sphere aptly summed up by Jerome Christensen’s description of David Hume’s career where “reality [exists] as discursive through and through.”38

We see this in Franklin’s description of his development as a ‘writer’ in which he continually conflates written language with social conversation, so that “prose writing” for Franklin appears not as and end in itself but as what Hugh Blair describes as a means of “furnishing materials for those fashionable topics of discourse, and thereby enabling us to support a proper rank in social life.”39 Through his ability to ‘converse’ both in writing and in oral speech, Franklin gains access to a public sphere that cannot be differentiated from an economic one.

We see this conflation of writing and speech in Franklin’s description of his development as a youth and in his analysis of how cultivating a literary personality improved his social standing. Franklin’s critical examination of his own evolution as a ‘conversationalist’ ultimately recommends to the reader a turn away from disputatious engagement to a form of sociable agreeableness. In his descriptions of his self-directed exercises that appear to prepare the young Franklin for what Habermas calls “the art of critical-rational public debate”40 such disputations begin as oral arguments but then continue in written form. From the start Franklin describes his weakness as a lack of eloquence,

37 Ibid, 578.
38 Jerome Christensen, Practicing Enlightenment, 3.
40 Jürgen Habermas, Structuralist Transformation, 29.
noting that even his father, for instance, after examining his written response to his friend Collins, with whom he practiced the art of debate, noted that Collins, the “more eloquent” in argument, who “had a ready Plenty of Words” won against Franklin “more by Fluency than by the Strength of his Reasons.” Franklin remedies his weaknesses through an intense study of “an odd Volume of the Spectator,” attempting to reproduce much of the writing from memory. This focus on eloquence over reasoned argument is Franklin’s first step towards sociability.

When Franklin describes his teenage adoption of the Socratic method from Greenwood’s Grammar, he warns his reader that his appropriation of the form was a mistake precisely for its ability to offend. “Charm’d” by “a Specimen of a Dispute in the Socratic Method” he originally chooses to adopt the debate style in order to hide his view on religion, having become “a real Doubter in many Points of our Religious Doctrine” after reading Shaftsbury. Thus the Socratic method appears “safest” for it allows him to never reveal his own views. The results in terms of argumentation work favorably for Franklin, for he draws “People even of superior Knowledge into Concessions the Consequences of which they did not foresee, entangling them in Difficulties out of which they could not extricate themselves.” But he ultimately gives up the method because it offends his interlocutors by exposing their faulty logic and such disagreements are against the ultimate “Ends of Conversation [which] are to inform, or to be informed, to please, or to persuade.” Ultimately, Franklin stresses that:

[Argument] is apt to become a very bad Habit, making People often extremely (sic) disagreeable in Company, by the Contradiction that is necessary to bring into

42 Ibid, 579.
43 Ibid, 581.
44 Ibid 581.
Practice, & thence, besides souring & spoiling the Conversation, is productive of Disgusts & perhaps enmities where you may have occasion for Friendship.  

Clearly Franklin’s model of “conversation” differentiates itself from Habermas’ “critical-rational debate” in that the objective of such writing and conversation is not to eliminate erroneous thinking about the nature of civic society, but to “have occasion for Friendship.” Jon Mee’s recent work on what he calls “conversability” in the eighteenth century helps us to understand both Franklin’s fluid boundary between writing and speech and his emphasis upon politeness in conversation. Mee tracks a tension between “politeness and improvement” over the course of the eighteenth-century in the period’s literature on proper conversation, ultimately arguing that Shaftesbury’s neoclassical Platonic model of conversation from the beginning of the century, a style displaying an Enlightenment “commitment to rational enquiry,” softens into Addison’s and Steele’s conversational style favoring “agreeableness” over candor. Franklin’s own thinking moves away from Shaftesbury, towards the amiable style of The Spectator. Mee accounts for this change in conversability as the result of a middle-class reliance upon sociability in an increasingly commercialized world. Shaftesbury, Mee notes, “sees commercial society as corrosively effeminizing through its reliance on ‘scrupulous nicety’ rather than what he calls those ‘masculine helps of learning and sound reason’,” whereas Steele already describes eighteenth-century society as a “world in which conversations take place…where there is constant intercourse with ‘either those above you or below you.’” Mee’s work highlights for us the tensions emerging from the Enlightenment, which through its privileging of

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46 Ibid, 578.
48 Ibid, 45.
49 Ibid, 45.
50 Ibid, 43.
rationality enabled such conversation between men of different stations, yet because of this never allowed for improvement to be defined separately from economic or class interests. In particular Mee sees the writing of David Hume’s “as the product of a culture of intellectual sociability in Edinburgh committed to ‘politeness’ and ‘improvement.”’\textsuperscript{51} Though Hume promoted conversation among the Scottish literati, Mee notes “politeness and improvement could form a tense relationship if a commitment to rational enquiry privileged candour over agreeableness.”\textsuperscript{52}

We see Hume’s own desire to ameliorate the tensions between critical-rational debate and “agreeableness” in the extended trade metaphor in “Of Essay-Writing,” which proposes the form of the essay as a practical means of bridging “the learned and conversible Worlds.” Expressing that a dialogue between the academic and social worlds would produce “mutual Advantage,” Hume offers himself “as a as a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation.” Speaking of his own essays as “commodities” that will enable a trade between both spheres, so that “I shall give Intelligence to the Learned of whatever passes in Company, and shall endeavour to import into Company whatever Commodities I find in my native Country proper for their Use and Entertainment.”\textsuperscript{53} In other words, Hume proposes himself as middle-man, a gate-keeper of academia, his “native Country,” who also knows what “Materials” will offer “Advantage” to a social world beyond academic circles, where men from different economic backgrounds need to engage with one another without incurring offense. As producer of essays that provide in essence the raw material of conversation, Hume naturally ensures himself a generous ‘cut’ of the transaction. Hume’s figuration of essays themselves as a raw material

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 37.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 37.
produced by the ‘nation’ of academia highlights the necessity of learnedness as a property in a world where ‘polite’ and sociable verbal exchange mediates economic relationships. For both Hume and Franklin literary improvement ultimately is in the service of economic improvement.

In Franklin’s description of the “Junto,” “a Club, for mutual Improvement” started by him and several other business men in Philadelphia we see David Hume’s model of the commerce between learned and ‘social’ circles instantiated. Though the men meet to debate both in speech and in writing “in the sincere Spirit of Enquiry after Truth,” ultimately they “acquire[] better Habits of Conversation.” Franklin explains to the reader that he presents the history of the Junto to show that members were through the years “exerting themselves in recommending Business to us.”

What appears on the service as a club for the development of intellectual ideas in reality operates as a means of facilitating business relationships. Franklin’s founding of a newspaper for which he is the principle writer has similar effects, “the leading Men, seeing a News Paper now in the hands of one who could also handle a Pen, thought it convenient to oblige & encourage me” by sending work to Franklin’s print shop. Franklin’s facility with language in the form of “conversation” displays his qualifications for admittance to an economically mobile merchant class.

If we turn for a moment to David Kazanjian study of eighteenth-century U.S. mercantilism we can begin to understand how Franklin benefited from the fact that both “modern liberal citizenship” and “modern economic freedom,” the two conditions that make Franklin’s social and economic rise possible, were only available via Franklin’s

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55 Ibid, 625.
57 Ibid, 19.
membership in a nation-state, first as a subject of the British empire, then later as a citizen of the new U.S. republic. As Kazanjian points out, in eighteenth-century political practice the construction of freedom as “modern liberal citizenship” ignores the particularities of individuals—“trade, heritage, wealth, race, gender, religion, the list is supposedly infinite”—and “agrees not to value or hierarchically codify such differences in order to see only the citizen, a subject formally abstracted from its particularisms and hence formally and abstractly equal to all its fellow citizens.”

Through such abstraction, by existing theoretically in the eyes of the state simply as ‘citizen,’ all political subjects gain equal access to the rights granted to them by the state. Similarly, abstract labor as the value form becomes the basis of modern economic freedom, a point that Marx makes in the Grundrisse, because it is through the ability to exchange his or her labor that the subject achieves economic equality with other subjects: “the laborer who sells his or her abstract labor, is the free economic subject of capitalism because he or she is said to be formally and abstractly equal to all other laborers.”

For this reason, equality, or perhaps more accurately, equivalency, serves as the basis of modern freedom in the political and economic sphere.

Through Kazanjian’s reading of the discourse of eighteenth-century U.S. mercantilist practices, we can see how Franklin’s political and economic powers result from eighteenth-century mercantile practices that enabled “the nation form [to become] the dominant political form for capitalism.” Specifically, in his analysis of the first tariff bill passed by the U.S. Congress on July 4, 1789, Kazanjian shows how mercantilist practices equated economic and political freedom and limited universalist conceptions of egalitarianism and

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58 Ibid, 2.
59 Ibid, 18.
60 Ibid, 42.
free labor within national boundaries. Such economic laws, by limiting the citizens’ social
relations with outsiders, Kazanjian argues, in effect created the nation itself:

These subjects will recognize their full fellowship as citizens once they have been
recognized in state policy and by each other as exchangers rationally abstracted from
their differences and antagonisms and represented as formally equivalent units of
population engaging in lively economic exchange.\textsuperscript{61}

Here the discourse of the state in the form of a trade regulation that encouraged inter-state
trade and discouraged international trade in essence localized a universal conception of
freedom within the boundaries of the nation, but expanded the definition of universal rights
to include free trade, but only with other free actors, i.e. other U.S. citizens. Here we see
state policy running a parallel route to the historical development of “improvement” itself.
We see the emergence of modern state policy developing along the same lines as other
iterations of “freedom.” Where initially “improvement” as an exercise of liberty emerged in
the form of literary cultivation within a public sphere where men of different social classes
engaged in “critical-rational debate,” such “improvement,” as we see in the examples of both
Franklin and Hume, devolved into a form of literary personality meant chiefly to serve
capitalist relations. Kazanjian’s work shows us that the modern state follows a similar path
where the modern state emerged to support a formally abstract freedom defined as
citizenship, state policy soon instantiates such freedom most visibly in the form of free trade.

The example of Franklin’s business contracts suggests that the relationship between
the state and citizen is mutually constitutive. Through his public displays of literary
personality that verify him as an ‘improved’ and worthy citizen, Franklin consistently finds
himself contracted by local government agencies. Perhaps most telling of the
interconnectedness of individual literary improvement and the expansion of state economic

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 36.
power is Franklin’s story of how he as a laborer working for the printer Keimer oversaw the project of printing money for the then province of New Jersey. As Franklin notes a committee of the province frequented the print shop to “take Care that no more Bills were printed than the Law directed.” These influential representatives of state power sought Franklin out on their visits rather than his master Keimer, for, according to Franklin, “My Mind having been more improv’d by Reading than Keimer’s, I suppose it was for that Reason my Conversation seem’d to be more valu’d.” These “principal People of the Province” predict that Franklin “will soon work this [Keimer] out of his Business & make a Fortune in it at Philadelphia.” “These Friends were afterwards,” Franklin ultimately remarks, “of great Use to me.” But perhaps the greatest evidence of Franklin’s ability to use literary personality in a public sphere that conflated political freedom and free market capitalism is the fact that his reputation as a man of letters and business earned him the right to aid in the writing of the U.S. constitution.

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Equiano’s Improvement

Writing in Equiano is not a form of middle-class economic improvement adapted to the specific conditions of a slave caste, but rather a means of proposing a moral improvement to a western conception of freedom that limits personhood to *homo economicus*, an “egalitarian” form of citizenship enabled via a slave economy. Though, like Franklin, Equiano names his own progressive literacy as “improvement,” Equiano’s presentation of the talking book must remain religious, for as we saw in the example of Franklin, modern personhood and thus modern literary form as defined by Watt, McKeon, and Gusdorf, can only emerge in a political sphere that recognizes both abstract citizenship and abstract labor.\(^63\) The fact that Equiano as a subject historically co-exists with Franklin, albeit outside of the boundaries of the nation-state forces us to consider that his literary production, though it assumes a traditional Christian ontology, differs historically from the spiritual autobiographies seen as precursors to both the novel and modern autobiography.

If we examine closely the nature of his literary improvement, we see that it is a symbolic attempt to remedy the limitations of modernity’s ‘universal’ rights of man. Though Equiano does not name the talking book as the Bible or a book of prayer, his statement that speaking to the book would allow him “to learn how all things had a beginning”\(^64\) links it directly to the preceding paragraph in which Equiano visits a Christian church service for the first time and is so “amazed” that he “ask[s]” the parishioners everything he can about the service upon which he learns its purpose is “worshipping God, who made us and all

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\(^63\) Describing one of his stays in London, Equiano notes, “I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction, but had made as yet but little progress. However, when I went to London with my master, I had soon an opportunity of improving myself, which I gladly embraced.” (italics mine) He is instructed in reading and writing by the same woman who arranges for his Baptism and becomes his godmother. His literary abilities are understood as a means of deepening his faith through scripture. (81)

\(^64\) Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 70.
things." For this reason to talk to the book is not simply to begin to read, to cultivate one's rational mind in preparation for one's entrance into a social and economic network as we see in Franklin, but to educate oneself of one's own divine origin through the book's mediation.

By noting that his child-self was "amazed" during the church service, Equiano as narrator marks his initial contact with an Anglo-Protestant culture as a major turning point in his development, calling the reader's attention to the fact that his literal entrance into a Christian church both mirrors and breaks from earlier sections of the narrative that describe his "astonishment," "wonder," and "surprise," when encountering white men. From the moment Equiano boards the European slave ship until the passage of the talking book, he is perpetually "amazed"—this vocabulary repeats itself in various forms nearly twenty times within this short span of narrative plot. His first "astonishment" occurs as he enters the slave ship because he understands the white men "as bad spirits, and that they were going to kill [him]," a scene that stages the middle passage as voyage into an Ovidian underworld, where the boy cannot recognize Europeans as human because of their "complexions" and "hair" and the fact that upon their ship "a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people, of every description, [are] chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow." Such "astonishment" repeats itself for the boy Equiano as he alternately describes incomprehensible wonders of both modern European science and acts of cruelty as he travels from Africa to Barbados, then to Virginia, and, ultimately, England.

He is "amazed" by the ship, that it "[goes] on" when "there [is] cloth put upon the masts by the help of rope" and "lost in astonishment" when the ship meets another upon

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65 Ibid, 70.
66 Throughout this part of the narrative (57-70) Equiano repeatedly uses "astonish," "amaze," "surprise," "wonder," their participles, and their noun forms.
67 Ibid, 57.
the ocean. “Observ[ing] the vessel stop” the boy and other Africans (“I and my
countrymen”) are convinced it is “magic.”\textsuperscript{68} Similarly, it is “with astonishment” that he
observes the crew’s “use of the quadrant.”\textsuperscript{69} When allowed to look through the instrument,
Equiano comprehends the clouds as a moving land mass in the sky, only “heighten[ing] his
wonder.”\textsuperscript{70} Landing in Barbados, he imagines men who ride horses as “full of nothing but
magical arts.”\textsuperscript{71} Equiano stages this wonder not only as his younger self’s childish
understanding of a new reality, but also as a marker of his cultural primitivism, given that he
often shares his “astonishment” with his “countrymen.” For this reason the text appears to
be establishing a narrative of assimilation, the kind of “cultural cleansing” Gates sees at work
in Gronniosaw’s narrative, as he journeys from African primitivism to western
Enlightenment. Equiano’s initial ‘savage’ inability to understand the mechanical laws at work
around him, his experience of the natural world as enchanted, appears on the surface as part
of a rhetorical strategy aimed at mirroring notions of European intellectual and technological
advancement back to a western readership.

As these episodes in which Equiano fearfully and superstitiously interprets his new
environs progress, however, they emerge as a sophisticatedly staged critique aimed at garnering
the sympathy of the reader. By the time the boy enters the Virginia plantation house where
he is briefly kept as a slave, his fetishistic impressions of the modern objects he encounters
no longer function as a representation of his own ignorance but rather as a critique of

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 59.  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 63. The Encyclopedia Britannica notes, “In 1730, independently of Thomas Godfrey of
Philadelphia, [John] Hadley invented a quadrant (actually a double-reflecting octant) for measuring the altitude
of the Sun or a star above the horizon to find geographic position at sea. His double-reflecting principle made
accurate determinations of location much easier. Hadley also fixed a spirit level to the instrument so that a
meridian altitude at sea could be taken when the horizon was not visible.” "John Hadley," \textit{Encyclopædia
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 62.  
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 62.
western modernity. Allowed entrance into the plantation house in order to fan the sick and sleeping master, Equiano is “astonished and shocked” upon encountering a female slave “loaded with various kinds of iron machines” including an “iron muzzle,” which “locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak, and could not eat or drink.” For the reader the repetition of the now familiar locutions of surprise links the iron muzzle with the other machines that had induced wonder in Equiano. Now affiliated with the earlier encountered technology of the quadrant and the ship, the iron muzzle brings into relief a regime of control facilitated by the sciences, one made possible through the very rationality so foreign and strange to the young boy. This scene of the iron muzzle transforms Equiano’s next display of naïve wonder—once again demarcated by his repeating vocabulary of surprise—into a rhetorical device capable of inducing a Shklovskian estrangement effect in the reader. Where at first his wonder seems a marker of his own ignorance, now it emerges as a critique similar to Adorno and Horkheimer’s understanding of the Enlightenment as a “disenchantment of the world” that becomes itself a mythology suspicious of “anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility.”

As the third in the sequence of decisively modern objects—and the first encountered on land once Equiano is officially a slave—the iron muzzle serves as the symbolic telos of the ship and quadrant in this unfolding narrative of objects, suggesting that the ultimate end of knowledge is the exploitation of the labor of others. This strange and estranging emergence of the iron muzzle as the product of the quadrant and ship moves the reader into affective alignment with Equiano. As he next narrates his perceptions of the objects surrounding him in the room where he fans his sleeping master, the reader newly empathetic

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72 Ibid, 65.
74 Ibid, 2.
to Equiano’s “wonder” perceives the decorative accoutrements as the fetish objects of another kind of mythology—the western belief in the development of reason as an ultimate good. Here we find Equiano once again “surprised”—this time by the noise of the clock on the chimney. Anxious after witnessing the iron muzzle, he fears the object has him under surveillance and thinks it capable of telling “the gentleman any thing I might do amiss.”

Similarly, he describes a portrait hanging in the room as also monitoring his actions: “[the picture] appeared constantly to look at me.” Within the implicit teleology that appears in the final lineal arrangement of objects—ship, quadrant, iron muzzle, clock, portrait—Equiano’s original fearful and anxious surprise serves now as a rather adequate response, connecting those earlier technologies to the more disturbing machinery of plantation life. The clock here reads as the more benign ‘parlor’ version of the iron muzzle, monitoring, despite its genteel form, the efficient extraction of the young boy’s labor, a labor that produces the wealth and sense of self-worth that results in the portrait of “the great men.”

The slave boy’s reaction to the portrait, his projection of a spiritual dimension onto the painting as “some way the whites had to keep their great men when they died,” highlights for us the rhetorical function of his bewildered ignorance and his belief in a supernatural organization of the world. Through Equiano’s vocabulary of surprise this portrait marks the endpoint of the first leg of Equiano’s adventure, so that in a very literal sense we can say that the ship and quadrant were deployed with the intention of bringing some black boy to this

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75 Though Equiano in this passage is unaware of the clock as a means of measuring time, his fear that the function of the machine is to monitor his work alludes to the development of new labor practices implemented by industrial capitalists in the 1780s. As Isaac Kramnick describes in his analysis of “bourgeois radicalism,” Josiah Wedgwood, the British potter who helped initiate industrial production in the English countryside, was the first to monitor his workers’ labor through the use of clocks: “Time was a new idol, together with care and regularity, [Wedgwood] trained his workers to notions of time by inventing the first punching-in clock. He also introduced a system of bells to summon them to work and to end the day. The bells stood in a central place on each floor, next to the clock.” See Isaac Kramnick, Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism, 102.

76 Equiano, Interesting Narrative, 65.

77 Ibid, 65.
room to fan the sickly descenents of the portrait, i.e. “[to] serve[] all the purposes of the bourgeois economy.”

If we return once again to this same narrative span beginning with Equiano’s boarding of the ship and ending with his entering the church service in England, we see a second category of surprise, one that suggests an understanding of western Enlightenment sympathetic with Alasdair MacIntyre’s, where a shared ethical ground no longer guides human behavior, and “[r]eason is [solely] calculative; it can assess truths of fact and mathematical relations but nothing more.” In addition to emerging at moments in which the boy witnesses the technology of the west, Equiano’s vocabulary of surprise also appears when the white sailors violate what the boy understands as fundamental laws of community. Specifically, the fact that the white sailors reveal their own capacity to treat “some of the whites themselves” with the same “brutal cruelty” that they “[show] towards…blacks” leaves the boy unable to understand the social laws at work onboard the ship. When he witnesses one “white man in particular” who was “flogged so unmercifully…that he died in consequence of it,” Equiano “fear[s] these people more” for he could expect “nothing less than to be treated in the same manner.” For the white sailors to murder one of their own race suggests to Equiano that there is no social code in place to limit the overall brutality among human beings. The effect of this incident is the young Equiano’s persistent fear of being eaten by the crew. His fear of cannibalism escalates during his passage from Virginia to England during which food is rationed and the captain and crew jokingly play on his fears:

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79 Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54.
81 Ibid, 59.
82 The young boy’s fear of cannibalism throughout his early journeys is another cleverly adapted rhetorical device on the part of Equiano. A common feature of western travel narratives throughout the age of exploration, Equiano’s fear of cannibalism asks the western reader to consider the savagery of European culture and functions as another means for the narrative to estrange the reader from her native western culture.
“In our extremity the captain and people told me in jest they would kill and eat me, but I thought them in earnest, and was depressed beyond measure, expecting every moment to be my last.”\(^{83}\) When finally the crew catches a large shark the boy is relieved, thinking at last the food crisis aboard alleviated and himself no longer in danger of being eaten, but “to [his] astonishment”\(^ {84}\) the sailors remove the shark’s fin and throw the remainder of the fish back into the ocean. The rejection of the fish as meat projects a cultural cruelty for Equiano, for it suggests that the crew has chosen the alternative of consuming his human flesh.

In relationship to previous episodes—this incident appears after the boy witnesses the iron muzzle and the white man’s murder by other white sailors—his “astonishment” threads together a complex narrative. Together these moments reveal a difference between the ethical codes of the west and Equiano’s home nation of Benin and the other African nations he describes in the opening auto-ethnographic sections of the Interesting Narrative. Specifically in his analysis of slavery as it is practiced in Africa he notes that in Benin slaves “do no more work than other members of the community, than even their master; their food, clothing, and lodging, were nearly the same as theirs, except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free-born.”\(^ {85}\) When one African nation captures a member of another, though the person loses his freedom, Equiano seems to suggest, there is a code in place that limits the brutality with which one human can treat another. That white sailors are more violent with one another than an African is to his slaves suggests comparatively that technological advancement is inversely proportionate to moral advancement, again echoing Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis that that “[w]hat human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human

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\(83\) Ibid, 67.  
\(84\) Ibid, 67.  
\(85\) Ibid, 39.
Equiano’s affect of surprise asks the reader to consider the relationship between technology and violence. As a rhetorical device it implicitly argues that modern systems of intellectual and economic rationality erode traditional social codes and communal security by creating social networks primarily motivated by self-interest and profit. That such events occur mostly at sea, outside of the jurisdiction of any nation state, such scenes underline the problems that both Kazanjian and MacIntyre see emerging from the fact that ‘universal’ rights of man only exist as “local” phenomena. If we examine the nature of Equiano’s surprise as he witnesses his first church service, we see, however, how the affect functions as a rhetorical means of differentiating between a secular western modernity and Christian culture. Here in his final significant moment of surprise, Equiano declares, “I was astonished at the wisdom of white people in all things I saw.” The only stated example of such “wisdom,” however, has to do with the Christian rejection of slavery, a position translated for Equiano by his white American friend, the young sailor Dick: “[A]nd what I could understand by [Dick] of this God, and in seeing these white people did not sell one another, as we did, I was much pleased; and in this I thought they were much happier than we Africans.” Otherwise the Christians appear deficient for several reasons including, “their not sacrificing, or making any offerings, and eating with unwashed hands, and touching the dead.” Christianity’s moral superiority, then, in comparison both to African culture and to western modernity, arises entirely from its rejection of slavery.

