CAPITALISM IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE:
TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

by

LYNN A. PARKS, B.A., M.A.

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ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental precepts of American culture is that America is the place where the free market economy assures rewards commensurate with productivity. This idea, and the corollary one that nonproductive people should not be allowed to usurp the rewards of others, has been a perennial concern of American writers since our literature's beginnings. This literary history attempts to show how these ideas were planted and flourished in the national consciousness, and how criticisms came to be levelled against the capitalist system in the colonial period, the early national period, and the Jacksonian period. Although the focus is on literary texts, each section begins with an overview of the broader social debates which impacted the literature being produced.

The colonial period saw the establishment of the essential American attitudes towards work and wealth. The experience of the colonists at Jamestown and Plymouth showed the benefits of an economic system based on self-interest. Puritan divines helped disseminate the concepts of the "calling" and the compassionate use of wealth. Later, Benjamin Franklin and Michel-Guillame-Jean de Crevecoeur helped codify the idea of rising individual while tentatively exploring the plight of the dispossessed groups.

In the early national period, American writers began dealing in earnest with questions of class stratification, the rising individual, and the economic parasite. Novelists reflecting the conservative viewpoint included Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Rebecca Rush; more radical in his critiques was Charles Brockden Brown.

In the Jacksonian era, characterized by wild economic swings and increasingly harsh urbanization, writers became more strident. James Fenimore Cooper provided an able defense of the landowner as productive capitalist; Charles Frederic Briggs presented a darker vision of the country's economic stratification; and Frederic Douglass showed how becoming a productive member of a free market system was an essential part of his identity as a human being.

The study ends with a look at a modern economic novel, Kurt Vonnegut's God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, as an example of a work that draws heavily on the ideas of the past in its plea for a capitalist system tempered with compassion.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental precepts of American culture is that America is the place where the penniless individual can work hard and achieve prosperity, where the free market economy assures rewards commensurate with productivity. This idea--and the corollary one that nonproductive people should not be allowed to usurp the rewards of others--is so pervasive that it has been a center of discussion in every period of our history and in nearly every forum imaginable--from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to current debates about welfare reform. To say that these ideas have had a profound impact on our national literature, especially American novels, would be understatement. The ideas cut across all fictional genres, from the naturalist works of Theodore Dreiser to the utopian fantasies of Edward Bellamy or Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They unite books as divergent in politics as John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath and Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged. Just cataloguing the books centering on the theme of the rising individual would be a monumental task. The following study, much more modest in scope, is a literary history, an attempt to show how the ideals of capitalist enterprise and the "self-made man" were planted and flourished in the national consciousness and how criticisms came to be levelled against the capitalist system

as it existed in America. The study traces these ideas from John Smith's A Description of New England (1616) through the Jacksonian period, the first period which saw the widespread development of such "modern" problems as unemployment and urban poverty.

The focus of the study is on literary texts, ultimately on novels. Within the study I will demonstrate that the best works by the most notable early-American writers of fiction are consistently and intimately concerned with the questions of commensurate reward for the productive individual and the rise of parasites who feed off the productivity of others. Fictional works that have these ideas as a major concern are obviously perennial in our literature and constitute a genre I propose to call "American economic novels." This dissertation, then, is an examination of the genesis of this genre. Accompanying the literary analyses are overviews of related historical contexts which illustrate the prevailing social and political thought on issues of work, wealth, class stratification, and the rising individual, in the early colonial period, the early national period, and the Jacksonian period.

In some ways the critical presuppositions behind this study are analogous to the presuppositions behind Marxist

criticism.¹ Like the Marxist critics, I believe that economic systems play an important role in determining the individual participant's quality of life, both materially and morally (although I wholeheartedly disagree with them about which economic system is most likely to lead to a quality life). I also believe that great literature shows a "fidelity to reality" (Lukacs 74), and--a corollary supposition--that it is enlightening to examine the relationship between a fictional work and its cultural context. Finally, I believe, with the Marxists, that currents of thought tend to progress through stages (Lukacs 82), and in fact the literature surveyed in this study provides a model dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis regarding the issue of capitalism.