88 Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 70.
89 Ibid, 70.
90 Ibid, 70.
Equiano’s rejection of Enlightenment possessive individualism and his acceptance of Anglo-Protestantism due to its condemnation of slavery undermines Gates’ definition of the trope as a sign of a slave’s attempt “[to meet] the challenge of the Enlightenment.” Gates’ analysis of the trope overall erases the rejection of possessive individualism implicit in Equiano’s religious understanding of reading as improvement, marking a significant difference between literary cultivation in Equiano and other western texts. Equiano’s purpose for reading is “to learn how all things had a beginning”—which again connects to his definition of God in the preceding paragraph, “God, who made us and all things.” Explicit in this definition of divinity is an acknowledgment of the slave’s humanity. As the indirect speech of Equiano’s translator, a young white man, Richard Baker, the statement makes clear the fellowship between Baker and Equaino, including them together in the “us” resulting from their attendance of a Christian service together. Reading then does not validate Equiano’s humanity by displaying for him his own cognitive abilities, or his ability to develop his own person as a form of capital, but rather functions as a proof of his own divine origins, and thus the humanity denied him by Europe’s modern economy. To go to “the beginning” through the book is to engage in an alternative social reality in the present through a religious social structure in which all humans are recognized as such, whether within or without national borders.

With its interest in origins the trope of the book retains mystical qualities rejecting reading as a solely rational activity. Rather, the book is the site of divine intercession. Through a Calvinistic model of salvation scripture offers the slave and former-slave—note Equiano’s use of the perfect tense—a continual arena in which to validate his own humanity: “I have often taken up a book, and talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in
hopes it would answer me.”91 The retention of a Christian belief structure overrides any social or political hierarchies by providing an alternative transcendental hierarchy, so that only a rejection from divine intervention threatens Equiano’s human status. For this reason when the book does not ‘talk back’ Equiano feels threatened: “I have been very much concerned when I found it remaining silent.”92 Inherent in this model of reading is the way that a literary personality functioned in the eighteenth century: a validation of one’s subjectivity. But here the validation comes from a Godhead, as in earlier Protestant conversion narratives, rather than from the literary public sphere. Here personhood because it is not abstracted is truly universal.

Ignoring the religious and mystical dimensions in Equiano’s particular staging of the talking book, Gates’ appears stubbornly wedded to a particular limited model of eighteenth-century writing that equates textual self-authorship with political and social self-mastery. Simply put, Gates wants to show that the talking book is proof that slaves battled the regime of rationality that enslaved them on its own terms: “Through the act of writing alone, Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject.”93 Grouping the talking book with the watch and portrait as “objects [endowed] with his master’s subjectivity,” thus “a surrogate figure of the master’s authority,”94 the book becomes a part of the nexus of objects that deny Equiano human subjectivity within the diegetic space of the narrative. Gates is able to do so only by ignoring the conditional construction of “the shift of tenses”95 in the final phrase of the passage: “and I have been very much concerned when I found [the book] remaining silent.” Gates interprets the sentence as an absolute

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91 Ibid, 70.
92 Ibid, 70.
93 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey, 156.
94 Ibid, 156.
95 Ibid, 156.
grammatical construction that through the perfect tense continues into Equiano’s narrating present, permitting Gates to declare: “Of course the book does not speak to him.” Grammatically, Equiano’s use of the adverb “when,” however, implies that at times the book does speak to him, and only in the moments that it does not does Equiano find himself “concerned.” Gates’ disregard for the conditional adverb leads him to equate the book with the watch and portrait, despite his summary of “the movement of [Equiano’s] plot” as one “from African freedom, through European enslavement, to Anglican freedom.” Despite marking Enlightenment culture, i.e., “European enslavement” as distinct from the “freedom” of Christianity in his terse plot synopsis, Gates ultimately denies the religious quality of the trope of the book and its political implications. This reading allows Gates to claim the extra-diegetic act of writing the narrative and putting it into the literary public sphere as the sole means through which the narrative serves as an argument, an exclusively rational, secular argument, for Equiano’s human subjectivity: “Equiano’s text [makes] 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.” Slave narratives undoubtedly garnered sympathy from an eighteenth-century readership because they symbolically enact what Charles Taylor calls “the enjoyment of the rights of self-creation” denied the authors in all other spheres of existence. Adopting modern notions of self-creation centrally featured in such eighteenth-century narratives as

96 Ibid, 156.
97 Ibid, 153.
98 Ibid, 153-154. Gates’ words here echo Ian Watt’s description of Defoe’s modern sense of time in his novels and how it enables the narrative to present character as developmental, as opposed to the unity of time in tragedy in which all action takes place within a twenty-four hour period. “At his best, [Defoe] convinces us completely that his narrative is occurring at a particular place and at a particular time, and our memory of his novels consists largely of these vividly realized moments in the lives of his characters, moments which are loosely strung together to form a convincing biographical perspective. We have a sense of personal identity subsisting through duration and yet being changed by the flow of experience.” By highlighting the developmental structure of Equiano’s narrative Gates is once again underlining its modernity in terms of the novel’s secularity.
99 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, 47.
Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* they thus aided the abolitionist cause by functioning as a proof of the slave’s human subjectivity. But to deny Equiano’s religious faith is to ignore a much more politically complex definition of improvement at work.

My focus upon Gates’ interpretation of the talking book passage aims not to discredit one reading of Equiano among, no doubt, thousands, but rather to suggest that Gates’ ‘misreading’ of the trope points to the limitations of the dominant theories of both the novel and autobiography in deciphering the socio-political origins of the rhetorical features defining the *Interesting Narrative*. These limitations ultimately prevent us from seeing the cultural model of writing at work in the text as the product of a slave economy and thus a product of modernity, despite its adaptation of tropes from the Protestant conversion narrative, a genre understood as a precursor of modern prose forms. Instead, the dominant genre theories have resulted in critics adapting the *Interesting Narrative* to fit historical teleologies derived from national literary productions, text such as Franklin’s, that cannot account adequately for Equiano’s generic innovation. The *Interesting Narrative* as a text of the Black Atlantic written by a subject in search of a state is a text without a nation, but claimed at times by both British and American literary traditions and most often analyzed within the discursive paradigms of national literatures.\(^1\)

By suggesting that writing functions primarily as a technology that Equiano uses to define, order, and present life experiences as a cohesive and developmental narrative in order to gain public validation of his humanity, Gates argues that the *Interesting Narrative* does not ultimately differ from a text like Franklin’s and thus fits

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\(^1\) See Cathy N. Davidson, “Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2, The Early American Novel (Fall, 2006 - Spring, 2007), pp. 18-51, for a discussion of the implications of recent archival research suggesting that Equiano may have been a native of South Carolina. Should the *Interesting Narrative* turn out to be “fiction” rather than “fact,” my own argument would still stand simply because the text in its own day was presented to a reading public as autobiographical and its validity as such was never challenged.
both the dominant critical narratives of the development of modern prose forms and eighteenth-century conceptions of subjectivity as a self-rationalizing process. Both conceptions assume, however, that literary improvement functions as a political technology aiding in the mutually constitutive relationship between the modern citizen and his nation-state, a requirement that Equiano’s subject position cannot fulfill.

If we turn for a moment to Adam Potkay’s interpretation of the *Interesting Narrative* in his essay “Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography,” we can begin to see another limitation of the dominant developmental narratives of modern prose forms. Where Gates wishes to rescue Equiano for modernity by adapting his narrative to the paradigms we find in the genre theories of Watt, McKeon, and Gusdorf, Potkay, because he admits the religious nature of Equiano’s text, must alternately adapt his reading to fit conventional understandings of British spiritual autobiographies. Given that Gates is claiming Equiano for the American canon, while Potkay reads the *Interesting Narrative* as British literature, we see between these two readings that the ‘English Department’ as a discursive regime replicates a problem analogous to the eighteenth-century conception of universal rights as deciphered by MacIntyre and Kazanjian. Only by placing Equaino’s work within the context of a national literature can Potkay and Gates even begin to decipher the generic implications of Equaino’s use of a Christian ontology. And the use of such an ontology can only be interpreted through the developmental narrative of political subjectivity of either nation state.

Potkay interprets the *Interesting Narrative* simply as a traditional Protestant conversion narrative. Ignoring Equiano’s opening dedication, “To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain,” and his stated reason for writing the

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narrative—“to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen”102—Potkay attempts to remedy Gates’ secular interpretation of the talking book.103 Focusing specifically upon the trope in order to counter Gates’ argument of secularity, Potkay claims the talking book is emblematic of an “ultimately theological curiosity:”

It is in light of Equiano’s ultimately theological curiosity that his ‘great curiosity to talk to books’ muse be read: indeed, the book that Equiano as yet unwittingly desires to read is not just any book, nor just a synecdoche for Gates’ ‘Western letters,’ but specifically the Bible, a book that claims to explain the genesis of all things.104

Though Potkay is correct to argue that any interpretation of the trope has to come to terms with its religious nature, to read the talking book simply as a “theological curiosity” is to erase its careful staging within the larger narrative context of Equiano’s initial experiences of western culture. As I’ve argued above, the trope appears only after Equiano, through his rhetoric of surprise, separates the west into two separate cultures, a capitalist culture emerging from Enlightenment rationality, the culture responsible for his slavery, and a Christian culture that rejects the practice of slavery altogether. Rather than reconciling the Christianity of the work with the text’s overall project of political emancipation, Potkay instead attempts to place Equiano within a longer British national tradition of conversion

102 Equiano, Interesting Narrative, 17-18.
103 Potkay’s 2001 article, a discussion of how to best teach Equiano’s Interesting Narrative, does admit to the text’s overall political purpose as an address to Parliament: “Its purpose is to rouse an audience to a specific course of action.” (604) Religion, however, once again becomes the sticking point for Potkay: “Four years after the appearance of [Houston] Baker’s book, Henry Louis Gates Jr. published The Signifying Monkey, a work concerned more with the literary than the economic self-possession of black writers, but equally uninterested in their Christian claims.” “History, Oratory, and God in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative,” Adam Potkay Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), p 609. For a response to the article that takes to task Potkay’s insistence on reading Equiano as a traditional conversion narrative see, “Equiano Lite,” Srinivas Aravamudan Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), pp. 615-619. Aravamudan, however, in his chapter on Equiano in Tropicopolitans, Duke University Press, 1999, criticizes, among others, Gates for “conflation of the category of subjecthood with the agency that comes from the complex technology of literacy,” suggesting that such a conflation emerges from the English Department rather than from eighteenth-century texts themselves. Such a suggestion, as this essay hopefully makes clear, ignores significant evidence to the contrary.
narratives. Once he interprets the trope of the talking book as a religious one, however, the text’s other material serves his expectations of the religious genre. This fact we see perhaps most clearly in Potkay’s allegorical reading of Equiano’s abduction by slave traders as a journey into religious vocation, a Christian salvation: “The tug toward the solution is always, in these autobiographies, away from Africa.”

In much the same way that Gates wishes to push the text into a well-establish paradigm of modernity expressed via generic conventions, Potkay pushes in the opposite historical direction, unable to consider the possibility that African writers adopted and adapted both Christian faith and Christian narrative forms to support psychological and political emancipation from slavery. Calcified within the parameters of British literary taxonomy, the *Interesting Narrative*, because it lacks the secularity of the novel, can only be a continuation of a traditional form, so that Equiano’s presentation of his biography becomes symptomatic of a private desire for Christian redemption, separate from his condition as a captured and enslaved African: “[Equiano] reads the pattern of his life as reduplicating the pattern of salvation history found in the Christian Bible.” We see the limitations of the dominant narratives of genre development at work here when Potkay assesses the *Interesting Narrative’s* auto-ethnographic opening as only a Puritan trope: “In early modern Britain, writing one’s life as a figural gloss on key Biblical passages was no more than all good Puritans were apt to do.” Potkay asserts both a dubious historical (“early modern”) and national (“Britain”) context to Equiano’s 1789 work, reducing the text’s overall purpose to a private spiritual act, nothing more than what earlier “good Puritans” had done, rather than Equiano’s stated political aims and a means of coping with his enslavement. Taking the

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105 Ibid, 680.
106 Ibid, 680.
107 Ibid, 681.
explicit intentions of the work seriously would suggest an alternative reading of this opening section. Equiano’s overt intentions as author require that tropology be understood differently. Rather than a means of self-examination for a convert seeking promise of salvation, here its purpose more obviously seems a rhetorical gesture aimed at garnering sympathy with a western audience. By presenting his own plight as an extension of a Judeo-Christian tradition, tropology offers Equiano a literary strategy for making the strange familiar. Once the text becomes pigeonholed as a specific genre within a national literary tradition such a logical suggestion appears impossible.

If we turn to D. Bruce Hindmarsh’s historical account of conversion narratives in *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* we see that Equiano’s most significant adaptation of a traditional trope from the genre is not the tropological reading of his own life that Potkay suggests, but rather what Hindmarsh calls the “uses of the law and gospel.” “Law and gospel,”108 a prescription for Christian self-examination expounded by early reformers defined both the pattern of Protestant self-examination and narrative presentation of such self-examination from the sixteenth century onwards. Made popular by William Perkins, a sixteenth century English Puritan, in his work the *Golden Chain* (1590) law and gospel became “the Puritan theology that would provide the structure of countless autobiographies in the seventeenth century and beyond.”109 The conversion process of law and gospel functions as a two-part system, through which the convert’s initial contact with Christianity reveals a moral inadequacy as the convert compares her deeds to the moral law of scripture. The convert finds solace in gospel, the signs of salvation visible to the convert despite her personal shortcomings.

109 Ibid, 35.
Discerning the law through scriptural study, the convert utilizes it as a tool to measure her own sinfulness. In his practical instructions to the reader Perkins describes the process so: “If therefore, thou desirest seriously eternal life, first take a narrow examination of thy selfe and the course of thy life by the square of God’s law.” Addressing the reader directly, Perkins asserts that such a comparison of an individual’s actions to the law will necessarily lead to despair that can only be alleviated through a surrender of one’s own will to the divine: “bewailing thy misery, & despairing utterly of thine own power, to attain everlasting happiness, though maiest renounce thy selfe and be provoked to seeke and sue unto Christ Jesus.” Such self-critique leads the convert to understand herself as an example of a flawed and sinful human nature and reveals the moral inadequacy of individualism.

Gospel works to counter the despair induced by the discovery of the convert’s personal inadequacy by communicating to the believer that entrance into Christianity grants the means of overcoming personal failings. Hindmarsh illustrates the meaning of gospel in the evangelical sense through a quotation from William Tyndale’s sixteenth century introduction to the New Testament: “Evangelion (that we call the gospel) is a Greek word; and signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man’s heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy.” The gospel as described by Perkins channels the divine, so that the convert must no longer rely solely on her individual human capacities. The gospel then is “the instrument, and, as it were, the conduit pipe of the holy Ghost, to

111 Ibid, 35.
112 Here we see the contradiction of post-Reformation Christianity. Such self-examination as a practice intends to aid the believer in realizing the poverty of human nature, but through what McKeon calls a “naïve empiricism,” a focus on particulars that ultimately affirms the cognitive abilities of the individual and thus validates a Cartesian model of personhood. Equiano’s application of law and gospel we might say, then, works as a provisionary tactic against such a modern conception of subjectivity, rather than as a full-developed political alternative.
fashion and derive faith into the soule.”

Where the law illustrates to the convert her failings, the gospel fortifies her human nature by allowing it to function as a “conduit” for the divine. Christian faith in this model thus reveals both the moral shortcomings of human nature and the knowledge that the individual believer must not rely solely on her isolated being in order to find spiritual salvation. We might say, then, that law and gospel critiques individualism, but also offers the convert a spiritual means of overcoming the moral limitations of such autonomy.

Turning to John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), we can see how this popular understanding of law and gospel took literary shape, for according to Hindmarsh Bunyan’s work in particular illustrates, “the pattern of conversion that became well established among the Puritans.” His description of Bunyan’s text as typical in its depiction of a series of spiritual fits and starts that ultimately end with the sinner being reassured of salvation offers us a prescription for the narrative shape of conversion:

> These accounts typically begin with serious religious impressions in childhood, followed by a descent into ‘worldliness’ and hardness of heart, followed by an awakening or pricking of religious conscience, and then a period of self-exertion and attempted moral rectitude, which only aggravates the conscience and ends in self-despair. This self-despair, paradoxically, leads to the possibility of experiencing a divinely wrought repentance and the free gift of justification in Christ. Forgiveness of sins comes, thus, as a climax and a psychological release from guilt, and ideally introduces a life of service to God predicated on gratitude for undeserved mercy.

Hindmarsh stresses the psychological difficulty of the convert’s self-analysis, which in Bunyan manifests itself as the attempts at “moral rectitude” followed by periods of “self-despair,” hallmarks of the genre. Hindmarsh’s narrative prescription suggests that tropology as a literary device must subordinate itself to the overall process of self-examination enabled

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114 Ibid, 35.
115 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 50.
116 Ibid, 50.
through law and gospel. His analysis implies that Potkay’s attempt to categorize Equiano’s text as a typical conversion narrative simply on the basis of biblical tropology falls short of the standard narrative and formal expectations of the genre.

If we turn for a moment now to a passage in Bunyan we see, for instance, the “self-despair” effected by Bunyan’s radical self-examination result in him turning to the story of Lazarus in order to find psychological comfort. Tropology here and throughout *Grace Abounding* serves to alleviate the guilt and hopelessness of Bunyan’s own sinfulness—thus it functions as gospel—suggesting that tropology does not appear independently as a central feature of the conversion process, but stands in service to the law and gospel system described by Hindmarsh:

[T]hrough my fear of miscarrying for ever (should I now die) I was as one dead before Death came, and was as if I had felt my self already descending into the Pit; methought, I said there were no way but to Hell I must; but behold, just as I was in the midst of those fears, these words of the Angels carrying Lazarus into Abrahams bosom, darted in upon me, as who should say, *So it shall be with thee, when thou dost leave this World*. This did sweetly revive my Spirit, and help me to hope in God.\(^{117}\)

Here Bunyan’s palpable anxiety results from his self-examination and leads him to imagine his own damnation. This initial moment results from his encounter with scriptural law. What interrupts this despair is Bunyan’s ability to understand the fate of his own soul to be the same as Lazarus’ fate. This is the moment of gospel, the joyful hopefulness that emerges from his ability to recognize his own life in scripture. Bunyan’s narrative shows us that tropology serves as simply one means of achieving gospel, of the convert recognizing himself as an individual included in Christian salvation, but certainly not the only means of achieving the turn from law to gospel, from personal guilt to spiritual joy.

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\(^{117}\) John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 80.
That Potkay reads Equiano’s talking book passage as the typical instance of Protestant conversion is fair enough, but Bunyan’s work shows us that Equiano’s shaping of his initial captivity as a version of the Old Testament story does not on its own mark the text generically as a conversion narrative, for absent from Equiano’s use of the conversion trope is a search for his own salvation. Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* on the whole differs from Bunyan in its relative lack of moral self-examination. Instead, Equiano adopts the use of law into a means of self-protection within the Atlantic culture that enslaves him. Rather than to examine his own conscious, Equiano deploys divine law to show the impotence of those humans that enslave him and to institute a universal conception of law that recognizes his humanity at times when national English law fails to protect him and the property he earns through his own labor.

We might say that the difficulties Equiano experiences throughout the *Interesting Narrative* is one of mimesis. Understanding himself as a human subject, he attempts to imitate those around him by also accessing the freedom of the New World defined as the ability to trade and acquire capital as labor or as goods. Equiano’s attempts at securing property are narrated as a series of fits and starts throughout the text, attempts that more often than not end in failure precisely because of the “philosophical problematic” defined by Kazanjian: Equiano finds it difficult to accept that the form of the nation limits an allegedly universal right to property. The scenes of failed trade create a seemingly endless cycle of episodic frustration that resembles the sinner’s spiritual fits and starts within the conversion narrative as we saw in Bunyan. Here in Equiano the frustration and anxiety emerges not from the failures of self in light of divine law, but rather due to the failures of civil law. If capitalist mercantilism is synonymous with modernity, than these episodes reveal that
modern subjectivity defined through access to a particular economic system does not make itself available to Equiano and other Africans.

One of Equiano’s most dramatic rhetorical uses of Christian law as an imagined means of overturning the limitations of civil law appears during one of his several attempts at claiming his own freedom. At the end of a naval expedition he and other sailors “[have] orders to go up to London with our ship, to be paid off.” Equiano, theoretically with English law on his side, expects “nothing but being freed”118 because he has been baptized and by the law’s of England no Christian can be enslaved. While the crew is still at sea, outside national boundaries, however, his master learns Equiano’s “dreams of freedom.”119 Fearing that Equiano will no longer be his rightful property, the captain physically forces Equiano off the ship and into a barge to demonstrate his continuing power over Equiano’s person. Rather than risk Equiano’s emancipation once the ship reaches London and thus a loss of what he understands to be his own property, the captain immediately seeks to sell Equiano to another English sea captain.

Throughout this extended scene Equiano invokes his rights under English law, a fact acknowledged by many of his fellow sailors, suggesting their allegiance with Equiano as men who themselves experience difficulty acquiring property despite their white skin, but his old and new masters disregard Equiano’s claims. Equiano’s initial assertion, “I told him that I was free, and he could not by law serve me so,”120 enrages his master provoking Equiano’s sale. In effect the master demonstrates that in practice Equiano’s rightful self-possession will not be recognized, especially beyond the geographic bounds of England. Once sold to a captain headed for the West Indies, Equiano informs him that under the law his old master

118 Equiano, Interesting Narrative, 95.
119 Ibid, 96.
120 Ibid, 98.
“could not sell me to him nor to any one else.” Here Equiano specifically cites his rights: “I have been baptized; and by the laws of the land, no man has a right to sell me.” The captain curiously replies that Equiano, “talked too much English,” alluding to Equiano’s predicament of claiming the laws of “the land,” while at sea, and the laws of a nation of which he is not a citizen. Without being recognizable as an Englishman by skin color or native tongue and not yet within the national boundaries of “the land,” where his citizenship might be rightfully processed and acknowledged through institutional systems, Equiano has little real or symbolic currency to access his theoretical rights. Curiously, it is at this very moment as English law fails him, and he is told that rights of personhood are literally a foreign language spoken by him, Equiano in a fit of frustration invokes divine law as an appeal against his new master, “as I could not get any right among men here, I hoped I should hereafter in Heaven.” At the very least in Equiano’s imaginary Christian law promises the rights denied him by political laws that can only recognize his humanity through inclusion within a nation state, a status denied him through his race which visually demarcates him as a foreigner to Englishman and by his existence at sea, outside the bounds of England.

Throughout the passage we see that those English sailors who find themselves in more servile positions emphasize their Christian identity over their national one, and thus express a greater capacity to build affective ties with Equiano despite racial difference. We see the most significant example of such ties between Equiano and Daniel Queen, one of the captain’s attendants, who is significantly older than Equiano and who among other things teaches him “to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me.” Here, again Equiano

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121 Ibid, 98.
122 Ibid, 98.
123 Ibid, 96.
through reading accesses an alternative system of laws that recognize his subjectivity.

Importantly, in this particular reading Equiano notes that he finds “the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here,” \(124\) creating an ethical common ground between Queen and himself that creates a familial tie between the two men. Equiano notes that “[Queen] was like a father to me; and some used even to call me after his name: they also styled me ‘the black Christian.’” \(125\) Where Equiano’s citations of English law are deemed by his new master to be a foreign language emerging from Equiano’s mouth, here biblical law permits other sailors to recognize Equiano as Queen’s son. Their epithet for Equiano while maintaining a consciousness of racial difference by particularizing the universal conception of a Christian, ultimately, at least through friendship, extends to Equiano the rights denied him by his masters because it permits white men to recognize him as fully human. This religious bond that develops into a symbolic familial bond ultimately allows both men to imagine Equiano being freed and participating with Queen in commercial practices denied him throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, a plan thwarted by the master’s sale of Equiano before reaching London. Equiano reports Queen’s assertions, “as I was as free as himself or any other man on board, he would instruct me in his business, by which I might gain a good livelihood.” \(126\)

Invoked as an imperfect remedy to the limited scope of theoretically universal egalitarianism, Equiano refigures the law as traditionally used in Protestant conversion narratives to create affective ties with Christian men and women and as a means of psychological self-protection when civil law denies him freedom and physical safety.

What we learn ultimately through Equiano’s use of Christian tropes as a rhetorical remedy for the limitations put on his freedom by civil law are the limitations of our own laws

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\(124\) Ibid, 96.
\(125\) Ibid, 96.
\(126\) Ibid, 96.
regarding genre. If we derive our definition of modernity from the analysis of first-person narratives produced within America and European nations during the eighteenth century, modern literary cultivation can only be defined as the product of a secular subjectivity defined through the political geography of the nation state. Equiano’s texts teaches us, however, about the negative space of modernity, and that our conception of modernity itself is extrapolated from local cultures conceived through universal terms. Given that Equiano’s own compromised political subjectivity resulted directly from the conditions of a modern western economy, his text directs us to a theoretical blind spot within eighteenth-century literary and cultural studies. What we lose by adapting his text to our conceptions of eighteenth-century genres is an understanding of the significant appropriations Equiano made in order to propose an alternative model of personhood and society, one that attempts to resolve what David Kazanjian calls modernity’s philosophical paradox of relegating a theoretical universal egalitarianism to the practical confines of national citizenship. Equiano’s model of writing imagines a modern form of subjectivity because it imagines a universal egalitarianism, but it can only do so through a revision of the autonomous individuality promoted and enabled through other modern prose forms.
Charles Brockden Brown’s “Walstein’s School of History”: The Romance Writer as Virtuous Patriot

“There are two ways in which genius and virtue may labour for the public good: first by assailing popular errors and vices, argumentatively and through the medium of books; secondly, by employing legal or ministerial authority to this end.”

—Charles Brockden Brown

Charles Brockden Brown’s most extensive presentation of his own narrative theory appears in the fictionalized essay, “Walstein’s School of History,” first published in the August-September 1799 issue of The Monthly Magazine, and American Review, which Brown also edited. The essay appears as a fictional translation “from the German of Krants of Gotha” and expounds Brockden Brown’s theory of literary production through the work and ideas of the fictional characters Walstein, a professor at Jena, and his most prominent student, Engel. Similarly to the opening pages of Brown’s novel, Wieland, “Walstein’s School of History” utilizes the late-eighteenth-century literary life of Weimar and Jena in Saxony to imagine the professional writer as ‘virtuous patriot,’ a neo-classical conception that emerged in late-seventeenth-century English political debates and posited the landowning aristocrat as disinterested public servant. During the revolutionary and early republican period the American founders redefined the virtuous patriot as a ‘natural aristocrat,’ a man who came to public duty and social privilege through talent and merit rather than birth. Due to the

2 For further discussions of the American model of the virtuous patriot see Elizabeth Hinds, Private Property: Charles Brockden Brown’s Gendered Economics of Virtue, 19-33; Paul Rahe, Republics, Ancient and Modern, Inventions of
circulation of German literary and cultural sources in English-speaking intellectual circles during the 1790s, which familiarized Brown with the political influence German writers such as Christoph Martin Wieland, Friederich Schiller, and Johann Jakob Engel had upon the Enlightened Absolutism in the German territories, Brown was once again able to redefine the term, presenting the virtuous patriot not as a civic-minded magistrate or minister, but as romance writer. Despite the marginal social position of the writer in 1790s America, German literary production of the second half of the eighteenth century enabled Brown to envision literary life as “labour for the public good,” disinterested service to an inchoate republic, a function on par with “legal or ministerial authority.”

By the 1790s the concept of virtuous patriotism in America was circulating in at least its third generation and though Brown’s understanding of disinterested civic duty is distinctly post-revolutionary, his formulations of civic virtue still carry the traces of the long century which conceived them. According to Pocock the concept of the virtuous patriot originated in the mid-seventeenth century in James Harrington’s political philosophy, and began to circulate again in English political debates as early as the 1670s as one of two rival “personalities” of property in order to highlight the moral threats to the civic status-quo implicit in capitalism. The revival of Harrington’s theories in the 1670s reintroduced into

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3 Though Peter Mortensen in British Romanticism and Continental Influences: Writing in an Age of Europhobia clearly documents the ways in which British political anxiety in the 1790s manifested itself in a popular backlash against foreign, specifically German, literary productions fearing, that “impressionable British youths [were] already being corrupted by the ‘blackguard productions of the German presses’” (24), the many articles on German literature and writers in English periodicals from the period demonstrate the considerable interest educated readers still had in German culture. Richard Holmes also notes in his Coleridge biography that in 1798 Coleridge “was working on a translation of Wieland’s Oberon.” (174) In America, Charles Brockden Brown’s The Monthly Magazine, and American Review from 1799 to 1801 published over twenty articles on German literature and culture. Also, in American Transcendentalism: A History, Philip F. Gura notes that possibly as early as 1795 influential New England ministers were in possession of J.G. Eichhorn’s Introduction to the New Testament. In 1801 John Quincy Adams completed his translation of Wieland’s Oberon.

4 Brown, 190.
English political rhetoric the concept of “propertied independence,” a model of political subjectivity that made the “moral personality” synonymous with “civic virtue,” a social position that could only be achieved through “the possession of land [that] brings with it unspecialized leisure” 5 and thus enabled the man of property to act as a disinterested party in civic affairs. This Harringtonian model of civic virtue initially offered a counter weight against the corrupting forces of the crown’s parliamentary patronage. Yet after the founding of the Bank of England in the mid-1690s, the disinterested and virtuous neo-Harringtonian personality provided, instead, a durable alternative to the “new class of creditors and speculators,” who made their wealth betting for or against the future stability of the nation. Where the man of landed property was seen as rational because his possessions were secure and real, a ‘real estate,’ the man of commerce was a threat to the public good because his investments were made in public stock, i.e. the National Debt, whose value was determined through speculation; that is, by an individual investor’s imagining “of a moment which will never exist in reality.” As the commercial personality of property gained economic force, Pocock explains, “government and politics seemed to have been placed at the mercy of passion, fantasy and appetite, and these forces were known to feed on themselves and to be without moral limit.” 6 Simply put, the model of the virtuous patriot which represented a disinterested, community-minded morality was being replaced by a definition of property primarily characterized as private, self-interested, and imaginary. The transformation ensured “that political relations were becoming relations between debtors and creditors.” 7

Thus the loss of landed wealth was understood as a loss of a communal moral ground because in politics the disinterested and virtuous patriot operated, at least theoretically, as

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6 Ibid, 112.
7 Ibid, 112.
universal citizen. This universality arose from his self-reliance. His unspecialized economic existence allowed him to function as a professional citizen in the civic arena. Those who had to earn a living each day from their “specialty,”—lawyers, doctors, artisans, etc.—presumably had a limited, self-interested investment in politics resulting from their economic needs, and thus could not be trusted in civic positions because they were not able to make judgments for the entire polis. With the introduction of the financial investor as a major force in England’s economy, the political position of presumed moral objectivity occupied by civic-minded independent wealth was now seen as having been taken over by a powerful and specialized interest group, whose financial gain came from betting against the success of the nation.

Pocock’s description of the loss of landed wealth as the loss of an unspecialized and disinterested leisure class acting in favor of the public good allows us to link this particular model of civic virtue to Raymond Williams’ analysis of the concept of “culture” that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century. By reading Williams’ discussion as an extension of Pocock’s historical analysis, we can begin to see that with the loss of a disinterested civic moral position due to the specialization of wealth, culture is asked to act as the universalizing human perspective that landed wealth had earlier assumed. Pockock’s analysis permits us to see Williams’ initial description of the major function of culture in the period as an attempt to fill the moral vacuum left behind by the loss of the civic category of the virtuous patriot:

I wish to show the emergence of culture as an abstraction and an absolute: an emergence which, in a very complex way, merges two general responses—first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgment and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative.8

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Culture, Williams argues, attempts to unite those “moral and intellectual” capacities of political subjectivity that have been thwarted by a new social order defined by “the driven impetus” of market forces. Where earlier the conservative personality of the virtuous patriot functioned as a conceptual bulwark against the commercial personality associated with the then emerging liberal market forces, culture in the abstract is now asked to perform a kind of postpartum heuristic social work by providing “a court of human appeal.” It is invoked as a negative space of affect and cognition into which the political subject is able to retreat in order to recover all those human capacities erased from him through his chief civic function as economic actor in a state defined primarily by market forces. Williams’ analysis of the period’s separation of “moral” and “intellectual” activities from the driving economic “impetus” of a new market-based society underlines both the problem of specialization in the public arena and the disintegration of the cognitive and affective functions of the individual political subject due to such specialization.

The articulation of these structural divisions foreshadows the problems culture faces as a heuristic category in a market economy composed of specializations. If the emergence of a speculative economy forces the extinction of a civic moral apparatus by impoverishing the definition of political subjectivity, culture is asked to remedy this loss by imposing itself to “set over the processes of practical social judgment,” that is, to operate as a mode of moral judgment. But ultimately culture—defined here as the category of the universal meant to recuperate the moral and intellectual impulses of the political subject—will fail at this task for formal reasons alone. To borrow Marx’s vocabulary, though culture will be invoked ideologically as a desired superstructure, it can only function practically as another type of specialized labor emerging through new relations of production. Civic virtue in the neo-Harringtonian model avoided such a degradation because of the official position of power
assigned to the landowning aristocracy in the traditional civic order. The attempt to relocate disinterested civic authority to culture in Britain, a move that begins roughly at the same time as the French Revolution, exposes culture to all the economic constraints facing a rising middle-class. Thus, culture’s definition as that category of human activity resistant to specialization is formally rendered a specialization in the face of capital. Its failure to exist as a public arena in which citizens relate to each other as such, rather than as representatives of their respective economic interests, is made legible by the fact that culture itself emerges as simply another labor, one in which the artist and the writer as professionals are subjected to market forces. Williams displays the irony of this fact through his discussion of Romantic writers. If we take further his discussion of Wordsworth’s “Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads” we reach a clearer understanding of how a new capitalist economy both makes necessary the definition of culture in circulation and how it precludes it from operating as a universal category.

Wordsworth’s text from 1800 shows us how one hundred years after the Financial Revolution, which Pocock credits with revitalizing the aristocratic landowner as an archetypal figure for disinterested civic virtue, the ideological site for “common” or universal human experience is still the rural countryside where “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil” as opposed to the city where “the increasing accumulation of men, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident.” Wordsworth speaking from the other side of the economic revolution, argues that rural life cultivates in us an exemplary affective life, an aspect of our being that has been deadened by the repetitive, mechanistic labor found in the industrialized city. Though Wordsworth’s representative men are linked to the aristocratic landowner through the “soil,” he is talking

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about a different class of men, not those disinterested enough to function in an active civic sphere, but simply those engaged in “rural occupations,” that Wordsworth claims still permit them access to their capacities as humans rather than their functions as laborers.

Wordsworth recognizes the rural inhabitant as someone who has escaped the dehumanizing elements of specialized labor and this again is another link between the rural laborer and the landed aristocratic; though the rural inhabitant lacks the independence of wealth, his work keeps him free from industrial specialization. But Wordsworth implies that the rural laborer cannot recognize himself as exemplary of the human condition, a means of species identification for others. This job Wordsworth ascribes to the poet and it is in the poet’s relationship to rural life through which the paradox of culture emerges. The poet, Wordsworth argues, functions as an expert in identifying those experiences that define humans as such through his ability to collect these experiences in his poetry through which readers can develop in themselves a species recognition. Poetry thus gains its moral ground as an arena for sympathy: “for short spaces of time to let himself...identify his own feelings with theirs.”

Wordsworth’s articulation of the poet’s position, however, reveals that the poet cannot extricate himself from the economy of specialization that is to blame for the loss of the natural development of humans as such:

[A poet] is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.

A moral crisis lurks in Wordsworth’s description. The poet claims for himself a heightened sense of human nature, an uncommonly easy access to what is common to us all, to the affective qualities that define us as an ‘us.’ Yet, poetry, and here poetry is simply one example

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10 Ibid, 441.
11 Ibid, 441.
of the task culture is asked to perform at this historical moment, has been forced to act as a substitute for something that should operate ‘naturally’ within each of us. The claim in favor of the poet’s expertise is a claim against the universality of “human nature.” If we need an expert to teach us an affective sensibility that is presumably inherent to us as a species, the claim to universality is illogical. Wordsworth’s treatise reveals to us that once the universal has to operate under the auspices of a profession, then a full definition of humanity becomes available only as a commodity, an object of “taste” that we may choose to purchase or not, depending on our subjective whims. Culture, operating as purveyor of the ‘naturally’ human, structurally cannot impose itself as a universal “philosophy” once pushed into the position of a specialized skill set.\(^\text{12}\)

Wordsworth’s “Preface” in its attempt to recoup through the category of cultural production a definition of humanity not at the mercy of market forces sheds light on the challenges facing post-revolutionary intellectuals who wished to assign culture the position in the civic arena occupied earlier by the aristocratic model of the virtuous patriot. By presenting the poet as a man possessing the particular ability to recover a universally human affective life through poetic production, Wordsworth implicitly acknowledges both the loss of a communal life of affects and the inability of culture to impose itself as anything other than another profession.

If we turn now to Charles Brockden Brown’s “Walstein’s School of History,” we see that the dominance of neo-republican concepts, specifically “natural aristocracy” and “virtue” in popular American political discourse of the 1790s, and Brown’s interest in eighteenth-century German literature, specifically Weimar Classicism, allow him to establish

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 441.
a model of the writer as virtuous patriot that both operates as a component of established
civic order and rejects authority based on wealth, birth, or religion.

Though the model of republican virtue in America rejects the traditional authority of
an aristocracy, patriotic virtue sees itself as a conservative force against the liberal market
forces taking shape in the new democracy. As early as 1779 in a letter to James Warren,
George Washington, in the midst of fighting the revolutionary war, fears that a sense of civic
duty, of public “virtue,” is being lost to a class of individuals interested in “speculation:”
“Our conflict is not likely to cease so soon as every good man would wish. The measure of
iniquity is not yet filled; and unless we can return a little more to first principles, and act a
little more upon patriotic ground, I do not know when it will—or—what may be the issue of
the contest. Speculation—peculation—engrossing—forestalling—with all their
concomitants, afford too many melancholy proofs of the decay of virtue…”

Similarly, historian Gordon Wood writes that immediately following the American Revolution “the
American people seemed incapable of the degree of virtue needed for republicanism. Too
many…were too deeply involved in trade and moneymaking to think beyond their narrow
interests or their neighborhoods and to concern themselves with the welfare of their states
or their country.” Both Washington’s letter and Wood’s analysis present the anxiety of the
founders who were troubled by the fact that the neo-classical conception of civic virtue
which required citizens to see themselves as political actors willing to sacrifice individual gain
for the public good was losing out to a liberal individualism that argued for the value of self-
interested actions.

A similar anxiety becomes clear in the first issue of *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review* (April 1799), a periodical emerging from the intellectual activities of The Friendly Club, which according to Bryan Waterman was a primary example of “the gentleman’s conversation club, a principal Enlightenment form, [that] allowed its members to enact on a miniature scale their ideal principles for public debate, …a ‘juridical public sphere’ in which readers would converse about and judge morals and knowledge in relation to the material they voraciously read.”

The magazine was edited by club member Charles Brockden Brown. A letter to the editor entitled “On the State of American Literature” operates as an ersatz mission statement for the publication, welcoming the magazine as a remedial measure serving “the interests of letters and science in America.” The author of the letter, identified only with the initial “M,” was obviously not a reader at large given that this was the magazine’s first issue, but rather a member of the magazine’s staff, most likely Samuel Miller. The letter argues that the development of the “literary character” in America is hindered by the “love of gain:” “[p]erhaps there never was such a theatre for *speculation* as the United States have presented for the last twelve or fifteen years.” This letter demonstrates that American intellectuals in particular were troubled by the general public’s desire for the quick acquisition of wealth at the expense of civic virtue. Though they share this suspicion of speculative capitalism with conservative forces in the nation, they see intellectual development rather than patriotism as virtuous. Like Washington’s letter, “On the State of American Literature” situates its argument in terms of a much longer neo-classical republican tradition skeptical of liberal market forces. By positing literature, i.e.

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16 Bryan Waterman hypothesizes Miller to be the writer of this letter due to the similarity of concerns between this text and Miller’s known publications.

culture, in opposition to the “love of gain,” the letter signals The Friendly Club’s allegiance to a more progressive notion of virtue aligned with Enlightenment notions of intellectual self-development.

Charles Brockden Brown’s own vision of the writer as virtuous patriot emerges through the nexus of references and allusions in his “Walstein’s School of History.”

“Walstein’s School of History. From the German of Krants of Gotha,” the full title of Brown’s first published statement on the art of writing, already begins to reveal the complexity involved in the practice of Brown’s narrative theory. Here, as he does throughout the essay, Brown conspicuously avoids the words “novel” and “romance” as generic labels for narrative fiction and instead chooses the designation of “history.” The title also deliberately erases Brown as the author of the essay by announcing the text not as a statement of Brown’s own ideas, but as a historical overview of another writer’s work, namely, “Walstein’s.” Not only does the title tell us that the text summarizes the ideas of Walstein, who we learn in the opening sentence was a professor of history at Jena, but the fictional framework announced by the title further expunges Brown from his author position by demarcating the work as a translation, “from the German of Krants of Gotha.” The text’s rhetorical structure thus ensures that Brown appears neither as the writer, who espouses a theory of narrative fiction as a genre of history, nor as the critic summarizing the work of the writer Walstein, who saw the historian’s work as a type of imaginative writing. Brown does not even appear as the translator of the text. The reader at most could assume Brown to have edited the text, which in its initial publication appeared in *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* 2:4 (April 1800).

Though in “Walstein’s School of History” Brown only uses the generic designation of “history” for the kind of imaginative writing Walstein and Engel write, in his essay “The Difference Between History and Romance” Brown designates the kind of interpretive history that Walstein, Engel, and he himself write as “romance.” For this reason, I have chosen to use “romance” throughout my discussion of Brown’s work.
American Review edited by Brown, which often published informative articles on European literature. The obvious questions then are why Brown would present his theory of fiction as the work of a fictional, presumably recently dead, German author and what relationship is there between the fictional framework of the essay and the theory of literature proposed within that framework? In examining the complex of figuration resulting from the essay’s numerous layers of narrative and literary references, it soon becomes clear that Brown’s rhetorical strategy of ‘a history within a history’ carefully avoids presenting his decisively secular argument for the writer as custodian of a nation’s moral life as a radical political concept, but rather as the natural continuation of a classical republican tradition. By doing so Brown conceptualizes a classical civic structure through which the writer as public intellectual propagates Enlightenment ideals as the dominant ideology of the republic.

Through redefining narrative fiction as history and presenting this redefinition as a historical fact rather than as a new idea emerging from post-revolutionary political needs “Walstein’s School of History” fabricates a history that both justifies and demonstrates the writer’s civic role as part of western political tradition. The essay, then, is a rich example of the practice that it preaches.

Brown’s understanding of the relationship between imaginative writing and history first begins to emerge through the narrator’s description of Walstein’s beliefs on the subject in the opening of the essay. Through a sober accounting by the narrator, Krantz of Gotha, we learn that historical writing as practiced by Walstein and his students is a form of fiction that uses a historical past in order to create coherent and socially constructive narratives for

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*The Monthly Magazine, and American Review (1799-1800)* modeled itself after English periodicals and strove, among other things, to keep readers abreast of cultural developments in Europe. The following sampling of the magazine’s articles on European culture show that “Walstein’s School of History” would have seamlessly fit into the magazine’s usual coverage of foreign cultural affairs: “Account of the Political Journals, &c. in the Dominions of the King of Denmark,” (Oct 1800); “Literary Industry of the Germans,” (Jan 1800); “A View of the State of the Stage in Germany,” (Jun 1800); “Life of Augustus Burger,” (May 1800).
the present. The method and style used by both Walstein and nine of his most “assiduous” students focuses on the explication of historical causes and effects: “[t]he same minute explication of motives, the same indissoluble and well-woven tissue of causes and effects, the same unity and coherence of design, the same power of engrossing the attention…”

Then, in introducing Walstein’s two major works, one on the life of Cicero, the other on the Marquis of Pombal, the narrator tellingly asks, “What link did [Walstein’s] reason discover, or his fancy create between times, places, situations, events, and characters so different?”

We learn that thematic unity, a single argument both within an in individual text and across all of a writer’s works, one deduced either through “reason” or fabricated through authorial “fancy” should be the primary objective of the history writer, more important than historical accuracy. Historical accuracy, the narrator suggests, is a fallacy. “Walstein was conscious of the uncertainty of history,” he assures us. Instead, history’s value is precisely the fictions it creates for the writer’s contemporary community. More specifically, history is to be shaped by writers for the purpose of interpellating individuals into the moral life of a community. As the narrator tells us, “Engel, the eldest of Walstein’s pupils, thought, like his master, that the narration of public events, with a certain license of invention, was the most efficacious of moral instruments.”

Here, the reader begins to see that Walstein’s and Engel’s narrative theory argues for the imaginative writer as creator of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a “classical” moral structure, a code that makes clear proper action for an individual, so that it is not at odds with the aims of the community at large. In other words, literature should produce an

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21 Ibid, 187-188.
22 Ibid, 188.
23 Ibid, 191.
ideological superstructure for a community. We also see that by imagining the writer as part of a community’s infrastructure, Brown avoids the contradiction of Wordsworth’s model of poet as professional. Where Wordsworth conceptualizes the poet in terms of a new social order, the neo-classical political discourse of 1790s America combined with Brown’s interest in narrative rather than poetry, gives Brown recourse to older strategies for unifying a community. As MacIntyre demonstrates, before the modern period, “the chief means of moral education [was] the telling of stories” and each classical culture “possesses a stock of stories which derive from and tell about its own vanished heroic age.”

For Brown to diagnose through his fictional counterparts of Walstein and Engel the need for the modern fiction writer to aid in the implementation of a common culture suggests that he understood his contemporary moment in much the same way that MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment, as a fragmented culture in which the life of the individual is no longer wedded to the life of a community. If the purpose of classical narrative works, such as the epic poem and the saga, is to clearly define a community’s moral structure in order to ensure a compatibility between the telos of an individual life and the good of an entire community, then for Brown to imply the need for modern literature to do the same is to suggest that American civic life of the 1790s demonstrates a dissonance between individual concerns and public life. MacIntyre helps illuminate this fact for us when he notes that in classical communities “poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate.”

It is precisely this correspondence between the forms at work in the text and those outside of the text that differentiate a classical structure with Brown’s neoclassical proposal. Through the two imaginary works of Walstein, the life of Cicero and the life of Pombal, we see that the stories

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25 Ibid, 121.
26 Ibid, 122.
of the past in Brown’s essay are not used to reinforce a social order already in place, but rather to argue in favor of implementing a secular social order, grounded in a belief that virtue emerges from the development of an individual’s reason. Brown’s presentation of his argument through Walstein’s writings on Cicero and Pombal suggest that these ideas have roots in both a distant classical past and the European Enlightenment.