The dialectic progression of ideas about capitalism, as is evidenced within this study, worked this way. In the first stage, the earliest American colonial leaders (at Jamestown and Plymouth) experimented with communal systems that virtually disallowed private enterprise; the economic results were so disastrous that the colonies almost foundered. The solution (which proved remarkably effective) was to institute systems that capitalized on self-interest by allowing private enterprise--the antithesis of the

¹I am depending heavily for my understanding of Marxist criticism to the cogent essays of Georg Lukacs, especially "Marx and Engels on Aesthetics," from Writer & Critic and Other Essays (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1974).

colonies' initial economic premises. Consequently, within the first few years of British colonization, free-market economies, supported by British law and traditions, were in place on the Atlantic seaboard. Almost immediately problems with the economic system, especially the problem of uncompassionate use of accumulated wealth, began being criticized (by Puritan divines), and attempts to temper the inequities of the system--in other words, to produce a synthesis--began.

This study, then, is necessarily broad, covering some two hundred thirty years of struggle with the idea of capitalism in the American experience, from the founding of the first British colonies through the Jacksonian period. The study is organized around chronologically succeeding periods and writers. The first major section is devoted to literature of the colonial period through the American Revolution; the section begins with brief selections from and analysis of the writings of John Smith, William Bradford, John Winthrop, and John Cotton, all cited to illustrate how capitalism came to be accepted as the expected American economic pattern--although the system was not without accompanying problems, which period writers did not wholly overlook.

Reviewed next in this section is the work of Benjamin Franklin, who helped establish the seminal American myth of the self-made man in his letters, essays, and Autobiography.

Franklin, building on the ideas of the Puritans, creates the essential paradigm that has largely governed discussions of work and wealth in every succeeding generation; he is a firm advocate of the necessity and benefits of a capitalist system built on self-interest, while at the same time he supports enabling charities and the bringing-in of disenfranchised and dispossessed groups that could and should participate productively within the system. Certainly, Franklin's views on women as potentially productive economic players is underdeveloped, and only late in his life did he champion the freeing of the slaves, but his willingness to at least raise these issues helped establish the parameters for most later critiques of American socio-economics--the parameters being that the free enterprise system was fundamentally good, and that the inequities within the system would be resolved when persons of wealth and power used at least a portion of their resources for the good of the larger community and when groups that had been institutionally dispossessed could participate freely within the system.

The first section concludes with a look at Letters from an American Farmer (1782) by Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur. Crèvecoeur, like Franklin, celebrates the American free market system while critiquing (again, somewhat tentatively) the system's limitations, particularly its exclusion of blacks from participation through the

institution of slavery. Crèvecoeur is also notable for his emphasis on the monied classes--particularly, lawyers and slaveowners--as being the source of society's parasites, those who unfairly usurp the rewards of others' productivity.

The second section, devoted to the literature of the early national era, begins with a survey of period discussions about class distinctions and class conflict. Texts reviewed include Aedanus Burke's attack on the Order of the Cincinnati as being a potential neo-aristocracy; editorials representing the views of debt-strapped farmers and their opponents, the bankers/landowners; debates among the framers of the new federal constitution about the make-up of the upper house of the legislature; and letters from Jefferson and Adams on class struggle. The section ends with a review of the exchanges between Abigail and John Adams on the issue of educational opportunities for women.

Following the more general historical material is an analysis of the period's notable works of fiction, beginning with an examination of Hugh Henry Brackenridge's episodic Modern Chivalry (1792-93, etc.) as a product of conservative thinking about the rise of the common man. Brackenridge, while evidencing a deep distrust of the common people, nevertheless affirms the existence of the "natural aristoi" and the basic principle that the productive individual can still rise within the American system. He also expands the

catalog of the parasite class to include a variety of confidence men ready to dupe the common people and even the government.