The narrator names “intellectual vigour” as the “link” between Cicero and Pombal, the “link” either discovered or imagined by Walstein as the guiding moral of each biographical narrative. We are told by the narrator that Walstein’s seemingly very different stories, the “imaginary history[ies]” of Cicero and Pombal, share the common truth that political authority should be based on the “moral incident” of “intellectual vigour” rather than the “physical incidents” of “birth and marriage.” Here the narrator espouses the revolutionary era’s ideal of society that rewards merit, the belief that natural abilities rather than social position should decide, who attains political authority in a nation:27

The authority of kings and nobles exemplifies the first species of influence. Birth and marriage, physical, and not moral incidents, entitle them to rule. The second kind of influence, that flowing from intellectual vigour, is remarkably exemplified in Cicero and Pombal. In this respect they are alike.28

In choosing to present the life of Cicero as exemplifying political authority achieved through intellect, Brown, through the work of Walstein, offers a new interpretation of the Roman statesman, who in eighteenth-century American political debates was normally presented either in “elite-conservative idealizations…as a model of patrician virtue [or] dissenting positions that discredit Cicero by emphasizing his selfish desire for celebrity, for example,29

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27 For more on the concept of natural aristocracy in the revolutionary period see Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (189-225).
28 Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 188.
rather than a virtuous concern for the collective public good." Brown would later publish several works on Cicero, two essays, “On the Merits of Cicero” and “Ciceronians,” and a narrative sketch, “Death of Cicero. A Fragment.” All three pieces in turn critique Cicero’s vanity, the worship of Cicero in American politics in the 1790s, and Cicero’s elite republicanism based on his position as a wealthy patrician. The Cicero of Walstein, however, is not to be criticized, but admired for his defense of the Roman republic from the Cataline plot. The narrator relates no other specific references to Cicero’s life and the mention of this conspiracy is presented only through a comment focused on Walstein’s writing: “The conspiracy of Cataline is here related with abundance of circumstances not to be found in Sallust.” Implicit in this comment, given the Roman historian Sallust’s accepted authority on the subject, is Walstein’s narrative invention. In fact, the narrator explicitly compliments Walstein’s Cicero, his “imaginary history,” precisely for its ability to invent believable accounts of the Roman statesman. For instance, invented parts of the narrative, despite being “false,” are “admirable” because they are “so comformable [sic] to Roman modes and sentiments, so self-consistent.” Similarly, the narrator underlines that where Walstein lacks facts for his story, they are “invented with a boldness more easy to admire than to imitate.” Clearly, the narrator is underlining Walstein’s implementation of his own theory of history writing. We can’t overlook, however, that by putting words into the mouth of Walstein’s critic, Krantz of Gotha, Brown is releasing his own myth of Cicero, one that indirectly argues for the intellectual as virtuous patriot. Here, Walstein, by taking “intellectual vigour” as the guiding virtue in his works, erases those aspects of Cicero, which Brown found pernicious to late eighteenth-century American politics. Walstein’s version erases the

8 Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 189.
9 Ibid, 189.
patrician elitism and selfishness of Cicero, which Brown would critique directly in future writings, and instead rearranges the history so that Cicero emerges as a classical republican statesman, who gains authority not because of his elite social position but through his intellect. Readers encountering this essay in Brown’s *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* would have read Brown’s essay and assumed this version of Cicero not as emerging from the imagination of the young American novelist Charles Brockden Brown, but as an account written by a German historian, far removed from a newly democratic America, where political debates waged over the basis of political authority. Thus, the essay, through its recounting of the historical work of the fictional Walstein, permits Brown to display a new Cicero for his American readers, one that advocates a new model of authority based in intellectual ability, rather than wealth.

The description of Walstein’s Pombal, unlike the summary of his Cicero, focuses largely on the accomplishments of the work’s central figure, rather than Walstein’s writing abilities. Pombal appears as an idealized enlightenment reformer, who diminishes the power of Portugal’s “besotted minks, jealous and effeminate nobles, and its cowardly prince.” He rejects the “Romish religion” and “feudal institutions” as equally illegitimate political forces and succeeds to a certain degree in expelling them from the nation. Through his judgment of these institutions as illegitimate due to the means by which they have gained political power, he demonstrates his own virtue. His own right to power, his own “intellectual vigour,” is defined by his rejection of traditional authority and his implementation of an egalitarian Enlightenment ideology. Pombal’s adoption of the correct system of morality marks his intellectual abilities as such and demonstrates the way in which intelligence and virtue are inextricably entwined in the method of narrative writing proposed by Brown through this

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32 Ibid, 190.
essay. Further, Pombol’s narrative presents Brown the opportunity to indirectly critique political authority based on religious authority. Though the description of Pombol’s expulsion of the Jesuits would in its specifics be applauded by the Protestant elites in America, in the abstract, nonetheless, Pombal’s tale demonstrates the moral correctness of intellectual authority trumping religious authority.

Here through the parallels between the writing career of Walstein and the political achievements of Cicero and Pombal, Brown’s argument for the writer as virtuous patriot begins to surface. To the reader it soon becomes clear that like Cicero and Pombal, Walstein gained public authority through his intellectual abilities rather than social status. By creating works in which men gain authority based on intellect and thus virtuously defend their respective nations, Walstein himself becomes defender of the public good. He protects the nation from tyranny by instructing the public that the great political leaders of the past gained political authority due to their intellect. By using history to mythologize the intellectual as virtuous patriot, Walstein makes a circular argument for his own moral authority. This confusion between the civic achievements of Walstein and those of Cicero and Pombal is demonstrated in the narrator’s grammatically ambiguous description of “the happiness of mankind”:

Walstein desired the happiness of mankind. He imagined that the exhibition of virtue and talents, forcing its way to sovereign power, and employing that power for the national good, was highly conducive to their happiness.

Here the reader must question whether “the exhibition of virtue and talents” describes the act of writing or the actions of the heroes within the writing. The ambiguity permits the sentence to serve both as a description of the writer and a description of the writer’s subjects. Through writing about or “exhibiting” those who “exhibited” “virtue and talents”

33 Ibid, 188.
the historical writer himself acts virtuously for he “believes himself displaying a model of right conduct, and furnishing incitements to imitate that conduct, supplying men not only with knowledge of just ends and just means, but with the love and the zeal of virtue.”

“Virtue” as defined in this essay thus has two meanings, acting virtuously and defining for your community what it means to act virtuously. If as MacIntyre argues, virtue is culturally specific, if there is no universal conception of moral behavior, then we can extrapolate that the act of defining virtue is in itself virtuous, for it enables the possibility for a system of morality to exist within a community. Definitions of virtue can only retain coherency within a social context, so the work of the writer is to make legible definitions of human excellence for this context. Through this reasoning, the narrator in his final comment on the work of Walstein, claims moral authority and thus political authority for writers in general:

There are two ways in which genius and virtue may labour for the public good: first by assailing popular errors and vices, argumentatively and through the medium of books; secondly, by employing legal or ministerial authority to this end. Modernity’s standard formulation of republican virtue as “labour for the public good” here is made more specific through the coupling of “virtue” with “genius” to imply the symbiotic relationship between morality and intelligence. We see, too, that defining “virtue” in relationship to “genius” necessitates a reordering of civic authority. “Books” are now the “first” means in operating for the public good, because the greatest public service is a discursive act: “assailing popular errors and vices, argumentatively.” In other words, the most virtuous act of civic duty is to educate the general public through reasoned, written accounts that correct common errors and thus instill a common sense of right and wrong.

Krantz of Gotha’s evaluation of the work of Walstein leads thus to a reevaluation of traditional moral bases, so that now “legal [and] ministerial authority,” i.e. governmental and

34 Ibid, 188.
35 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 123.
36 Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 190.
religious structures, are “second” in their effectiveness towards working for the public good. Brown’s fictionalized historical and critical evaluation of the German writer thus allows him to present within the American public sphere a more specific and radical model of disinterested, virtuous patriotism, one more in alignment with Godwinian doctrines of social improvement, than customary late-eighteenth-century American conceptions of republican virtue grounded in Christianity. Through Walstein, Brown envisions a social order, which supports the development of each citizen’s intellectual capacities primarily through a literary public sphere and curbs the authority of formal civic and religious institutions.

These conclusions radically challenge the status quo of 1790s America, which saw religion as necessary for the moral health of the republic. The notion that religion is necessary to republican virtue in revolutionary-era America surfaces in both official and popular forms. In 1787, for example, the *Virginia Independent Chronicle* ran an editorial in which an anonymous citizen argued:

> [Y]et the most approved and wisest legislators in all ages, in order to give efficacy to their civil institutions, have found it necessary to call in the aid of religion; and in no form of government whatever has the influence of religious principles been found so requisite as in that of a republic. It requires but a slight degree of observation to be convinced that mankind require that awe of some power to confine them within the line of their duty. 37

The distrust of Enlightenment-era beliefs that a fully-developed capacity for reason would ensure the general morality of citizens in a republic emerges not just in the reflections of private individuals, but also in law itself. For instance, the third article of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights, drafted by Samuel Adams in 1779 and adopted by the state’s legislature in 1780 states, “the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of

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civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality.”

For Brown to replace “religion” with “intellect,” as the natural partner to “virtue” as he does is a radical revamping of republican ideology that dominated Brown’s American scene, one that no doubt would have opened Brown up to the charge of atheism. Though Brown’s reconception of the virtuous patriot as writer serves as a justification for the importance of his own vocation, the fact that intellectual labor replaces religion in his model of republicanism at least partially accounts for his choice to place this ideology in the mouths of distant German intellectuals.

Though Brown hides his authorship of this essay, presumably to evade controversy at home in America, and stages his radical revision of the virtuous patriot as a foreign import, he does, however, cleverly insert himself into the essay through the character of Engel. Any reader with a knowledge of Brown’s work would know that Brown rewrites the narrative of his own *Arthur Mervyn* as the German novel “Olivio Ronsica” by Engel, Walstein’s most important student. Where the first half of the text devotes itself to Walstein’s primary works, which examine grand figures upon the world stage, the second half of the essay in its discussion of Engel’s novel, argues for the importance of writers to portray “the relations in which men, unendowed with political authority, stand to each other…” Where Walstein’s work portrays actions and characters suited for national epics, Engel’s writing concerns itself with situations that arise around issues of “property” and

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39 Bryan Waterman in *Republic of Intellect*, Chapter 2, chronicles the social troubles of Elihu Smith, one of Brown’s closest friends, after Smith admits “his loss of faith in Christianity” in a letter to his friend, Theodore Dwight. Smith’s friends and peers quickly connect Smith’s religious doubts to his intellectual interests in “philosophy,” i.e. the works of European intellectuals, specifically Godwin and Wollstonecraft. Smith’s admission is quickly interpreted by his social circle as a challenge to the public authority of the ministry.

40 Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 193.

41 Ibid, 192.
“marriage,”42 middle-class subjects traditionally associated with the novel form. Such subject matter is valuable as a moral tool, Brown’s narrator argues, because the average reader identifies with the predicaments in which Engel’s characters find themselves: “But though few may be expected to be monarchs and ministers, every man occupies a station in society in which he is necessarily active to evil or to good.”43 Here again we see that despite Brown’s radical views regarding the basis of civic and moral authority, he eschews liberal individualism in favor of a classical social order in which each citizen understands his civic duties in terms of a shared morality. His vision for the writer as the propagator of virtue is less an argument for an entirely new model of civic order, than for the dissemination of a post-Enlightenment progressive value system through a neo-classical civic apparatus. As will become clear in the discussion of Wieland below, Brown is keenly aware that for a community to function it must have a coherent system of ethical beliefs. Where Brown differs from many of his contemporaries is his understanding that in the secular age it is the romance writer’s civic duty to define such a system publicly.

The narrator’s summary of “Olivo Ronsica,” illustrates for the reader the way in which works of literature can have a positive moral effect upon average people in familiar situations. In Engel’s story of Olivo the reader learns that even in situations of powerlessness, ignorance, and deprivation, an individual can act virtuously. Olivo, the narrator informs us, is “a rustic youth,” who leaves his provincial home due to “domestic revolutions,” “destitute of property, of friends, and of knowledge of the world.” “Virtue and sagacity,”44 we are told, will help him acquire all these things which he lacks. Upon entering the German city of Weimar, Olivo demonstrates his virtue through his contact with “a

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42 Ibid, 192.
43 Ibid, 193.
44 Ibid, 193.
vicious character,” Semlits, who is unable to corrupt the youthful hero. Olivo ends his contact with Semlits, once he learns of the man’s moral corruption, but then becomes gravely ill due to a pestilence “prevalent throughout the north of Europe.” While under the care of a physician, Olivo relates his “previous adventures” and slowly is restored to health. Olivo’s narrative is exactly the story of *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown’s novel set in Philadelphia during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. The insertion of Brown’s own novel here disguised as the work of Engel makes it clear that the supposed tradition of Walstein and his students is synonymous with Brown’s own understanding of the romance form. Given that Walstein’s “imaginary histories” resemble earlier epic forms in their presentation of grand leaders successfully defending the integrity of their respective nations, but still share the same moral imperatives of Engel’s writing, which chooses humbler characters and circumstances as its subjects matter, we see that Brown understands the novel to perform the same moral task in the post-revolutionary era, which the epic did for the classical age. If, as MacIntyre argues, “human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story,” then part of the task of the writer is to understand what form the human story is taking in his respective historical moment. For this reason Brown’s stealthy inclusion of his own work in a narrative of German literary history cannot be interpreted solely as a gesture of political self-protection for his radical position on the role of the writer in a republic. Instead, we must recognize that “the progressively coded German literary wave of the 1790s” did offer Brown not only ways of writing the stories of new life forms made

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46 Ibid, 194.
48 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.
49 Barnard & Shapiro intro. to Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 185.
possible by the age of revolution, but also ways of imagining the writer’s role in influencing the new political structures that will ultimately influence the forms of life possible.

Brown’s insertion of *Arthur Mervyn* points to one formal kinship between Brown and his German contemporaries. As Barnard and Shapiro suggest, “in anagrammatical fashion” the title of Engel’s “Olivo Ronsico” seems to allude to Christoph Martin Wieland’s hero Don Silvio von Rosalvo in his romance, *Der Sieg der Natur über die Schwärmerei oder die Abenteuer des Don Silvio von Rosalvo* (1764), published in English in 1773 as *Reason Triumphant over Fancy; or the Adventures of Don Silvio of Rosalvo*. Wieland imitates *Don Quixote* in this comic work in order to poke fun at his own earlier Pietism expressed in his writings from the 1750s, which were strongly devotional and which he later abandoned for a more worldly, rationalistic philosophy. Though the narratives of “Olivo Ronsico” and *Don Silvio von Rosalvo* have little in common, the rejection of the religious life for an intellectual one in Wieland’s romance expresses a stance compatible with the implicit agenda of Brown’s essay.

To allude to Christoph Martin Wieland serves Brown’s overall conception of the romance writer espoused in “Walstein’s School of History” in two more important ways. First, the self-formation (*Bildung*) of the youthful hero that operates as a narrative telos in *Arthur Mervyn* marks Brown’s novel as an American variant of the German *Bildungsroman*, of which Wieland’s *History of Agathon* (1766-1767) is considered the first example and which appeared in English translation in 1773. To invoke Wieland indirectly, then, within an allusion to his own novel, is for Brown to acknowledge the German author as an important precursor to *Arthur Mervyn*'s literary form. Though Wieland’s *History of Agathon* takes place in Athens in the late 5th Century B.C., Agathon, like Brown’s Arthur, is a youth of no particular

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50 Ibid, 185,
importance. Through a set of contradictory statements emerging from the opening claim of Wieland’s “Author’s Preface” to *Agathon*, Wieland fashions a critical statement on the art of fiction writing very similar to the one espoused by Brown in “Walstein’s School of History.” Wieland inaugurates his work with a statement that both attests to *Agathon’s* authenticity as a translation of an ancient manuscript rather than an invented tale, and doubts his readers ability to accept this claim of authenticity as true:

The Editor of this History sees so little probability of being able to persuade the public, that it was really taken from an old Greek manuscript, that he thinks it best to be silent on this point, and to leave the reader entirely at liberty to think as he pleases.

Like the work of Walstein and Engel, Wieland deems *Agathon* a “history,” rather than a romance or novel. Further, he states that the basis of the work’s importance should be its authenticity as an ancient document, “that it had been found among the records of ancient Athens,” but the information within the manuscript itself is too insignificant to persuade readers of its importance. What we learn from the manuscript, Wieland claims here, are the mundane facts of Agathon’s existence. We learn the date of his birth, marriage, and death, the disease from which he died, and the number of offspring he left in the world. Because of this fact, Wieland laments, “[W]hat could induce any one from such anecdotes as these, to read his history, even though it could incontestibly [sic] be proved, that it had been found among the records of ancient Athens?” Despite the manuscript’s age, its portrayal of an insignificant figure implies that readers will find no inherent value in the work. Wieland,

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52 There is no evidence that Charles Brockden Brown knew German, so it is generally assumed by scholars that he only read German works in translation. For this reason, throughout this chapter I have chosen to use the 18th century English translations of Wieland’s work, i.e. the translations which Brown himself would have read. The translation of *Agathon* is from 1773 and the translator is anonymous.
53 C.M. Wieland, *The history of Agathon, by C.M. Wieland. Translated from the German original, with a preface by the translator* (London, 1773. Eighteenth Century Collections Online), xviii.
54 Ibid, xvi. “[W]as würde uns bewegen können, seine Geschichte zu lesen, und wenn es gleich gerichtlich erwiesen wäre, daß sie in den Archiven des alten Athens gefunden worden sei?”
however, almost immediately contradicts these opening statements by denying the text’s
originality and declaring that the value of Agathon’s story arises from its presentation of an
identifiable human character: “[t]he truth…of a work of this kind…must depend entirely
upon it’s [sic] consistency with the general customs of the world.”55 The text that was in the
preceding paragraph “found among the records of ancient Athens,” is now a “work” that
through an author’s technical abilities attains “truth” through “consistency.” Consistency we
soon learn means that the text is not obligated to present an objective history, but that the
“author,” i.e. Wieland, must invent a coherent narrative, if the “history” is to have any “use”
for its readers:

…the characters, therefore, are not to be arbitrarily drawn according to the fancy and
peculiar design of the author, but derived from the inexhaustible fund of nature
itself. In the winding up of several parts, the probability of the events in
themselves…must be carefully preserved…Besides this, the peculiar characteristic of
the country, of the spot, and of the age…should be constantly kept in view, and the
whole narrative so put together, that no sufficient reason may be assigned, why the
events should not have happened exactly as they are told, or why they might not
happen again. Such an appearance of truth as this, can only render a work of this kind
useful, and this the author takes upon himself to promise to the readers of The History
of Agathon.56 (xviii) [my italics] 57

Though The History of Agathon began from a manuscript, which contained little significant
narrative of an ancient person’s life, the work of the author is to invent an elaborate life in
literature for him. We are told at the end of this passage that only through such an
appearance of truth can Agathon’s history be “useful” to the reader and render the work

55 Ibid, xviii. “Die Wahrheit, welche von einem Werke, wie dasjenige…gefodert werden kann und soll,
besteht darin, daß alles mit dem Lauf der Welt übereinstimme.”
56 Ibid, xviii
57 “…daß die Character nicht willkürlich, und bloß nach der Phantasie, oder den Absichten des Verfassers
gebildet, sondern aus dem unerschöpflichen Vorrat der Natur selbst hergenommen; in der Entwicklung
derselben so wohl die innere als die relative Möglichkeit…daneben auch der eigene Character des Landes, des
Orts, der Zeit…niemals aus dem Augen gesetzt; und also alles so gedichtet sei, daß kein hinlänglicher Grund
angegeben werden könne, warum es nicht eben so wie es erzählt wird, hätte geschehen können, oder noch
einmal wirklich geschehen werde. Diese Wahrheit allein kann Werke von dieser Art nützlich machen, und diese
Wahrheit getrauet sich der Herausgeber den Lesern der Geschichte des Agathons zu versprechen.”
worthy of study. But what is it exactly that makes the work “useful”? The difference between the description of the original manuscript in the preceding paragraph and the “useful” narrative described above is the difference between a narrative of arbitrary detail and one composed of probable causes and effects. The challenge to the author is not to “arbitrarily” draw a character, but to compose one from the “fund of nature.” Here Wieland calls for a mimetic relationship between the literary persona and people as they appear in the world. In essence, he presents what is not considered the difference between classical literature and the novel as a modern form. The work of the writer is to imbue a literary character with a personality drawn from real life and to ensure that the character acts in accordance with his personality throughout the work. This same attention should be applied to the narrative itself. In the events depicted, nothing “improbable” should occur. In other words, effects must be equal to causes, actions to motives. Obeying these laws of consistency should not result in a narrative that proves there once existed in ancient Greece a youth named Agathon, but rather the narrative should prove that if there had ever been a youth in ancient Greece named Agathon, it is not unlikely that he may have behaved in this way. Again, Wieland is after “the appearance of truth” rather than truth. The difference between “the appearance of truth” and truth itself is the difference between the subjunctive and the simple past. The author is not beholden to what “was” in the objective sense. Instead, he is obligated to intuiting the logic of the world of the past, which now only exists in writing. His work is successful as long as what is shown is not impossible, as long as the reader does not question, “why the events should not have happened exactly as they are told, or why they might not happen again.” The narrative is useful then, because it shows likely characters acting in likely ways. The reader by observing this probable world is able to observe probable
actions and see their probable results. The reader thus gains risk free human experience through observing an actor not unlike himself operate in a world not entirely unlike his own.

Wieland’s dedication to the historical past as a site for imaging probable humans taking probable actions links him to neoclassical traditions interested in grand epics, but his choice of an average youth, whose life has no direct impact on the course of historical events, but rather is a search for personal meaning connects Agathon to the modern novel. By placing an ‘everyman’ hero within a neoclassical setting Wieland’s narrative appears as a hybrid of Walstein’s and Engel’s works. The similarity of purpose between Wieland’s feigned historical framework and Brown’s fictional construction of German literary history in “Walstein” suggests Brown’s knowledge and admiration for Wieland’s narrative theory and methods. Brown’s interest in using fictional narrative for the “minute explication of motives” for existing societal conditions, such as he does in his novel Wieland, which explores the socio-historical reasons for a violent family murder, suggests that Brown was able to adapt Wieland’s narrative theories to suit the historical conditions of his own age.

Many references within “Walstein’s School of History” suggest that not only Wieland’s work influenced Brown’s literary production, but also that Wieland’s public life in Weimar served as a model for Brown’s conception of the romance writer. When Brown transposes his own Arthur Merryn to Engel’s “Olivo Ronsico,” he changes the setting of his own Philadelphia to Wieland’s Weimar, where the German poet served as tutor to the princes and remained a man of letters at court for the majority of his mature life. We can assume from Brown’s other political beliefs that he would not have favored Weimar’s Enlightened Absolutism as an ideal political form, but the fact that Wieland, who abandoned an austere pietism for rational philosophy, functioned officially within the court as tutor to future rulers, must have seemed to Brown as a step closer to the realization of a political
order in which “intellectual vigour” gained political authority. No doubt, the turmoil of 1790s American politics, the struggle for authority between elitist federalism and market-oriented democracy, did not offer Brown any hope that the new nation would take seriously the romance writer as deserving of political authority. We can assume that Brown saw the difference in cultural positions between Wieland and himself something like the differences between Cicero and Pombal, each man “pursuing his end by the means suited to his own condition,” adapting his values to the circumstances of his own political reality.

Brown demonstrates his admiration for Weimar Classicism in general throughout “Walstein’s School of History” through many allusions, suggesting that he saw not only Wieland, but the entire community of writers working in and around Jena and Weimar as already beginning to influence political life through their respected positions as German writers and intellectuals. The many references in Brown’s essay suggest that Brown was not inspired by one German writer in particular, but saw that the literary life in these German cities exhibited an integration between literary production and civic life that was not possible in Brown’s America. For example, as Barnard and Shapiro carefully note, the names Brown chose for the fictional writers Walstein and Engel reference two important figures of eighteenth century German literary life, Frederick Schiller and Johann Jakob Engel. Walstein, Barnard and Shapiro argue, “likely refers to the work of Frederick Schiller,” specifically Schiller’s play History of the Thirty Years War. The name is an alternative English spelling in the period for Wallenstein, and refers to a general who appears in this particular play and other works by Schiller. It seems that Brown chose the name Walstein, not because he wanted to refer to the character in Schiller’s works, but because he wished to reference Schiller himself. Schiller, who like the fictional Walstein was a professor of history at Jena, wrote many

58 Barnard and Shapiro, intro to Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” 185.
fictional works based on major historical events. Like Walstein’s “Cicero” and “Pombal,” which aimed to show that political authority should be based in intellectual abilities, rather than birthright, Schiller’s works often used history as vehicles for progressive politics.

Brown names Engel after the real life German writer Johann Jakob Engel, a professor of moral philosophy, logic, and history, who served as an advisor to Frederick the Great. Like Wieland, Engel’s intellectual life served as the basis for some measure of political authority, if only through an advisory position. To Brown, who was interested in reaching and educating a wide audience of readers through his creative works, Engel’s reputation for making philosophical topics “approachable for nonelite audiences”\(^\text{59}\) must have also been admirable. These writers were well known to the most important political figures of their time and their reputation as men of letters granted them official positions in the civic order. Brown, who was unable to attend university due to his Quaker faith and is presumed to have given up novel writing because of financial insecurity, must have seen Engel’s position as an advisor to Frederick the Great and Wieland’s post as tutor to the princes at the court of Weimar, as the beginnings of a modern enlightened social order, in which a writer was granted authority for his ability to reason and develop this capacity in others.

If we turn for a moment to the novel *Wieland; or The Transformation. An American Tale* (1798) we can diagnose some of Brown’s imagined consequences for a society that lacked a shared ethical ground that he imagined literary culture could provide. Here again Brown utilizes the cultural life of eighteenth century Germany, this time as a means of comparison to between Enlightened Europe and his own contemporary America by imagining the socio-political motives behind a brutal family murder in rural Pennsylvania. Brown used James Yates’ murder of his wife and four children in rural New York State in 1782, as inspiration

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 185.
for the gothic novel, an act which Yates claimed was inspired by divine voices. In 1796 the murders received renewed attention when an account of the event was published in The New York Weekly Magazine; or Miscellaneous Repository and early drafts show that Brown modeled Theodore Wieland, the murderer in his novel, after Yates. Though Brown chooses this particular event around which to structure his narrative, his subtitle, The Transformation: An American Tale and his theory of the novel as a form of diagnostic history writing highlights that the negative changes which occur in the Wieland family over the course of three generations in some sense contribute to a cultural climate in which such a murder could take place. For this reason the opening pages of the novel are especially important, for here we learn that much about what goes wrong in the Wieland family has to do with the differences between an eighteenth-century German literary world and a monadic Protestant American culture.

That Brown chooses to make his American family a branch of the real and famous contemporary German poet’s family highlights the comparative aims of Brown’s work. The “transformation” of the American clan, of the branch of the Wieland family that moves progressively west over the course of three generations has everything to do with the cultural structures available in each geographical location. In the first few pages of the narrative we move from the grandfather’s Saxony, to the father’s England, and then finally, to the daughter and son’s rural Pennsylvania farm where the story proper begins. Saxony functions much like the culture Brown idealized in “Walstein’s School of History,” while England represents a society fractured by Post-Reformation. America appears simply as a private

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family farm where each member of the family operates under his or her own private belief system. Unlike Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*, *Wieland* is not a tale of self-development, but rather an account of a family’s demise as it moves further and further away from socio-political structures that provide a communal set of ethics.

Clara Wieland, sister of the murderer Theodore Wieland, narrates the tale retrospectively, at the request of an unnamed person and she begins her story with her Grandfather Wieland, a German noble and a native of Saxony, who in essence represents the family in its most virtuous state, and Enlightenment ideals in their most developed form. Despite being disowned and disinherited from his noble family for marrying a local merchant’s daughter, Wieland attempts to earn a living via the arts, the only ‘trade’ available to him: “His youth had been eagerly devoted to literature and music.” In the process, Clara claims, her grandfather became “the founder of the German Theater.” Clara also notes that “the modern poet of the same name is sprung from the same family, and, perhaps, surpasses but little, in the fruitfulness of his invention, or the soundness of his taste [my]” grandfather. Tellingly, the elder Wieland wrote in “the Saxon dialect,” thus contributing to a symbolic formation of nation-state identity by moving away from the classical languages, especially Latin, associated with the Catholic Church’s political domination of Europe.

Through his literary career the Wieland grandfather instantiates the kind of progressive secular civic life imagined by Brown as the most virtuous republican form. By naming this family after the poet Wieland and having Clara reveal that the German poet is descended from the same family, Brown implies an alternative narrative for the family. The actions of the novel which take place “between the conclusion of the French and the

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63 Ibid, 6.
64 Ibid, 7.
beginning of the revolutionary war.” From this we can assume that “the modern poet” Wieland would be a contemporary of Clara and Theodore. If Theodore’s murders are the ending of an “American tale,” the implication here is that the alternate “German tale” ends in literary production rather than murder.

The first fateful occurrence which sets the stage for the Wieland family’s demise results from the death of the grandfather and his wife at an early age. Their deaths cause Clara’s father, a young boy at the time, to be sent by his merchant grandfather to be “apprenticed to a London trader [in] mercantile servitude,”

a position of indentured servitude not much higher than a slave’s. Unlike his father, the son remains uneducated and uncultured except “with a view to this profession.”

Where the Grandfather Wieland was ancestor to Weimar Classicism, Clara’s father remains an uncultivated laborer. The father’s life changes when by chance he begins to read the only book in his “garret,” though earlier “he entertained no relish for books, and was wholly unconscious of any power they possessed to delight or instruct.”

After throwing the book carelessly across the room one evening, he notices that it has fallen open to the words “Seek and ye shall find” and he begins to read it voraciously. What is especially relevant here is that the book is not a Bible, but a fugitive Huguenot text, “an exposition of the doctrine of the sect of Camissards” that “abounded with allusions to the Bible,” but itself is no Bible. The reading, then, does not interpellate the father Wieland into a larger institutionalized religious tradition, but serves as the means for him to create a highly private belief system. The young man understands this text to be the single source of religious revelation: “This [the book] was the fountain, beyond

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65 Ibid, 7.
66 Ibid, 8.
67 Ibid, 9.
68 Ibid, 9.
69 Ibid, 9.
which it was unnecessary to trace the stream of religious truth; but it was his duty to trace it thus far.”

Even though the text eventually leads him to acquire a Bible, the central text of all branches of Christianity, his reading of the Bible is marred by his original engagement with sectarian literature:

A Bible was easily procured, and he ardently entered on the study of it. His understanding had received a particular direction…Every fact and sentiment in this book were viewed through a medium which the writings of the Camissard apostle had suggested. His constructions of the text were hasty, and formed on a narrow scale. Every thing was viewed in a disconnected position. One action and one precept were not employed to illustrate and restrict the meaning of another. Hence arose a thousand scruples to which he had hitherto been a stranger. He was alternately agitated by fear and by ecstasy [sic].

Where Walstein demands a unity of form and a delineation of causes and effects in order for a narrative to produce an edifying effect upon its reader, here the Wieland father’s reading causes a sense of fragmentation “a thousand scruples” unable to be mastered via reason, but rather causing him “fear” and “ecstacy.” Bible fails at bringing Wieland into a shared world view for it is filtered through a sectarian vision. Rather than interpellating him into a social order, his reading of the Bible disturbs his own sense of self.

Brown uses literature itself as the source of the vastly different experiences between grandfather and father. The grandfather by virtue of his education in literature founds a national German theater, a means of creating a new political formation in the aftermath of the Reformation. The father, however, through his chance, but dedicated engagement with a radical sectarian religion loses the possibility of a national identity, for he must leave England “on account of his religious tenets.” Having been deprived inclusion in the national life of both Germany and England, he escapes to America.

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70 Ibid, 10.
71 Ibid, 10.
72 Ibid, 9.
Through these parallel stories Brown presents an argument for the possibility of literature to create both a coherent moral system and a shared culture in an age where religion has begun to divide traditional society. Brown’s description of the Wieland family in America is marked by a dangerous inability for family members to share a belief system. They thus fail to have a common interpretation of the world around them. Soon after the father arrives in America, where he wishes to convert “the unbelieving nations,” i.e. the native Americans, he abandons his plan to proselytize, choosing instead to buy land and slaves. This “[gives] him who was poor in Europe all the advantages of wealth.” Strangely religious, Clara notes, “He allied himself with no sect, because he perfectly agreed with none.” Despite his original impulse to convert non-believers, he does not instruct his family in the faith as he understands it to have “been expressly prescribed to him.” Clara’s mother, raised as a Moravian, continues her practice in that tradition without any conflicts with the father: “My father refused to interfere in her arrangements…Other modes, if practised [sic] by other persons, might be equally acceptable.” In other words, the Wieland house is one of religious plurality and toleration. So little commonality is found among the members that the family seems not to even share a belief in the same God. Clara in describing the temple her father built on the property for his own worship states, “This was the temple of his Deity.”

The opposition of world views within the family becomes especially clear in the dialogue surrounding the father’s death. One evening, while praying alone in his temple, he is struck down by a fiery force, which burns his skin and turns his clothes to ash. His injuries are severe, but he lives long enough to communicate to the family that he was punished for

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73 Ibid, 11.
74 Ibid, 11.
75 Ibid, 13.
76 Ibid, 12.
not converting the natives, as he was called to do. His brother-in-law, a surgeon, is a man of science and skeptical of the father Wieland’s claims and believes the injuries to be the result of spontaneous combustion rather than divine intervention. Brown’s own skepticism regarding the religious nature of the incident is expressed in a footnote, claiming that such “symptoms” were recently documented in a Florentine medical journal.77 Though Clara is too young to make sense of her father’s death, she notes that in hindsight it has caused her confusion:

Is it a fresh proof that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects, and commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submission to his will? Or, was it merely the irregular expansion of the fluid that imparts warmth to our heart and our blood, caused by the fatigue of the preceding day, or flowing, by established laws, from the condition of his thoughts?78

It is with these words that the reader enters the narrative proper, the story of the murders which Theodore Wieland commits in the name of God. By the end of the novel we see that Theodore Wieland accepting the first idea “that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs” by commanding his believers is enough for him to believe the voices in his head encouraging to slay his wife and children. Wieland’s ability to explain his murders as an obedience to a highly personal God worshipped through a highly personal religion makes this novel a critique of the radical self-authorizing individualism emerging from Protestant sectarianism.

The pluralism of world views emerging from such religious divisions, Brown’s novel implies, leads to the kind of moral incoherency inherent in Theodore’s self-defense. By referencing the German literary culture of Weimar Classicism through direct references to Christoph Martin Wieland, Brown suggests that the moral incoherency of eighteenth-century America, which results from competing religious views, could be reconciled through the

77 Ibid, 19.
78 Ibid, 18-19.
implementation of a unified moral code based in secular literary production such as he proposes in “Walstein’s School of History.” Though Brown’s commitment to a secular national culture marks him as an Enlightenment figure, his dedication to a classical social order defined as a shared code of ethics reveal him to be a staunch critique of liberal individualism. Brown’s redefinition of the virtuous patriot as romance writer proposes that earlier classical civic structures can be adapted to a post-revolutionary, Enlightened world.
“I have not been particularly anxious to give the geography of the scene, inasmuch as it seemed to me no route, no series of stations, but a garden interspersed with cottages, groves and flowery lawns, through which a stately river ran...What I got from the journey was the poetic impression of the country at large; it is all I have aimed to communicate.”

In making sense of the composition of *Summer on the Lakes*—specifically the author’s frequent interruption of the empirical facts of the journey “with random associations or with insertions of brazenly extraneous matter, especially with ad hoc poetic flights,” as one frustrated reader put it, sympathetic critics have clung to Fuller’s own formulation of her compositional strategy as “the poetic impression of the country at large,” a statement she makes at the end of the text’s third chapter. Latching on to this allusion to a distinctly Romantic form of sensibility implicit in her phrase “poetic impression,” Fuller’s champions, generally speaking, attempt their defense of the work’s form through attenuated notions of Romantic aesthetics.

Susan Belasco Smith, paraphrasing Lawrence Buell, for instance, suggests in her introduction to *Summer on the Lakes* that the overall popularity of the travel genre in the nineteenth century was due to “the rise of romanticism with its stress on individual experience.” Her analysis emphasizes the importance of the perceiving subject, suggestive of the valorization of sensibility in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, though Smith stops

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3 Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 43.
4 Susan Belasco Smith, introduction to *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* by Margaret Fuller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), xii.
short of acknowledging the text’s affinity with any particular strain of Romanticism. Instead, she aligns the genre with gender rather than the practices of a specific aesthetic movement, “Summer on the Lakes follows the tradition of portfolio and sketchbook writing that began at the turn of the nineteenth century and was largely an art form practiced by women.”

Similarly, John Matteson, Fuller’s most recent biographer, references Romanticism in his assessment of the text’s form by aligning the composition with the German literary culture Fuller knew so well, claiming that “[t]he patchwork nature of Fuller’s narrative is due in part to her wanting to infuse her book with some of the spirit of the German Romantics.” His identification and definition of a specific Romantic aesthetic or practice remains as cursory as Smith’s, only substantiated by the claim that German Romantics remain “generally less concerned with telling logically connected stories than they were with revealing philosophical and psychological truth.”

Stephen Adams in his article, “That Tidiness We Always Look for in Woman: Fuller’s Summer on the Lakes and Romantic Aesthetics” due to his title appears to promise a more thorough engagement with aesthetic theory, but inevitably eschews the subject through a thematic reading of the works’ disparate materials. Conceiving of “Romantic literary experimentation” as a formal literary category in itself, Adams argues “[p]erhaps the letters, tales, poems, extracts from books, and other materials ostensibly unrelated to the trip do not merely pad out an otherwise skimpy narrative, but help control

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5 Ibid, xiv.
6 Fuller translated Goethe’s Tasso, Eckermann’s Conversations with Goethe, and two epistolary novels by Bettina von Arnim, Goethe’s Correspondence with a Child and Die Günderode. For more on Fuller’s work as a translator see Colleen Glenney Boggs, “Margaret Fuller’s American Translation,” American Literature, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Mar., 2004), pp. 31-58.
8 Ibid, 235.
10 Ibid, 261.
and direct the book’s shape and major themes.”\textsuperscript{11} Flattening the definition of the Romantic travel narrative as a genre to “some kind of voyage out and back,”\textsuperscript{12} he groups \textit{Summer on the Lakes} with works such as \textit{The Prelude}, \textit{Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage}, “Song of Myself,” \textit{Walden}, and \textit{Moby-Dick}, arguing that a “voyage” functions as a “loose narrative spine” for such “Romantic experimentation” because “[t]he focus shifts from the landscape…to subjective or inner exploration.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus, with his thematic analysis Adams never adequately reads Fuller’s work through the aesthetic philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

I begin with these representative examples of common explanations of \textit{Summer on the Lakes} because they display a general critical predilection in the study of nineteenth-century American literature to comprehend European Romanticism as simply a monolithic late-eighteenth-early-nineteenth-century literary privileging of subjective experience. In doing so such readings perform a great disservice to \textit{Summer on the Lakes} as a text, and Fuller as an author and intellectual. They also obfuscate one of the most significant examples in American literature of an adaptation of a particularly European conception of literary and aesthetic cultivation for the very literal and literary purposes of cultivating a new American landscape.\textsuperscript{14} Fuller’s text betrays a deep understanding and engagement with the codes, conventions, and theories of the British picturesque movement, an awareness she already

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\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 248.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 251.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 251.
\textsuperscript{14} To emphasize the pervasive academic understanding of the text as one of solely regional interest, I find it important to note that the most recent scholarly edition of \textit{Summer on the Lakes}, edited by Susan Belasco Smith and published in 1991, appeared in the “Prairie State Books” series of the University of Illinois Press. The mission statement for the series emphasizes the text as one of mostly local interest: “In conjunction with the Illinois Center for the Book, the University of Illinois Press is reissuing in paperback works of fiction and nonfiction that are, by virtue of authorship and/or subject matter, of particular interest to the general reader of the state of Illinois.” More recent editions of the text appear from independent presses as a print-on-demand title.
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suggests through her most basic authorial choice: to write a domestic travel narrative as “a poetic impression of the country at large.”

Many critics interpret Fuller’s understanding of American literature as “a new poetry” and “new intellectual growth” due to the geographic and historical divide between the United States and Europe, as a call for an American literature devoid of any connection to Old World literary traditions. Smith, for instance, writes that Fuller was “a leading proponent of the development of a uniquely American literature that would not be imitative or repetitive of British traditions.” Fuller’s own writing, however, never makes such wholesale divisions between American and European cultural productions, a result of her deep engagement with European literature. Colleen Glenney Boggs argues in particular that “translation enabled Fuller to define cultural identity as a model of personhood that depends on a dialogue with others in a nation whose culture emerges in global contexts.” Fuller’s own words amend Boggs’ assertion, focusing less on a model of subjectivity, than a theory of cultural capital focused on European sources. In her article “Americans in Europe” from 1847, for instance, Fuller identifies three types of Americans she encountered during her time abroad as a journalist. The first she names “the servile American,” whose main interest as a European traveler is “to spend his money and indulge his tastes.” His ultimate end is to gather enough European cultural ‘accoutrements’ in order to “win importance at

15 Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, 43.
16 Ibid, 18.
17 Susan Belasco Smith, “Introduction,” in Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, xv.
18 Colleen Glenney Boggs, “Margaret Fuller’s American Translation,” American Literature, Volume 76, Number 1, March 2004.
19 Boggs’ essay emphasizes the important role translation played in shaping Fuller’s understanding of culture as transnational, arguing that for Fuller American Literature was “domestically and globally transnational.” (33) Supporting this proposition with a reading of a single passage from Summer on the Lakes, she suggests that Fuller treated European and Native American culture as equally valuable and developed. As I show throughout this chapter, Fuller’s relationship to the U.S. expulsion and genocide of Native Americans was complicated and often contradictory. Though Fuller’s understanding of culture was transnational, it was also deeply Eurocentric.
20 Margaret Fuller, At Home and Abroad; or, Things and Thoughts in America and Europe, ed. Arthur B. Fuller (New York: The Tribune Association, 1869).
21 Ibid, 250.
home” “among those less traveled and as uninformed as himself.” The second type Fuller names “the conceited American, instinctively bristling and proud of—he knows not what. He does not see, not he, that the history of Humanity for many centuries is likely to have produced results it requires some training, some devotion, to appreciate and profit by.” Fuller ultimately valorizes the third species of American, “the thinking American,” who studies and adapts European culture to benefit the situation of his new nation. Here, more conspicuously than in her second example’s reference to “training,” Fuller presents a model of intellectual cultivation. She does so through an extended botanical metaphor, where individual plants transported to the U.S. stand in for the transmigration of cultural objects and traditions from a European into an American context:

…a man who, recognizing the immense advantage of being born to a new world and on virgin soil, yet does not wish one seed from the past to be lost. He is anxious to gather and carry back with him every plant that will bear a new climate and new culture. Some will dwindle; others will attain a bloom and stature unknown before. He wishes to gather them clean, free from noxious insects, and to give them a fair trial in his new world. And that he may know the conditions under which he may best place them in that new world, he does not neglect to study their history in this.

Fuller’s trope imagines European cultural practices as botanical samples that the “thinking American” consciously transplants from their original context to the “virgin soil” of America, “not wish[ing] one seed from the past to be lost.” Understanding Europe as a past in which he shares, a past figured as both geographic and temporal, the thinking American in his desire to adapt cultural practices to new socio-historical contexts must learn their “history,” so as to best revise them for a new world context. Fuller’s emphasis on “history” presents an understanding of cultural practices as socio-historically specific, but also as an inheritance—a heritage to which the American has a right. Such a heritage is mobile,

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22 Ibid, 251.
23 Ibid, 251.
24 Ibid, 253.
portable in Fuller’s description, emphasizing the modern conception of metaphorical cultivation as a form of personal capital. By figuring intellectual capital as a living, material heritage she emphasizes the responsibilities the American has towards cultural reproduction through transplantation. Knowing that with all transplantation the “plant” risks “dwindl[ing],” and that different “soil” will “attain a bloom and stature” unlike the original, the “thinking American” has an obligation to “know the conditions under which he may best place them in that new world,” in which he may best grow the cultural capital to which he has been given access.

Fuller published this extended meditation on the value of European cultural practices for the new nation as part of her work as a foreign correspondent in Europe, but her engagement with the picturesque in *Summer on the Lakes* demonstrates that already in 1843 she understood the deep relationship between real and imaginary cultivation, and understood the inherent value of intellectual capital both for an individual and a nation. Her statements on the thinking American’s relationship to European culture and her own writing practice reveal that Fuller’s conception of an original American literature was not a culturally isolationist one. She understood that European culture offered Americans strategies for imagining themselves as a nation. The originality of American literature and thought for Fuller emerges from the fact that American writers by necessity need to adapt inherited forms to new socio-political terrains. The innovation inherent to such cultural transposition becomes apparent in *Summer on the Lakes* itself. Fuller’s picturesque does not differ from the British tradition in its imposition of aesthetic enclosure upon a natural terrain recently subjected to physical enclosure, though, as will become clear below, the particulars of the American situation require her to revise the types of social divisions facilitated by the aesthetic in order to ultimately affirm a conception of national unity.
As a set of eighteenth-century codes and conventions at work in landscape gardening, landscape painting, loco-descriptive poetry, and domestic travel guides, the English picturesque cultivated in its viewer what Christopher Hussey, the first modern critic of the aesthetic, describes as the “habit of viewing and criticizing nature as if it were an infinite series of more or less well composed subjects for painting.” Current criticism of the aesthetic shows that the picturesque “habit” can already be identified as early as 1730 in the tropes of James Thomson’s poem “The Seasons” and in the conventions of the mid-century landscape paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, whose paintings in particular influenced the framing of views in the period’s guidebooks of the English countryside in which writers often referenced the painter’s work in their verbal descriptions of particular ‘natural’ scenes and encouraged their readers to attempt landscape sketches of their own. Art historian Ann Bermingham notes that it wasn’t until the 1790s that William Gilpin and Uvedale Price published the first formal theories of the aesthetic by enlarging Edmund Burke’s category of the beautiful. In *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape*, for example, Gilpin expands beauty as an aesthetic category through his discrimination between the beautiful and the picturesque, where the beautiful describes those objects “which please the eye in their natural state,” and the picturesque those “which please from some quality, capable of being illustrated by painting.” Because of the aesthetic’s stress upon the creation of painterly effects, it valorized roughness, irregularity, and

26 “By beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it. I confine this definition to the merely sensible qualities of things, for the sake of preserving the utmost simplicity in a subject which must always distract us, whenever we take in those various causes of sympathy which attach us to any persons or things from secondary considerations, and not from the direct force which they have merely on being viewed.” (91) Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, U of Notre Dame, Notre Dame London, 1968.
variousness found in Great Britain’s landscapes, which were believed to be more pleasing in painting than the smooth, regular, and balanced objects of ideal beauty.

The work of art historians and literary scholars of the British eighteenth-century, specifically Alan Liu, Raymond Williams, John Barrell, Nigel Everett, Ann Bermingham, Martin Price and Thomas Pfau have over the past fifty years produced much significant work that explores the picturesque’s function as, in Pfau’s words, a “historical unconscious,” operating at a time in which the modernization of the British economy was rapidly transforming the social landscape of the nation. This body of scholarship enables us to begin to understand the significance of Fuller’s adoption and adaptation of the aesthetic for her own literary negotiation of a politically charged American terrain. Originally the picturesque emerged as the social organization of the British countryside radically changed due to improvement and enclosure, and the national economy transitioned to an imaginary, speculative form via the creation of a national debt. As a series of cultural practices the picturesque allowed a new and economically precarious middle class engaged in the distinctly modern process of self-making to cultivate and enclose the national landscape symbolically through the development of an imaginary form of capital defined as “taste.” As Alan Liu writes, “the picturesque was a deep imagination of the economic institutions then transforming feudal notions of property into the new sense of exchangeable

29 In his essay “The mobility of property and the rise of eighteenth-century sociology,” Pocock underlines the role of imagination in an economy based in capitalist speculation: “The price [government stocks] command is determined by the present state of public confidence in the stability of the government, and in its capacity to make repayment in the theoretical future. Government is therefore maintained by the investor’s imagination concerning a moment which will never exist in reality. The ability of merchant and landowner to raise the loans and mortgages they need is similarly dependent upon the investor’s imagination. Property – the material foundation of both personality and government – has ceased to be real and has become not merely mobile but imaginary.” (112) The picturesque we might say was a means of displaying one’s portable property in person, a definition that helps us understand that modern property in all its forms is imaginary and portable.
Thus as a set of shared cultural practices grounded in formalized viewings of the national landscape the picturesque enabled a developing British bourgeoisie to engage in an aesthetic and symbolic commodity exchange and thus to distinguish itself both from an ancien regime supported through a system of familial and political inheritance and from rural labor largely disenfranchised by the same economic changes that created the middle class.

“[T]he wild regions of mountain and forest,” as Raymond Williams writes, “were for the most part objects of conspicuous aesthetic consumption.”31 With its ability to transpose land into a symbolic and portable form of property, the picturesque as a historical unconscious helped Britain redefine itself for a modernity that equated nationhood with bourgeois ideology.

In her adoption and adaptation of the British picturesque for *Summer on the Lakes* Margaret Fuller demonstrates an understanding of the aesthetic’s ability to function as a symbolic form of nation building. From Fuller’s perspective as a Great Lakes tourist in 1843 the national situation reveals itself in many ways to be homologous to eighteenth-century Britain. Fuller’s frequent allusions to Wordsworth and the overall familiarity she displays with picturesque convention suggests that she was fully aware of the fact that the Great Lakes as a new tourist destination functioned as an American counterpart to England’s most popular picturesque tourist destination, the Lake District, not only for the superficial similarity of landscape, but also for the symbolic role both territories played in a psychological struggle to define each nation. Though in the social structure of the United States there was no landed gentry to displace the rural poor, the Midwestern settlements and cities through which Fuller traveled depicted the effects of a particularly American version of ‘enclosure’ and ‘improvement’. The 1830 federal Indian Removal Policy had ensured that by

the summer of Fuller’s journey “most of the Native Americans east of the Mississippi had been defrauded and displaced.” This fact defined the terrain visually for Fuller and other tourists, who were aware that they traveled through settlements, rather than to the frontier: “When Fuller arrived in the Midwest in 1843, the Great Emigration of white settlers along the Oregon Trail was just underway, and traveling to Niagara Falls, Chicago, and the territory of Wisconsin was no longer a journey to the frontier.” Fuller’s own vocabulary throughout the text draws comparative allusions to the British picturesque, as if only a recourse to a familiar aesthetic and literary practice could aid her to negotiate such alien physical and psychological terrain. In the epigraph to this chapter, for instance, she notes her visual apprehension of the landscape as an enclosed space, “no route, no series of stations, but a garden interspersed with cottages, groves and flowery lawns” to which her “poetic,” sensibility makes claims, a symbolic possession made possible by the very real displacement of a native population. Fuller’s perceptions of the displaced Native Americans bear the picturesque manner in which Britain’s rural poor appear in English Romantic lyric. In observing “picturesque groups” of Indians at a temporary encampment, which Fuller watched from the window of her boarding house, for instance, she describes their behavior as portraying “all the gipsy charm and variety,” alluding to the convention of the wandering gypsy within picturesque landscape painting and locodescriptive poetry. Through her

33 Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, 41-42.
34 Ibid, 108.
35 This passage reveals Fuller’s typical reliance on literature to mediate her experiences, a rather picturesque ‘move,’ as will become clearer below. In witnessing the “gipsy charm” she immediately invokes Sir Walter Scott: “If such romantic sketches were suggested to him, by the sight of a few gypsies, not a group near one these fires but would have furnished him material for a separate canvass…” (108) Notice also her description of literary writing as “canvass.” As the passage continues, she also invokes the work of Henry Schoolcraft, who conducted ethnological research on Native tribes as part of his appointment as U.S. Indian Agent at Sault Ste., Marie, Michigan in the 1820s. In 1936 he negotiated with the Ojibwe tribe so that they ceded over 13 million acres to the U.S. through the Treaty of Washington. Fuller appears to refer to his work Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi River to Itasca Lake (1834) when she notes, “…these tribes possess great power [of
‘quoting’ of such standard conventions of the picturesque, Fuller announces to the
nineteenth-century reader well-versed in Romantic literature and aesthetic practices her own
text as a version of the picturesque, thus prescribing an interpretative grid for her reader.

storytelling], if only from the fables taken from their stores, by Mr. Schoolcraft.” (108) We can assume that
Fuller read Schoolcraft after her journey, while she conducted research for the book in the Harvard Library.
For more on Schoolcraft see, Bremer, Richard G., Indian Agent & Wilderness Scholar: The Life of Henry Rowe
Schoolcraft, Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University, 1987.
Vision for a Nation

As a historical and collective unconscious aiding England’s transition from a quasi-feudal structure to a modern, capitalist, economy, the conventions and practices of the picturesque at times facilitated seemingly competing interests, alternately providing its practitioners symbolic means for establishing rigid class divisions and for conceiving the British nation as a unified and egalitarian whole. As the work of critics over the last fifty years shows, these multiple ‘picturesques’ ultimately wrought a definition of nation synonymous with middle-class ideology. In reviewing the most salient ideological features of the aesthetic practice in a British context, we establish the foundation for comprehending the implications of Fuller’s adaptation of the picturesque.

As an art-historical phenomenon the picturesque suggests that the division between pre-modernity and modernity in the west is defined by the rise of the nation-state as a by-product of the Reformation. In his exploration of the picturesque’s aversion to narrative and its idea of vision as pure form, “form, or ‘picturicity,’ [as] cognate with experience,” Alan Liu traces its development from an “Anglican reform” to an aesthetic facilitating acts of imaginary nation-building. Presenting western painting as an initially Christian “institution,” Liu argues that by removing the narrative element within painting the picturesque cut its ties with “the major institution served by narrative,” the Roman Catholic Church. To illustrate this point, he analyzes Claude Lorrain’s “Landscape with Hagar and the Angel” from 1646, an influential precursor of the British picturesque landscape, which greatly revised the traditional manner of figuring biblical narrative. Specifically, Claude relegates Hagar and the Angel to “the middle distance” of the canvas, rather than the traditional central position, thus forcing the biblical narrative to compete with the landscape itself as subject matter.

Taking its cue from Claude, the picturesque, as we see in the paintings of Gainsborough and John Constable, for instance, goes one step further, erasing the demoted biblical narrative altogether, and elevating landscape as form to the ‘content’ of the work. Thus, “the picturesque, we can say, forgot half the Classic picture—the narrative.”\(^\text{37}\) In its rejection of narrative, then, the picturesque functions as an “evacuated [Catholic] liturgy,” a Protestant “counter-institution.”\(^\text{38}\)

Art historian James Simpson helps us to better understand the connection between the Reformation’s institutionalized iconoclasm, and the picturesque as painting evacuated of its narrative content. “Taste,” Simpson contends, “with its focus on form, is a strategy designed to look at Rome again.”\(^\text{39}\) The Enlightenment “by creating an autonomous space for Art” in which images no longer functioned as objects that mediated the viewer’s relationship to a transcendental sphere essentially “conceded the fundamental critiques of Protestant iconoclasts.”\(^\text{40}\) The category of the aesthetic with its focus on the expertise of the viewer, on the viewer’s ability to judge the quality of an image as such, permitted post-Reformation Europe to return to the art originally produced as an extension of Catholic liturgy and practice, for aesthetics “neutraliz[ed] [the image’s] power to enthrall.”\(^\text{41}\) The disinterested viewer produced by Enlightenment rationality understood to “[f]ocus on the form, ignore the content.” Because of this ability to empty images of their religious power, Simpson argues, “the category of the aesthetic is itself, in sum, a historical product of iconoclasm.”\(^\text{42}\) The picturesque, then, following Simpson’s logic through Liu’s account of the aesthetic, represents a category of imagery that fled ‘Rome,’ never to return, so not only did

\(^{37}\) Ibid, 75.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid, 75.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid, 133.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 133.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 133.
the picturesque elevate the mundane to an acceptable subject matter for art, it invited its viewer to reduce even such earthly content to only form.

This elevation of the national landscape to a worthy subject for painting evidences a more significant ideological shift in the history of European modernity. Anglicanism as a religious counter-institution operated as an arm of the state, so that “an understanding of the picturesque as a religious institution can only be provisional because the meaning of Reformation in England was also, more basically, nationalism. It was state.” But already in its early forms, as Joseph Leo Koerner shows us, the iconoclasm of Protestantism fostered a model of community that lent itself as a model for the modern secular state. In its efforts to eradicate the errant belief structures of Catholicism based in iconography and ritual, “[b]eginning in 1518, Luther himself had preached in the practical sphere, outlining proper ways to confess, pray, work, celebrate and die. Elevating matters of private conscience to the level of public creed, such reforms also redefined community itself.” Community now was not defined by “the sum of persons with divergent local and familial fealties who happen to live in one place,” but “became an overarching unity to which all members actively had to conform, both by confessing common beliefs and by adhering to a common way of life.”

Decentralized from Rome, local communities shared “a homogeneity of thought and action” fostered by print technologies. This Protestant redefinition of community that Koerner describes sets the ground for the modern conception of the nation-state. Such reformed church communities in their careful fostering of beliefs bear the markings of interpretative communities that Thomas Pfüau sees as the beginnings of a middle-class self-recognition, as we’ll see below.

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As an aesthetic whose development travels from religious counter-institution to state apparatus, the picturesque displays Protestantism’s general evolution from “valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume” to the “spirit of capitalism” as traced by Max Weber. What begins in painting as a reformatory religious impulse ends as an affirmation of “worldly affairs,” one that equates nationhood with property. In this equation of estate with state, painting now provided the viewer a means of apprehending symbolically both private and national territories, enacting a Lockean conception of citizenship in which property defined freedom. The picturesque as a habit of tourism fostered by a proliferation of tourist guides by writers including Gilpin and Wordsworth furthered this elision of state and estate so that a new ‘middling class’ found itself exercising the same imaginative rights as the landed gentry. This class, however, had to “apprehend” public territory, “invest[ing] unowned property in the Lakes with imaginative capital earned in the urban areas.” In doing so, a middle-class found itself in imaginative possession of the nation ‘in general.’ The “‘feeling’ of economic affluence and psychological confidence” gained through such aesthetic practices parallel the important and expanding role of new money in the nation’s transition to a speculative economy, where capital became increasingly portable and imaginary. As we’ll see below for Fuller this particular elision of picturesque tourism and the production of national identity is the most salient effect of her adoption of the British aesthetic. Though Fuller continually insists on denying the inherent cooperation between aesthetic sensibility and national

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46 See Hussey’s Chapter, “Picturesque Travel.” For examples of primary sources see Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) and Gilpin’s *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1772, on several parts of England; particularly the mountains, and lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (1786); *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1776, on several parts of Great Britain; particularly the High-lands of Scotland* (1789); and *Remarks on forest scenery, and other woodland views (relative chiefly to picturesque beauty), illustrated by the scenes of New Forest in Hampshire* (1791).
expansion, her ability to ‘capture’ the Great Lakes as a landscape via the picturesque by
definition suggests the “psychological confidence” Pfau describes, an entitlement to visual
possession of terrain.

A significant formal effect of picturesque practice also adopted by Fuller operates as
a form of collective denial. The abandonment of narrative in favor of a formal
discrimination of rural Britain, in addition to providing an urban and provincial middling
class with a sense of national identity, provided the middling and landowning classes a means
of psychologically obfuscating the economic plights of the rural poor instigated by the
modern economy from which these classes benefited. Martin Price’s description of the
“dramatic emphasis”49 within the picturesque suggests that Liu’s assessment of the aesthetic
as pure form may not only be an “evacuation” of religious narrative, but a repression of the
new and very real national narrative. Specifically, Price’s analysis of “crumbling form(s)”
garnering the aesthetic “interest” of the picturesque viewer suggests that formal
discrimination operated as a means of collective repression, for the conventions of the
picturesque stipulated the formal abstraction of objects inherently burdened with human

The picturesque in general recommends the rough or rugged, the crumbling form, the
complex or difficult harmony. It seeks a tension between the disorderly or irrelevant
and the perfected form...Where it concentrates upon a particular object, the aesthetic
interest lies in the emergence of formal interest from an unlikely source (the hovel,
the gypsy, the ass) or in the internal conflict between the centrifugal forces of
dissolution and the centripetal pull of form (ruined temples, aged men). Clearly this is
a dramatic emphasis.50

Though at the theoretical-level the picturesque writer and traveler understood him or herself
as seeking formal features intriguing to the eye, seemingly abstracted effects of broken light

50 Ibid, 277.
and disrupted line, Price here notes that those effects were found in objects pointing to 
human dissolution or in human figures marked by time and poverty. The “conflict between 
the centrifugal forces of dissolution and the centripetal pull of form” seemingly allegorize 
the historical shifts negotiated via the picturesque. The forces causing the ruin of one form 
of life gathered into a counter-force instigating new social formations.

We see in J. Hassell’s *Tour of the Isle of Wight* from 1790, for instance, how at times the 
vacant formalism of the picturesque gaze submerged the elements of the human drama 
implicit in the aesthetized surfaces of rural British life. In its dedication to a form of realism 
perhaps more aptly described as a refusal of complete abstraction, however, the aesthetic 
could never completely erase the narrative evidence of rural poverty through its particular 
brand of formalism:

At the entrance of Newtown we are met with one of those subjects so often 
touched by the pencil of Mr. Gainsborough; a cottage overshadowed with trees; 
while a glimmer of light, just breaking through the branches, caught one corner of 
the stone and flint fabric, and forcibly 
expressed the conception of that great master. 
A few faggots, with a cart under a shed, formed the shadow part of the foreground 
and the New Forest, rearing its leafy tenants above the proudly swelling waves, 
closed the distance. 51

Here Hassell displays his expertise in identifying the picturesque in the actual countryside. 
Tutored by his study of Gainsborough’s visual art, Hassell describes the rural scene of labor 
and poverty as one evacuated of human form and arranged into abstracted elements that 
‘glimmer,’ ‘break,’ and ‘overshadow.’ Because such disassociated formal discriminations are 
dependent upon evidence of rural life (cottage, cart, shed), the “dramatic emphasis” that 
Martin Price describes emerges, or, perhaps more accurately, never quite submerges. The 
very need for the picturesque to find its form in what Price names “an unlikely source” 
suggests an “internal conflict,” for the abstracted elements are not located in the scene itself,

but arise from the viewer. Hasserl viewed through Price illustrates a separation at the heart of the picturesque, the aesthetic permitting a certain class of Briton to no longer identify the land as a site of rural labor, but one of his or her own leisure. Raymond Williams describes such disassociation as inherent to any conception of landscape: “A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.”

Through John Barrell’s discussion of the portrayal of labor and leisure within the picturesque we see how the aesthetic disassociation of the leisure class lent itself to a false identification with rural laborers through forms of self-projection. Through an iconography that imagines the viewer’s leisure as a luxury available to the rural poor we see the sophistication of the picturesque to create illusions of a national unity. John Barrell’s readings of James Thomson’s *The Seasons* and Gainsborough’s painting “Landscape with a Woodcutter Courting a Milkmaid” in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* offers an analysis of eighteenth century English landscape art that helps us to understand the picturesque’s ability to officially promote “the liberal ideology of a rich, happy, harmonious land,” i.e., a unified Great Britain, while at the same time displaying dramatic but unacknowledged divisions of class. In particular his readings illustrate the extent to which concealment as a formal convention within the picturesque, perhaps best exemplified by the divisionary play of light from which Barrell takes his studies title, performs the work of national ideology.

In Thomson’s poetry, for instance, “the main concern is to present an image of English social life as in all important respects egalitarian and without conflict.” The English countryside “is the reward of all who work whether the responsible gentleman, shooting and fishing for relaxation, the busy citizens, visiting the country for recreation, or the industrious

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52 Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country*, 121.
swain, whose health is guaranteed by his outdoor life.” Though the poem does portray “a society…which may well permit inequalities of wealth” the rhetoric, Barrell notes, makes it difficult to translate “the labels ‘rich’ and ‘poor’…into the more divisive distinctions of ‘consumer’ and ‘producer.” The landscape maintains its sense of unity through the poetry’s “ambivalent use of language,” a language that deters the reader from associating the divisions of class with the realities of the modernization of economy. The success of the poem relies upon the fact that despite “the unity of Happy Britannia [being] fraught with contradiction,” such contradiction goes relatively unnoticed, so that, for instance, the casual reader might take the equation of the swain’s labor with the leisure activities of the tourists and gentleman at face value and ignore that in fact the poem “portray(s) the repressive actuality, that the sweets of life are reserved for the rich.”

Barrell finds a similar discordant parity between labor and leisure in the figures of Gainsborough’s painting “Landscape with a Woodcutter Courting a Milkmaid.” Just as in Thompson’s poem, Gainsborough’s canvas presents a country landscape that “invites us to endorse the statement that the rural life is a blend of Pastoral and Georgic,” for it shows figures both at work and play. The painting, however, presents only rural laborers, where the central focus is upon the figures of a woodcutter and milkmaid not at work, but occupied in a leisurely flirtation. In the background a laborer plows a field, suggesting to Barrell an ideological imperative at work in representations of England’s rural labors. The painting operating with a kind of visual ambivalence staged by the representation of labor and leisure as an unproblematic and complementary pair offers the eighteenth-century viewer “[the] justification of the social and economic organization of England,” easily presenting one of

54 Ibid, 37.
55 Ibid, 37.
56 Ibid, 52.
two arguments, depending on the temperament of the viewer: either that “labour is a happy and leisurely affair, or that leisure is a brief interlude, only, in a serious life of labour.”

Because the milkmaid and her suitor pose in a manner that suggests both “a courtly and a rustic identity,” the painting makes an aristocratic leisure part of a rustic vocabulary, suggesting to the viewer that leisure and labor are available in equal parts to all members of British society, rather than the reality, as Barrell notes: “But, as one nearly contemporary economist was moved to admit, ‘it is not the same man that first works, and then reposes; but it is because the one works that the other rests’.”

In *Summer on the Lakes* we’ll see such projections recalibrated. Specifically, Fuller’s rhetorical alignment of her own sensibility with the Native population will seemingly separate her from the project of national expansion, but just as Barrell’s pressure upon the codes in Thompson and Gainsborough reveal class strife, an examination of Fuller’s tropes easily unveils an ideological unity between her own picturesque tourism and the American project.

Ann Bermingham identifies another route of disassociation available to the picturesque viewer through the aestheticization of rural poverty, a convention that Fuller also will adapt to negotiate psychologically the extermination of the U.S. native population.

As Bermingham notes, in addition to modes of formal contemplation that allowed the viewer to submerge evidence of human activity within rural scenes, the aesthetic also facilitated an imaginary historical separation between the urban and provincial life forms and the life forms of rural Britain. In its elegiac modes Bermingham argues that the picturesque reconceived the worker disposed by the agrarian revolution as an anachronism. By aesthetisizing “derelict habitations, mills, and so forth” it falsely “demodernized [the] plight” of rural labor, so that the dramatic currents Martin Price finds circling beneath the aesthetic

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57 Ibid, 50.
surface not as a narrative of contemporary life, but as remainders of a historical past. Rural life, then, appeared as an English past “which had been, or was being lost,” rather than as a contemporary social world reeling from the effects of the nation’s transition to a modern economy in which the viewer was deeply implicated. Ann Bermingham emphasizes that this landscape “cut two ways,” for it seemingly celebrated this lost past, yet “the manifest desolation of the landscape could work as a justification for transforming it to a more efficient, vital one.” Either pull incorporated rural poverty into a celebration of the nation itself, either as a grand heritage or as a modern wonder. Fuller in particular figures the disappearing Native population into a narrative of national heritage, where Fuller’s rhetoric subsumes the Indian into a noble lineage of western cultural ancestry.

Where Liu, Price, and Barrell help us to begin to see the operations of the picturesque as a historical unconscious in its ability to obfuscate and amend economic realities, Bermingham’s discussion of Uvedale Price, whose formal theories of the aesthetic appeared in the 1790s alongside Gilpin’s writings, suggests that the aesthetic conventions of the picturesque provided strategies for the rural gentry to conceal consciously the dramatic effects of enclosure upon the rural landscape. Tracing Price’s criticism of the landscape practices of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton, who “[equated] taste with the heightened display of property and the appropriation of nature to personal use,” dramatically and often violently transformed the landowners relationship to the rural village, often even “removing villages inconveniently near a mansion or favoured view.” Uvedale Price’s criticisms of the landscape designs of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton betray an anxiety surrounding the ‘improvements’ that had begun to dismantle the

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59 Ibid, 69.
61 Ibid, 41.
paternalistic relationship between landowners and rural peasantry. Though as a gentleman farmer Price benefited economically from the agrarian revolution, as a man of taste he criticized such invasive landscape designs that transformed and often dismantled the local community: “He who destroys dwellings, gardens and enclosures, for the sake of mere extent and parade of property, only extends the bounds of monotony, and of dreary selfish pride; but contracts those of variety, amusement and humanity.”

Price’s language here suggests what Nigel Everett calls the Tory idea of landscape, a conservative allegiance to paternalistic notions of a landowner’s responsibility to the rural community thriving upon and around his estate. But as Bermingham argues, though Price’s rejection of the work of Brown and Repton seems to suggest a conservative impulse against the new economy by favoring a landscape that “depended on the maturing effects of time” rather than grand and invasively transformative designs, Price’s writings evidences a fear of Jacobin backlash against the enclosure and improvement from which he himself benefited. Price believed the less imposing and picturesque garden would protect landowners, “guarding us against democratic opinions.” For this reason Bermingham finds Price essentially complicit with the modernization the picturesque landscape attempted to hide, for in providing an alternative to “the Brownian landscape garden” Price wished to protect himself and other landowners from “the malice of democracy in the ‘leveling’ and ‘sweeping away’ that brought it into being.” Price serves then as an example of a self-conscious exploitation of the picturesque in its ability to mask modern capitalist conceptions of class relationships as continuous with its paternalistic past.

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63 Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology, 68.
64 Uvedale Price quoted in Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology, 67.
65 Ibid, 68.
But the work of Malcolm Andrews and Thomas Pfau suggests that Price’s overt use of the picturesque for preserving the traditional power of a landed gentry was not the most significant cultural work performed by the aesthetic. Andrews argues that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the picturesque first emerged it bore an Augustan influence that suggests it was “a kind of intellectual recreation favoured by a self-confident elite [with an] education in the classics.”\(^{66}\) By the “third quarter of the century,” however, “Milton and Thomson are beginning to seem rivals to Homer and Virgil,”\(^{67}\) in other words, the cultural capital of the elites is replaced with the secular vulgate of a burgeoning middle-class. By exhibiting itself through a literature accessible to those without training in the classics, the picturesque begins then to cultivate “taste” in a new community of practitioners. The picturesque, that is, begins to serve as a means for the middling classes to develop their property in person.

Such development of an individual’s taste through aesthetic practice, Thomas Pfau argues, appeared as an innate natural sensitivity, allowing members of a growing middling class to develop a shared seemingly moral ground. Though a facility in identifying and reproducing picturesque views depended chiefly on formal discriminations actively cultivated in the viewer through rigorous practice, the subject nevertheless perceived such discriminations as “an originary and unimpeachably authentic affect—[a] core sensibility or ‘feeling.’”\(^{68}\) By demanding the viewer’s attention to “texture and color, character as opposed to beauty, the artistry of time and accident”\(^{69}\) the picturesque seemingly evidenced the viewer’s sensibility, what Ildiko Csengei defines as “refined emotionalism.”\(^{70}\) Because taste

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\(^{67}\) Ibid, 41.

\(^{68}\) Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth’s Profession*, 20.


and sensibility expressed themselves affectively, thus disguising their origins as learned discriminations, their expressions suggested a natural, biologically-based capacity in an individual, implying a natural selectiveness for divisions of social class, for “taste [was] granted to only a few and inaccessible to vulgar minds.” Taste as evidence of affective sensibility ultimately signaled moral superiority as Martin Price notes, because it implied “an intensity of awareness.” Fuller text similarly attempts to evidence her moral superiority through displays of taste. Her designation of the texts as a collection of “poetic impressions” would signal such sensibility to the eighteenth-century reader. As we’ll see below Fuller uses taste as the primary means of differentiating herself morally from the American project of territorial expansion.

In its British context the class distinctions, Thomas Pfau argues, resulting from formal picturesque practices enabled a newly created middle-class in England to recognize itself. Specifically, the intensity of the formal discriminations demanded by the aesthetic produced “what today are known as interpretative communities in the very process of delineating their distinctive cultural capital.” “Elaborating such a capital in an insistently formal and disciplinary manner,” Pfau elaborates, “such communities delimit, refine, and police their boundaries, at first as a strictly aesthetic ‘movement’ centered around a number of representational media, objects, and practices and, eventually, in the reflexive form of a social ‘class.’” Where the aristocracy inherited its social identity, a middle class produced it through shared picturesque practices. As an American displaying her knowledge of these very same forms Fuller revises her own national identity, so that the picturesque permits her to portray herself as British in character, again disassociating herself from those aspects of

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71 Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology, 70.
73 Thomas Pfau, Wordsworth’s Profession, 20.
American ideology which she finds troubling. Her ability to use the aesthetic as a shorthand for British culture in general suggests, as most scholarship on the picturesque already argues, that though the aesthetic represented the ideology of the middle-class such ideology had become synonymous with British national identity.

The appearance of naturalness that Pfau describes in the middle class’ performance of taste, however, never appears in Fuller. In fact, though she consciously discriminates and categorizes individuals according to their particular exhibitions of taste, sensibility and cultivation are throughout the text portrayed as the productions of conscious intellectual labor, visible forms of cultural capital emphasized through Fuller’s extensive and conspicuous intertextual references. Fuller’s use of the picturesque in Summer on the Lakes, as Edward Cahill’s recent work on aesthetic philosophy and early American literature shows, does not represent an isolated American example adaptation of the British aesthetic, but rather represents a particularly evolved and deliberate instance of a generally pervasive American “borrowing of recognizable rhetorical forms with specific political implications.”

In attending to Fuller’s rather late adaptation of the picturesque—Summer on the Lakes appeared in 1843, but because of Price’s and Gilpin’s theoretical publications the 1790s are generally considered the aesthetic’s most influential—we see that such aesthetic language does not operate transhistorically, but rather mutates as it is summoned to mediate homologous socio-historical terrains. In examining the operations of Fuller’s picturesque in Summer on the Lakes we see how the aesthetic aids a singular conscience grappling with the moral implications of American expansionism to ultimately translate actions of the state into an ethical and acceptable vocabulary.

An American Picturesque

As a socio-cultural phenomenon the British picturesque discussed above could be described as a national project for its multivalent existence permeated leisureed and literary society allowing it to operate as a kind of learned dialect for the upwardly mobile and privileged classes benefiting from the nation’s transition to a modern economy. The literary public sphere, as evidenced through such periodicals as The Spectator, The Tatler, and The Monthly Magazine, travel guides such as Thomas West’s Guide to the Lake District, as well as the widely disseminated loco-descriptive poetry of Pope, Gray, Thompson, and Wordsworth, ensured that members of certain classes were easily and often unconsciously interpellated into its vocabulary and ideologies. Given its emergence within a uniquely English class system, the picturesque as a set of popular cultural practices could never take root in exactly the same manner outside of a British national context, though we find its conventions and codes employed regularly in American writing especially after 1783, when Britain officially recognized the United States as a sovereign nation. State agents, for instance, employed the rhetoric of the picturesque in their documentations of new federal territories. We see this for example in Manasseh Cutler’s pamphlet An Explanation of the Map Which Delineates That Part of the Federal Lands, Comprehended between Pennsylvania West Line, the rivers Ohio and Scioto, and Lake Erie, assessing the newly federalized part of the Ohio Valley in 1787, and in John Filson’s The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucky from 1784, as well as in William Bartram’s Travels from 1791.

75 To emphasize the popularity of picturesque guidebooks, Hussey notes, “A Guide published by Thomas West in 1778 had reached a seventh edition by 1799,” (126).
76 For more on the use of picturesque language in early America see Chapter 3, “The Beautiful and Sublime Objects of Landscape Writing” in Edward Cahill, Liberty of the Imagination, 99-137.
Fuller’s work distinguishes itself from other examples of an American picturesque, however, for its extended meditations upon the moral implications of American expansionism and her attempts to employ the aesthetic to solve the historical contradictions produced through such expansionism. Essential to her symbolic resolution of such contradictions is her explicit invocation of taste, her desire to offer the reader “poetic impressions,” signaling what John Guillory describes as a Wordsworthian model of poetic character that announces itself not through the production of a distinctive form of speech, but rather through “the character of the poet, whose refined sensibility reproduces the aristocrat’s, but in the register of sensibility alone.”

Though Fuller invokes sensibility as the key distinction of an individual possessing poetic character, unlike Wordsworth who sought to reproduce ‘common speech’ so that the rigorous cultivation necessary to composing poetic works remained invisible to its readers, Fuller seems to take great pleasure throughout her work in displaying the labor cultivation requires. She makes her own expertise and the expertise of others visible not through an elevated or artificial diction but through what Christine Zwarg calls a “saturation of textuality.” This strategy might be better described as a ‘saturation of intertextuality’ for the Summer on the Lakes makes copious citations—some lasting several pages—from various other written works, in addition to a seemingly endless stream of short and direct references to various texts and writers, not to mention the less obvious allusions embedded within her own language.

Citations and summaries from Fuller’s reading, her own poems and the poetry of others, as

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78 The visibility of Fuller’s source texts through direct quotation and reference differentiates her from her British counterparts. John Guillory in his chapter, “Mute Inglorious Miltons: Gray, Wordsworth, and the Vernacular Canon,” for example, notes that the cultural sources in Gray’s “Elegy,” are hidden via the vernacular: “The most striking feature of Gray’s poem has always been acknowledged as the density of its intertextuality; its phrases sound familiar even in the absence of identified pretexts, as though it were the anonymous distillation of literary sententiae.”
79 Christine Zwarg, Feminist Conversations102.
well as extensive narrative digressions instigated by her experiences during her travels regularly interrupt the account of her journey, so that the reader often has the impression that she has found herself immersed in one of Fuller’s commonplace books, rather than a travel narrative. This compositional mode augments the definition of the picturesque as nature that resembles painting, for it ultimately presents an understanding of empirical reality as coextensive with literary imagination, so that “the activities of travel and reading [are made] synonymous.” Fuller appears both wholly dependent upon aesthetic production to mediate ‘real life’ and willing to display such mediation.

Fuller’s exhibition of her own knowledge through citation and reference might easily be explained in terms of her biography. Tutored rigorously and relentlessly throughout her childhood by her father, her education equaled and often surpassed those of the most economically privileged and intellectually ambitious American men, gaining her entrance into correspondence and conversation with New England’s most prominent thinkers. Her intellectual relationship with Emerson led to her position as editor of The Dial, the Transcendentalist journal, and she made a modest, if often precarious living, as teacher, editor, and journalist, eventually leading to a career as America’s first foreign correspondent. Such an interpretation, however, limits us in understanding the political significance of her adaptation of the picturesque for her travel narrative. Most importantly, her choice to mediate her journey through an extensive nexus of aesthetic codes and literary intertextuality that often confuses empirical and imaginary terrains functions as a complex, if unconscious strategy for Fuller to mark her own sensibilities as European rather than American, so that her own actions superficially differentiate themselves from the American materialism she

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80 Ibid, 102.
81 For more on the unusual education of Margaret Fuller, see Matteson’s The Lives of Margaret Fuller, esp. Chapter One, “Prodigy.”
deems immoral for its general acquisitive nature and its specific treatment of the native population. The frequent collapse of Fuller’s seemingly distinct categories suggest that like the British picturesque, Fuller’s own version of the aesthetic aims to resolve the conflicts of a historical unconscious, for her rhetorical strategies allow her to justify morally the very same expansionist national policies that she excoriates throughout the text, and to identify her own poetic sensibility as an American one, despite having gone to great lengths to position her personal cultivation as an extension of a distinctly European sensibility.

Where the British picturesque deploys taste as a means of an imaginary system of class stratification, Fuller employs taste as a means of distinguishing national sensibilities. We see this early in the text when she opposes “sensibility” with “utility” by comparing her own engagement with Niagara falls to that of a fellow onlooker who interrupts her viewing. Fuller’s description of her own experience of the scene goes to great lengths to model for the reader an engagement with the natural world that is primarily aesthetic. Like the narrators of English guidebooks, who aid tourists in their search for the most picturesque vistas of a region, Fuller demonstrates her own aesthetic expertise through an authoritative description of the proper position for viewing the falls, declaring to the reader that “as picture, the Falls can only be seen from the British side.”

(Worth noting here is her qualifier “as picture” ensuring that the adjective “British” not only applies to the physical terrain but to the cultural practice, so already her picturesque directives are coded as non-American.) Appropriately, from this “British” position the falls display the necessary obfuscation of the aesthetic, so that they appear as “veils” creating “magical effects” of “light and shade.”

Despite her rhetorical exhibition of picturesque convention, ultimately she admits that her

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82 For instance, Wordsworth in his Guide to the Lakes, writes “At the outlet of Gowbarrow Park, we reach a third stream, which flows through a little recess called Glencoin, where lurks a single house, yet visible from the road. Let the Artist or leisurely Traveller turn aside to it, for the buildings and objects around them are romantic and picturesque.” pg. 16, 5th ed. 1835, OUP, 1970.
favorite viewing position does not produce a picturesque effect, but rather a sublime one: sitting “close to the great fall” her powers of discrimination are overwhelmed by the waters so that “all separate consciousness [is] quite lost.” Rather than instigating a feeling of subjective universality as Kant specifies in his treatise on the sublime, for Fuller the experience distinguishes her from a character, who she deems typically American.

Fuller makes such national distinction clear in the description of her second visit to the “British side.” This time the sublimity of the falls is ruined for her by another American’s response to the scene, one emblematic of the national character: “[J]ust as I had seated myself, a man came to take his first look. He walked close up to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat in it.” Here the American character is one of vulgar acquisition, too debased by its “love of utility”84 to comprehend the beauty of its own national riches. (Fuller’s italics) The rhetoric of Fuller’s analysis accentuates the man’s national identity as an American by supporting her own analysis with references to European writers, a move that obfuscates Fuller’s own American identity, given that her values are in allegiance with her European sources. In order to stress the overdevelopment of what Pocock calls “the commercial personality” as a general American malady through this singular incident at the opening of her narrative, she references Charles Dicken’s famous criticism of American materialism, and directly cites the words of Prince Puckler Muskau, a Prussian aristocrat famous for his creation of a park influenced by his study of English gardening practices.85

83 Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 4-5.
84 Ibid, 5.
Puckler Muskau’s words in particular augment the dramatic effect of Fuller’s experience, for he warns that modernity’s proclivities for utilitarianism increase “the probability of men coming to put the bodies of their dead parents in the fields to fertilize them.”86 This quotation increases the moral stakes at play in the opposition between Fuller’s and the spitting man’s relationship to the falls. “Utility” becomes an American inability to recognize land as symbol, as either a national or ancestral heritage, so that the falls risk being reduced to a giant spittoon and parental graves double as crops. Fuller in differentiating her own aesthetic engagement with the terrain creates a necessary, if unconscious, illusion that relating to the land aesthetically absolves her and anyone else exhibiting taste of an immoral appropriation of territory.

For her American readers such overt invocations of European culture operate both heuristically and ostensively in this regard. For readers already familiar with either Prince Puckler Muskau or Dickens’ writings on America, the passage evidences their possession of the cultivation necessary to separate themselves from the spitting American. Similarly, such allusions provide ignorant but ambitious readers an opportunity for cultivation through self-tutelage. Thus, as a rhetorical form Fuller’s writing offers American readers both the diagnosis and the cure for a moral disease. But we would be incorrect to interpret Fuller’s work as the beginning of something akin to a project for national cultivation, a desire to instill all Americans with the European culture she continually practices and praises, for her final remarks in the passage suggest that such moral amnesty can be achieved for the nation as a whole through the taste of just a few. The remarks of Puckler Muskau and Dickens, Fuller believes “will not…be seen on the historic page to be truly the age or truly the

86 Ibid, 5.
America,” because “[a] little leaven is leavening the whole mass for other bread.”\textsuperscript{87} The role she begins to create for herself here and develops throughout the text resembles Wordsworth’s\textsuperscript{88} definition of the poet as “a man…endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.”\textsuperscript{89}

Another incident at Niagara will help us better understand the power of the picturesque in the hands of Fuller for both psychologically appropriating the new territories of the nation and erasing the moral conflicts inherent in doing so, all the while granting Fuller herself a veil of sensibility that appears to separate her from acts of appropriation. Only at Niagara, at the very beginning of her journey, does Fuller experience the landscape as sublime, as a threatening force of nature, and only in these moments of sublimity does she imagine the Indians themselves as a threat to her own safety, though the threat is pure fantasy, for at the falls she never actually encounters any members of the native population. This fact is significant for it shows us that the territories through which she journeys are already ‘enclosed,’ already easily adaptable to a landscape aesthetic and its surveying gaze. Only due to the natural intensity of the waterfalls themselves does the scene defy the topoi of the picturesque as Fuller attempts to view them, thus losing the ability to perceive the terrain as a topography, as a space defined and controlled by the conventions of a culture practice. Her immediate unconscious identification of the falls’ resistance to the picturesque as synonymous with a native population still in control of the terrain displays the capacity of the picturesque for awarding its practitioners a psychological authority regarding the

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{88} Throughout the text through reference and allusion Fuller displays the influence of Wordsworth. No doubt the fact that she was also writing a ‘Guide to the Lakes’ was not lost on her. For a description of her meeting with Wordsworth in see “Letter II” in “Part II: Things and Thoughts in Europe” of \textit{At Home and Abroad: Or Things and Thoughts in America and Europe}, the anthology edited and published posthumously by her brother Arthur in 1869.
acquisition of physical territory, exemplifying Nigel Everett’s assessment of the aesthetic and its practices “as a cultivated management of landed property.”

Initially, the falls themselves are an aesthetic disappointment. Because of Fuller’s extensive preparation they yield “nothing but a quiet satisfaction,” where normally habituation to a scene via “drawings, the panorama, &c,” preparation to view the landscape “as picture,” as described by William Gilpin above result in an experience of beauty, the falls resist such appropriation. Fuller’s habituation to the site, her “clear notion of the position and proportions of all objects here,” her knowing “where to look for everything,” and the scene’s fulfillment of her expectations (“everything looked as I thought it would,”) result in aesthetic boredom. Only by repeatedly returning to the falls for concentrated observation does she eradicate the influence of these preparatory visual representations, thus opening up the possibility of a rewarding aesthetic experience for herself.

By doing so, however, she transforms her experience qualitatively, inducing a sublimity that challenges the coherence of her subjectivity by overwhelming her perceptions: “Daily these proportions widened and towered more and more upon my sight, and I got, at last, a proper foreground for these sublime distances.” Such expansion, the ‘widening’ and ‘towering’ of the scene, ultimately induces a “dread” in Fuller. Tellingly, without the aid of picturesque convention, Fuller loses the ability to impose herself upon the terrain, to control the land by delineating it as landscape. Having abandoned her original intentions of viewing the falls as a topography, she opens herself to a particular “mood of nature” that suppresses her perceptions, noting that “the perpetual trampling of the waters [that] seized my senses” made it possible “that no other sound, however near, could be heard.” With her senses

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90 Nigel Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape*, 92.
91 Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 4.
92 Ibid, 4.
overwhelmed she begins to “look behind [her] for a foe” for “the Indian was shaped on the same soil.” Her abandonment of picturesque practice in favor of sublime experience becomes synonymous with a psychological and imaginary surrender of territory, of “soil,” inducing in Fuller fantasies of her own murder at the hands of “naked savages:”

For continually upon my mind came, unsought and unwelcome, images, such as never haunted before, of naked savages stealing behind me with uplifted tomahawks; again and again this illusion recurred, and even after I had thought it over, and tried to shake it off, I could not help starting and looking behind me.

This early experience illustrates for us the sympathetic aims between picturesque sensibility and the utility that she condemns in her fellow Americans, a utility that results in “warlike invasion” and “the rudeness of conquest.” Picturesque sensibility, however, expresses itself here, through the threat produced by its collapse, as one in collusion with such “warlike” American expansionism, though Fuller continues to condemn utility and the conquest it instigates throughout the text. That she persists to differentiate her own aesthetic personality from American utility via the picturesque, despite the emergence of this contradiction in the opening sequences of the work, evidences that the ruse of sensibility aids in an unconscious negotiation of Fuller’s own conflicted relationship to American expansionism.

Through John Barrel’s work on Thompson and Gainsborough above we saw that the rhetoric of the picturesque appears “fraught with contradictions,” so that in its strained portrayal of the “unity of Happy Britannia” the deep class divisions of British society reveal themselves, despite the rhetoric’s efforts to deny them. Fuller’s rhetoric, we might say, operates in reverse, for it labors to present deep ideological and moral divisions by opposing utility with sensibility, yet through the contradictions in her own writing, as we already saw

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93 Ibid, 4.
94 Ibid, 4.
95 Ibid, 18.
above, sensibility ultimately aids in the nation building begun by utility. Fuller’s picturesque ultimately serves the interests of a unified ‘Happy America’ through a rhetoric that continually undermines the very categories it attempt to asserts, most obviously in her hierarchy of national sensibility. This hierarchy places Americans “seeking their fortune in the west” at the bottom. Indians appear next, above Americans, for they display a natural, uncultivated sensibility, while Fuller and European settlers, because of their rigorously cultivated taste via the picturesque, emerge at the top. This paradigm seemingly places Fuller in allegiance with the native population and against the materialistic aims of her fellow Americans, however, Fuller’s sensibility emerges as a fully developed form of taste, one which trumps the instinctual, primitive taste of the native population, so that Indian culture itself appears outmoded and anachronistic.

In her first sighting of Indians, for instance, Fuller, as a passenger on a boat “[c]oming up the river St. Clair,” ostensibly valorizes the natural “wildness” that initially instigated her “dread” at Niagara, for she opposes it to the “rudeness of the white settler” in her short description that bears many conventions of the picturesque:

They were camped out on the bank. It was twilight, and their blanketed forms, in listless groups or stealing along the bank, with a lounge and a stride so different in its wildness from the rudeness of the white settler, gave me the first feeling that I really approached the West. (12)

Not surprisingly, Fuller spies the Indians at twilight. As we saw above in the theoretical evaluations of the aesthetic, the picturesque favored moments expressive of immanent transition—displays of diurnal (“An Evening Walk”), physical (crooked paths, shadows and

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96 Lydia Maria Child’s novel *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times* (1824), presents a similar paradigm of taste. The heroine Mary Conant marries the Indian, Hobomok, when she believes that her British fiancé, Charles Brown, has been killed, largely because Hobomok presents an innate sensibility reminiscent of Brown’s cultivated tastes, while she perceives her father and his Puritan community as completely lacking in aesthetic sensibility.

97 Ibid, 12.
shifts of light), or temporal liminality (ruins and aged people), a visual and poetic convention that functions as an allegory for the historical transitions the aesthetic attempted to negotiate. “Twilight,” as an invocation of picturesque code hints at the elegiac stance Fuller will ultimately take towards the native Americans, displaying an adaptation of the British tendency to figure the rural laborer as a representative of an earlier historical period, rather than a victim of contemporary events shifts, thus “demoderniz[ing] his plight.”

Fuller’s privileging of the Indians’ “wildness” over the “rudeness” of the settlers—the settlers’ “habits of calculation…talking not of what they should do, but of what they should get in the new scene” appears on the surface as a Rousseauian critique where the white settlers stand as example of Rousseau’s “fatal enlightenment of civil man” while the Indians exist as a moral mid-way point of social evolution, “placed by Nature at equal distance from the stupidity of the brutes” and such “fatal enlightenment.” Through such a critique Fuller seemingly offers a critique of modernity and its possessive individualism. The picturesque rhetoric of the passage despite its surface allegiance to the sensibility of the native operates as an exhibition of symbolic labor on the part of Fuller so that her exhibition of cultivation through the conventions of the picturesque trump the natural and uncultivated taste implied by “wildness” according to a logic more in keeping with Levi-Strauss’ model “[savage] mind in its untamed state as distinct from mind cultivated or domesticated for the purpose of yielding a return.” Where cultivation of taste requires conscious labor, as Fuller’s many citations remind us, “wildness,” despite being coupled with the display of an aristocratic and picturesque repose signaled through “lounge,” nevertheless suggests an animal-like

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98 Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology, 69.
99 Rousseau, The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166
behavior.101 But according to the laws of possessive individualism, only through labor can one be guaranteed possession of an object. Where the sublime of “wildness” represents an untamed nature incapable of possession, Fuller’s picturesque cultivation infuses the landscape with her own claims to possession.

More than a valorization of Indian sensibility this anecdote functions as a recuperation of Fuller’s own command of the territory, eliminating the threat she involuntarily experienced at Niagara. Here “wildness” as a descriptor disenfranchises the Indians from any claim to the territory, though it syntactically operates as a term opposing the acquisitiveness of the white settler, as a marker of the dynamic sublime it must yield to the cultivation implicit within the picturesque. As an instinctive form of taste “wildness” still marks the Indian as a “mood of nature,” rather than a fully-formed subject. The “listless” behavior, too, suggests that this “wildness” thwarted by the invasion of white settlers now has no power for expression, for despite the fact that this sighting of natives results in Fuller’s “first feeling that [she] really approached the West,” picturesque convention grants her perceptions an authority that controls and abstracts the Indians through its codes into “blanketed forms” rather than the imaginary savages at Niagara.

This symbolic management of Native Americans by Fuller has been misread in two recent readings of the Niagara scenes. These readings deny Fuller’s racism by arguing Fuller’s ultimate rejection of the picturesque and the hegemonic power of western expansion it represents. Such readings not only betray a shallow understanding of the picturesque, but also project a contemporary conception of a feminist politics in order to preserve Fuller’s

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101 Repose as a symbolic gesture imitative of aristocratic leisure is one of the dominant tropes in the picturesque. Liu writes: “Awareness of form, indeed, was repose, the sense of arrest in experience.” Here the “lounge” is a “repose” projected onto the Indians by Fuller, who now in full command of picturesque convention, needs no longer fear for her safety and can project her own middle-class subjectivity onto the native population. The “wildness” is defeated and reduced to “taste.”
feminist status as the author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Such readings block that Fuller’s wielding of the period’s dominant discourses grants her a cultural capital that grants her social privileges normally denied women of her period. By interpreting her use of the aesthetic’s elegiac mode described by Bermingham above as an expression of Fuller’s rejection of picturesque politics. By interpreting her use of the aesthetic’s elegiac mode described by Bermingham above as an expression of Fuller’s rejection of picturesque politics. We see such critical discomfort in Fuller’s adoption of aesthetic discourse, for instance, in Michaela Bruckner Cooper’s essay “Textual Wandering and Anxiety in Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes,*” where she argues that Fuller’s conspicuous displays of cultural capital represent a male discourse which “Fuller tries self-consciously to allay, if not escape.”¹⁰² By making this argument Bruckner Cooper can separate Fuller from the racist and nationalist implications of her implementation of picturesque convention. But given Fuller’s explicit account of her sublime fantasy of murder at the hands of Indians, it’s difficult to accept Bruckner Cooper’s assessment that “[i]n her description of Niagara Falls, Fuller sets the tone for her subsequent efforts at anxiously employing and questioning traditional modes of representation.”¹⁰³ Bruckner Cooper also misreads Fuller’s sympathetic tone not as part of a picturesque strategy that allows Fuller to ultimately accept the decimation of Native American as the natural disappearance of an anachronistic culture, but as a rejection of the picturesque itself: “[S]he also voices the fear that dominant representations, such as those generated by conventions of the picturesque, crowd out stories about the lives of women and Native Americans.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Jeffrey Steele in his chapter “Charting Disharmony: *The Flawed Literary Personae of Summer on the Lakes*”

¹⁰² Michaela Bruckner Cooper, “Textual Wandering and Anxiety in Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes*” in *Margaret Fuller’s Cultural Critique: Her Age and Legacy*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 177.
¹⁰³ Ibid, 177.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 177.
portrays aesthetic discourse as a pervasive social force that Fuller attempts to resist, rather than as a form of cultural capital from which she benefits: “What is remarkable about *Summer on the Lakes* is the extent to which Fuller...begins to disrupt the picturesque aesthetic with other modes of response that evoke—at various points—maternal love, political analysis, and mourning.”105 These ‘disruptions’—the text’s conspicuous intertextuality—however, functions to increase Fuller’s cultural capital by displaying her own cultivation as a marker of her sensibility, i.e. her moral superiority. Such contradiction, as we saw above, is essential to the labor of the picturesque in its function as a historical unconscious.106

If we return now to Fuller’s praise of native American culture, we can begin to see how her initial defense ultimately provides her the ground to justify the decimation of the Indians themselves. When comparing the sensibility of the Indians to that of the “white settlers,” Fuller praises the former unambiguously. Contrasting the way each group establishes a homestead, for instance, she goes so far as to suggest that the respect for the beauty of the land that the Indians display through their choice of constructing dwellings that make little impact upon the terrain should grant them rightful ownership. She notes that where “so many dwellings of the new settlers, which showed plainly that they had not

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105 Jeffrey Steele, *Transfiguring America: Myth, Ideology, and Mourning in Margaret Fuller’s Writing*, (St. Louis: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 139.

106 Due to the constraints of space and time in this first version of the essay I am limiting myself to Fuller’s implementation of the picturesque to its political implications vis-à-vis American expansionism. Ultimately, however, I hope to extend this argument and show how Fuller stages two women within the text in the same terms that she presents native Americans. By portraying two women of exceptional but ‘primitive’ sensibility, her former schoolmate Marianna and die Seherin von Prevorst (the Seer of Prevorst), in two of the test’s most famous ‘digressions’ that critics alternately see as writerly ineptitude, or, as in the cases of Bruckner Cooper and Steele, as disturbances to the politics of the picturesque, she asserts her own poetic nature as fully developed, allowing herself to occupy the position of a female Wordsworthian subject in control of her sensibility, unlike these earlier forms of female subjectivity that are “delicate, poetical, but not yet clear within itself.” (87) Similarly to the native Americans who Fuller portrays as evolutionary precursors of her own poetic character, these two woman display an unbriddled, unconscious, sensibility that often manifests itself as a proto-typical form of hysteria. For this reason, the picturesque through its ability to present certain subjectivities as atavistic offers Fuller an unanticipated avenue of emancipation from negative conceptions of feminine ‘enthusiasm.’ In claiming fully the cultural capital of the picturesque she figures herself as Romantic genius. It is precisely her embrace of such hegemonic discourse that provides her a means of subverting, however problematically, the gender norms to which she herself was subjected.
thought beyond satisfying the grossest material wants,...were very repulsive,” “[i]n the traces of the Indians, who chose the most beautiful sites for their dwellings, and whose habits do not break in on that aspect of nature under which they were born, we feel as if they were the rightful lords of a beauty they forbore to deform.”\textsuperscript{107} Here an ability to recognize natural beauty becomes the criteria for recognizing the Indians as “rightful lords,” trumping white settlers ‘gross material want.’ This logic, however, eventually permits Fuller to deny the Indians any claims they might have on the land in favor of the American project in general, for though most “white settlers” privilege utility and material gain, the sensibility of some settlers and Fuller herself display a distinctly European recognition of beauty thus providing a “little leaven” for the “whole mass” of American settlement.

For instance, settlers like the “English man, who…wish[es] to pass the evening of an active day amid the quiet influences of country life,” pose a challenge to the sensibility of the Indians themselves. He, too, exhibits the ability to recognize beauty, for, as Fuller notes, he, in correct picturesque fashion, initially rigorously studied “books about this country” making him so familiar with the localities that, “on coming here at last, he sought and found, at once, the very spot he wanted, and where he is as content as he hoped to be, thus realizing Wordsworth’s description of the wise man, who ‘sees what he foresaw.’”\textsuperscript{108} This Englishman has “a large and handsome dwelling” surrounded by “barns and farm yard, with cattle and poultry.” The way in which these buildings are situated on the land itself, however, suggest his awareness of the natural beauty of the site, for “a wood surround[s] the house, through which paths are cut in every direction.” And as if in support of Uvedale Price’s non-invasive landscaping theory, the Englishman has employed “the framework of wood” so that the buildings themselves, despite their size and number, “have a very picturesque and pleasing

\textsuperscript{107} Margaret Fuller, \textit{Summer on the Lakes}, 29. 
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 24.
Anecdotes such as this one complicate and eventually override Fuller’s original claim that the Indians have rights to the land due to their exhibition of taste.

By grounding her criteria for rightful land possession in taste Fuller also permits her own gaze to operate as a means of enclosure that practically operates underfoot as she treads further into the region. As a process of visual domestication her picturesque gaze functions as an “endlessly repeatable enclosure of pure picturicity.” Here Specifically, Fuller employs the disassociation implicit in the judgment of picturesque landscape as a means of aestheticizing her own travels as they unfold. Describing her group’s need to cross difficult terrain by foot, for instance, Fuller objectifies her personal experiences:

We ladies crossed on a little footbridge, from which we could look down the stream, and see the wagon pass over the ford. A black thunder cloud was coming up. The sky and waters heavy with expectation. The motion of the wagon, with its white cover, and the laboring horses, gave just the due interest to the picture, because it seemed as if they would not have time to cross before the storm came on…

Here again Martin Price’s analysis of “the dramatic emphasis” within the picturesque offers us a vocabulary to understand “the due interest” Fuller perceives in the composition she presents. As we saw above in the theoretical evaluations of the British picturesque, the aesthetic favored moments expressive of immanent transition—displays of diurnal (“An Evening Walk”), physical (crooked paths, shadows and shifts of light), or temporal liminality (ruins and aged people). Within the British picturesque the countryside becomes a scene where such transitions can be aestheticized as a lurking threat, where, in the words of Price, “the centrifugal forces of dissolution and the centripetal pull of form” become apparent and pleasing to the viewer. This is where the “interest” can be garnished from the “laboring horses,” the possibility that the whole enterprise might fail, should the clouds break. As we

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110 Alan Liu, Wordsworth, 94.
111 Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, 24-25.
saw above, in the British context the “drama” inherent to individual scenes functioned as an aesthetic metonymy for Britain’s transition to a speculative economy. Through our familiarity with the world of the eighteenth-century British countryside, we might be tempted to say that Fuller’s gaze, finds “due interest” (i.e. pleasure) in the potential failure of the wagon’s crossing, as if her visual perceptions operated as a kind of hedge fund of the imagination. But such a reading only works, if the social coordinates remain British. The upwardly mobile picturesque tourist had seemingly much to gain from the dissolution of the paternalistic relationships of rural life and the implementation of capitalist social relationships, but this economic paradigm did not exist in Fuller’s world. Fuller, we can’t forget, is one of the passengers on this wagon.

Had such a ‘scene’ been identified by the trained eye of a British tourist, we might, from the ideological aims of the picturesque examined above, understand the viewer, i.e. Fuller, as socially distinct from the scene viewed, as wishing to differentiate herself from the men driving the horses and wagon. Within a British paradigm the lurking possibility of destruction attains dramatic effect, for it implicitly narrates a story in which the picturesque viewer unconsciously finds pleasure in the decay of a traditional economic system. The “interest” in the decay of that earlier system is an interest in the countryside becoming available as an imaginary and concrete property for the viewer. In this particular example, however, Fuller aestheticizes the very objects that grant her entrance into the terrain. This possibility results from a fortuitous overlap between the rusticity of picturesque convention and the realities of nineteenth-century middle class travel in the U.S through “what was then considered the far western frontier.”112 Fuller and her companions traveled by “train, steamboat, carriage, and, at times, on foot to make a roughly circular tour of the Great

112 Susan Belasco Smith, “Introduction” in Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, vii.
Lakes, beginning with Niagara Falls, extending as far north as Mackinac Island and Sault Ste.
Marie, as far west as Milwaukee, as far south as Pawpaw, Illinois, and ending back at
Buffalo.” Though both the English and American Lake Districts served as middleclass
tourist destinations, the newly settled American lakes made it difficult, at least at the level of
scenery, to distinguish the middle-class traveler from the rustic inhabitant. The lack of a
traditional and rigid class system and an authentic aristocracy in the States also made the
economic line between the middle-class tourist and the rustic settler much less clear. Within
the American economy where land was plentiful and cheap, the rustic personas populating
the landscape, resemble, economically speaking, England’s precarious and growing middle-
class, rather than a rural peasantry in demise. For these reasons Fuller’s disassociation, we
must assume, serves a different purpose than it did within the British picturesque.

Given Fuller’s earlier assertion that sensibility rather than utility must be the criteria
through which to establish land rights, such disassociation functions as a means of her own
immediate claim to the land, instantly transforming territory into landscape as she treads.
She, unlike the “white settlers” she criticizes, exhibits taste just as the Indians do, but
precisely because her ‘taste’ reimagines a terrain already conquered and settled by the U.S.,
by these “white settler,” her picturesque journey ultimately operates as the final phase of
settlement, for in the words of Liu the picturesque ultimately is “an imagination of state.”
Here again we are also reminded of Levi-Strauss’ distinction between savage and cultivated
mind, in that mind is “cultivated or domesticated for the purpose of yielding a return.”
The scene returns interest on Fuller’s investment precisely because metaphorical and literal
cultivation cooperate to complete a westward expansion.

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113 Ibid, viii.
Though we might excuse the example above as a personal negotiation of Fuller’s entrance into a seemingly foreign territory, two particular examples code Fuller’s picturesque gaze as a means of identifying the bounds of American territory, exposing the manner in which “the regime of perspective…is the regime of military surveillance, of cartographic advance.”115 In the first Fuller finds herself atop “Fort Holmes” where she and her traveling companions “[have] the most commanding view of the lake and straits, opposite shores, and fair islets.” Spreading out from the fort is “an old French town, mellow in its coloring, and with its harmonious effect of a slow growth, which assimilates, naturally, with objects round it.” By identifying the town below as French, Fuller accounts for its display of taste, both in its unimposing use of the land and “[t]he people in its streets, Indian, French, half-breeds, and others…who live a life of taste and inclination, rather than of the hard press of business, as in American towns elsewhere.”116 The history of Fort Holmes, however, brings to surface the contradictions in Fuller’s rhetoric of national division, for though everything and everyone in the town exhibits a taste seemingly at odds with Fuller’s understanding of American character, the fort, which affords her a “commanding view” and “crown[s]” the town “most picturesquely,” had been won by the Americans from the British during the War of 1812, a war declared by the U.S. at least in part due to the British support of native Americans against U.S. expansionism. This scene in particular allegorizes Fuller’s overall text quite nicely. Perched up upon a U.S. military stronghold, our picturesque narrator gazes upon an American town, imagining it to be a cosmopolitan mixture of harmonious European and native American taste and by doing so allows herself to take visual possession of the terrain by erasing all the signs of utility and military force that she herself finds so

116 Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes, 107.
reprehensible in America’s history. Her “commanding” aesthetic gaze, however, could only have been achieved through the violent overtaking of the fort. The primary function of her gaze operates as the final step in such settlement, for it cleanses the terrain of its history, codes the town itself as non-American, and thus seemingly eliminates in the symbolic the conflicts of a historical unconscious. Sensibility, then, reveals itself to be a morally purified utility.

Yet despite these perpetual contradictions in the text, Fuller’s direct claims condemn the national project in regards to its effect upon the Indians to the very end. By the final chapter, however, her voice is one of resignation: “I have no hope of liberalizing the missionary, of humanizing the sharks of trade, of infusing the conscientious drop into the flinty bosom of policy, of saving the Indian from immediate degradation, and speedy death.”117 The problem with such declarations is that their tone suggests that Fuller has been engaged in a defense of the Indian all along, but her rhetoric, as we’ve seen above, has been at the very least ambiguous in its allegiances. That she makes this particular comment towards the end of the text suggests that she comprehends her own efforts as separate from the official U.S. position. But such statements can only be understood as the results of a picturesque denial, for though this articulation of a “speedy death” is the first overt acknowledgment of the Indian’s decimation, Fuller had already staged the Indians as an effectively ‘dead’ culture in a very early description of her visit to an “ancient Indian village,” which cleared of living Indians already exists as a tourist site for Anglo-Americans.

In commenting on the site the Indians chose for the village, she notes “[a]s usual, they had chosen with the finest taste,” a judgment she makes after viewing an arrangement

117 Ibid, 121.
of graves, “regularly arranged mounds.” The site’s graves prompt Fuller to reimagine native American culture as part of a European heritage so that she appropriates native Americans into a narrative of western civilization: “The whole scene suggested to me a Greek splendor, a Greek sweetness, and I can believe that an Indian brave, accustomed to ramble in such paths, and be bathed by such sunbeams, might be mistaken for Apollo.” In this elision of ancient Greek and native American culture, Fuller positions herself and the nation as a whole as cultural descendents of a people who in actuality were still struggling for existence. Her earlier acknowledgement of a wild Indian sensibility now becomes directly appropriated into her more developed taste by serving as a pre-cursor to her own sensibility, a heritage to which she has every right to claim. She herself seems to believe her own figurative sleight of hand, for she visits the village on the Fourth of July and through witnessing the taste of her alleged ancestors makes the site a source of national pride befitting the holiday: “certainly I think I had never felt so happy that I was born in America.” This incorporation of the native American culture into a developmental narrative of western civilization prompts Fuller to give her fellow Americans permission to celebrate the birth of the nation without guilt: “drink the health of their country and all mankind, with a clear conscience.” Fuller’s elegiac mode of perceiving native culture quite literally presents itself as an extension of state institution when she argues for the importance

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118 As Joel Pace argues in his essay, “William Wordsworth, William Cullen Bryant and the poetics of American Indian removal,” Fuller was not the first American writer to employ the image of Indian burial mounds as a site to stage an ambiguous relationship to the national policy of Indian removal. Bryant, in his poem “The Prairies” (1832), which Fuller quotes in Summer on the Lakes, denies the disappearance of Native American tribes as the result of U.S. policy “by holding that ‘the tribes that slumber in’ the burial mounds are not Native Americans, but a different ‘race, that has long passed away.’” That Bryant’s poem, one of the most popular American poems of the first half of the nineteenth century, bears the influence “of Wordsworthian pastoral elegy” suggests that the rhetorical paradigms of the picturesque used to obfuscate uncomfortable historical facts circulated widely among American readers a decade before Fuller’s own adoption of them. In Native Americans and Anglo-American Culture, 1750-1850, ed. Tim Fulford and Kevin Hutchings, CUP 2009

119 Ibid, 33.

120 Ibid, 33.

121 Ibid, 37.
“a national institute, containing all the remains of the Indians,—all that has been preserved by official intercourse at Washington, Catlin’s collection, and a picture gallery as complete as can be made, with a collection of skulls from all parts of the country.”

Here in Fuller’s pedagogical attitude towards the literal remains of the native Americans we see once again that Fuller’s conception of cultivation is co-extensive with American state power.

122 Ibid, 143.
The Labor of Poetry

Understanding Fuller’s literary description of her journey as a late and symbolic phase of the U.S. acquisition of the Great Lakes territory clarifies for us her writing as an important symbolic extension of U.S. policy. She herself describes Summer on the Lakes as a “poetic impression of the country,” one which alters the view of the land so that it appears as “no route, no series of stations” for collective and individual economic gain (note the teleological implications of both descriptors and the allusion to social mobility inherent in “station”), but rather as “a garden interspersed with cottages, groves and flowery lawns, through which a stately river ran,” i.e. a landscape. If we return to her comment at Niagara that “a little leaven is leavening the whole mass,” we can understand this statement now as something akin to Wordsworth’s conception of the poet as “a man…endowed with more lively sensibility.” In other words, what is “poetic” about Fuller’s writing is not any formal poetry within the text per se, but the continuous exhibition of an affect that by the time Wordsworth wrote his manifesto came to define the “profession,” to use Pfau’s term, of the poet. For this reason Fuller is Romantic, for she has learned from Wordsworth that now, as Guillory summarizes it, “the burden” is on “the character of the poet, whose refined sensibility reproduces the aristocrat’s, but in the register of sensibility alone.”

That such sensibility has emerged as a professional specialization due to the realities of a new economy is a fact that Fuller herself notes as she describes to the reader the task of writing Summer on the Lakes: “In times of slower growth, man did not enter a situation without a certain preparation or adaptedness to it. He drew from it, if not to the poetical

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123 Ibid, 43.  
124 Ibid, 5.  
126 John Guillory, Cultural Capital, 127.
extent, at least, in some proportion, its moral and its meaning.”

Echoing Wordsworth’s famous phrase that a “multitude of causes, unknown to former times…blunt the discriminating powers of the mind,” Fuller describes a world of capitalist expansion and professional specialization, where affective reflection no longer operates as a widely exercised human capacity. As Fuller notes, earlier “the woodcutter did not cut down so many trees a day, that the hamadryads had not time to make their plaints heard…But now the poet must be at the whole expense of the poetry…The poet must describe…adding the beauty, and leaving out the dirt.” Where economic factors impose themselves both on natural and imaginative terrain, it’s the poet’s job to propagate an altered vision of this new reality, one that obfuscates the destruction caused by production and consumption, the economy’s “dirt.” It’s only through description imbued with sensibility, a recirculation of visual data through conventions of the imagination, that the environment can be given any beauty. That publication of *Summer on the Lakes* resulted in Fuller being offered a position as a correspondent at Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* further evidences the fact that the expression of affect in the form of literary production now doubled as an example of a specialized professional competency.

A poem by Fuller that ends *Summer on the Lakes* provides an example of how such historical “dirt” might be covered by the poet’s labor. “The Book to the Reader who Opens, as American Readers Often do, at the End, with Doggerel Submission” appears on the surface as both an appeal for American cultivation and a slight to the general level of literacy amongst Americans, the title quite literally suggesting that Americans do not know which end of the book is up. The poem’s submission to the doggerel style further emphasizes the

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127 Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 18.
129 Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, 18.
130 Ibid, 155-156.
lack of sophistication among American readers. Despite the title, however, the substance of the poem itself expresses no satire. Rather, the poem appears as a sincere appeal by the book for American readers to submit to lessons of cultivation and sensibility within.

The central trope of the poem focuses on the making of a blackberry jam by a country housewife, so that sensibility is literalized in the sense of taste. The housewife expresses her wisdom by making the blackberry jam with “foreign sugar,” which enhances the natural taste of the wild fruit, providing a mixture of frontier ‘wildness’ and refined import. The book coaxes the reader in its final stanza to “try a little” with the evening-bread.” The jam, then, appears to be a metaphor for *Summer on the Lakes* itself, a production that harnesses the country’s ‘wild fruit’ and improves it through the ‘imported sugar’ of the picturesque, an American landscape cultivated through a British literary aesthetic.

What complicates the message of the final stanza is the narrative that precedes it, one that repeats the aesthetic preferences that appear throughout the book as a whole, a privileging of cultivated over “wild” sensibilities. The poem begins as the story of an urban cousin visiting her cousin in the country “at the time of blackberries.” The country cousin warns her urban visitor not to go picking the berries, for “in the thickets…they ripen best,” a fact that places her urban cousin’s gentility at risk: “You tear your dresses and you scratch your hands.” She instead insists that the cousin wait “Another year,” when the wild thickets will be “open fields.” The prediction that the “thicket” will so soon be a “field” voices an anticipated development of the land itself that will shift the terrain from one of wild sublimity to a domesticated picturesque.

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131 Ibid, 155.
132 Ibid, 155.
Where the urban woman echoes Fuller’s own subjective position in her role as narrator in the text as a whole, the country cousin, who navigates the wild thickets with “housewife skill [and] has filled the shelf/ With blackberry jam,” resembles those settlers in possession of European sensibility, who nevertheless have ambitiously agreed to settle new terrain, like the Englishman Fuller has met during her journey. The shared sensibility, a taste which both women possess, reveals itself as the basis for the cousins’ sympathy with the colonial enterprise in general. The country cousin, for instance, knows that her productions will be overwhelming to the palate, if made solely from wild ingredients. She, as an appeal to taste, must make the jam, “Not…with country sugar, for too strong/The flavors that to maple juice belong;/ But foreign sugar, nicely mixed 'to suit/The taste,' spoils not the fragrance of the fruit.” The literalization of taste in this example again becomes an aesthetic battle writ small, where the sublime symbolized as a jam made from solely “wild” ingredients threatens to overwhelm the palate. Once the refined sugar, a colonial import is introduced, the taste of the fruit as such can be maintained. The urban cousin expresses a taste similarly in need of colonial products noting, “the best pleasure such a fruit can yield,/Is to be gathered in the open field;/And, for occasions of festivity,/West India sweetmeats you had better buy.” In this literalization of taste the “pleasure” increases according to how much the originally wild fruit has been refined. So a berry produced through cultivation is preferable to a wild berry, but true celebrations demand the fruit to be transformed into candy and confections, the sweet meats of the colonized West Indies.

What becomes important here is the role of each cousin in creating a world in which material production can cater to taste. The rural cousin possessing a personality capable of

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133 Ibid, 155.
134 Ibid, 156.
entering the “wild” begins a domestication of terrain, an agricultural cultivation that will eventually turn the wild blackberry into a farmed one. Once the land is cultivated, the urban cousin may arrive without risking injury to her own affective sensibility. Like the poet Fuller described earlier, she, as the possessor of the most refined sensibility (she knows when sweet meats are in order), she validates her ‘rustic’ cousin’s call for ‘foreign sugar’ and also furthers the demand for products of colonial markets. She enters the scene once the land has been acquired, suggesting a rejection of the utility needed for settlement, but her taste because it necessitates colonial production, implicitly sanctions settler utility. Exhibited through the topos of taste, the demands of the cousins become an allegory for affective depth and thus provide moral obfuscation, if not total justification, through the purview of aesthetic pleasure. Fuller’s final poem in its references to colonial production metonymically once again figures the picturesque as an extension of state power.
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Biography

Magdalena Zurawski was born in Newark, NJ in 1972. In 1995 she received a B.A. in Comparative Literature from Brown University. She was awarded an M.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Temple University in 2001. Her novel The Bruise was published in 2008 by FC2/University of Alabama Press and received both the Ronald Sukenick Award for Innovative Fiction and the LAMBDA Award for Lesbian Debut Fiction. She received her PhD in English Literature from Duke in 2013 and begins teaching as an Assistant Professor of English in the Fall of 2013 at The University of Georgia. A collection of poetry is forthcoming from Litmus Press in the Spring of 2014.