Examined next is Charles Brockden Brown, whose novels Ormond (1799) and Arthur Mervyn (1799-1800) are discussed as examples of a growing cynicism about the "self-made man" and the money culture in America. Brown may be the most radical writer in American literature until Melville. His presentations of capitalists are extremely unflattering; they are invariably amoral and self-centered, and often even criminal. The credibility of Brown's one Franklinesque figure, Arthur Mervyn, is undermined in various ways, most especially by a recurrent shallowness. Throughout these two novels, Brown pictures a stark and diseased urban landscape, where poor people struggle, often fruitlessly, to achieve prosperity and where they are preyed upon by parasitical monied men--ideas which strike at the heart of the American economic tradition.

Rebecca Rush's Kelroy (1812), the last figure examined in the early national period section, has as its titular hero the penniless man of ability aspiring to fortune, yet the book's underlying class consciousness serves as another vivid example of conservative sensibility. Kelroy certainly serves as an indictment of greed and ostentation, but within the world of the novel opportunities for the lowest classes

to rise in both material prosperity and social standing are extremely limited.

The last major section of the dissertation is devoted to the Jacksonian period, a period characterized by wild swings in business cycles, increasing urbanization, and increasingly strident debates between the monied classes and the laboring classes. Opening the section is another historical overview sketching the general ideas of the period concerning class stratification, wealth, and economic parasites; representative samples from both liberal (Jacksonian Democrat) and conservative (generally Whig) writers are given, including some extended passages from Andrew Jackson himself. Also reviewed are the ideas of two period feminists, Sarah Grimke and Margaret Fuller, who argue for fairer treatment of women in education specifically and the larger sphere of society more generally. The historical material is coupled with an analysis of Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1820), an early indictment of the money culture of the period.

Examined next in the Jacksonian section is James Fenimore Cooper's conservative defense of the landowner/capitalist in three novels, The Pioneers (1823), The Chainbearer (1845), and The Crater (1847). In The Pioneers, Cooper attempts to legitimize the concept of property ownership by examining what it would take to secure

an indisputable title to the land. In The Chainbearer, Cooper pits the productive landowner, Mordaunt Littlepage, against the parasitical commoners Aaron Thousandacres and Jason Newcome. In The Crater, Cooper shows the productive man wresting his existence from bare rock in a utopian work that affirms capitalist enterprise and condemns populist attempts to subvert property rights.

The focus then turns back to a harsher critic of the system, Charles Frederic Briggs. In The Adventures of Harry Franco (1839), Working a Passage (1846), and The Trippings of Tom Pepper (1847), Briggs explores and ultimately affirms the Franklinesque ideal of the rising young man, but along the way he presents a disturbing array of parasitical monied men, productive men not reaping commensurate reward, and disenfranchised poor struggling to stay alive in a harsh urban environment--aligning Briggs more with Charles Brockden Brown than with Franklin or Cooper.

The last work in the study of Jacksonian period literature is Frederic Douglass's Narrative (1845), a surprisingly conventional defense of free market capitalism based on the idea that one strong motivation for a slave to escape (and one essential element in achieving identity as a human being) is to participate on an equal basis in a capitalist system that provides commensurate reward for productive labor.

The final chapter of the dissertation is an analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), as one modern response to the ongoing discussion about productivity and class stratification in American society. As in the works of Brown and Briggs, Vonnegut's novel portrays the wealthy as powerful parasites who preclude the truly productive from real participation in the American system. The chapter also demonstrates that a careful analysis of the beginnings of the capitalist tradition in American culture provides a useful contextual framework for the study of later economic novels.

So the discourse has continued, from America's earliest literature to current works. So deeply ingrained in the American consciousness as to be a virtual given is the idea that ours should be a country where, thanks to its free market system, productive people will rightfully enjoy the fruits of their labors with enhanced material and social standing; but under the umbrella of that idea there is a rich diversity of opinion about whether or not that ideal actually exists for all people--and if it does not, how we should set things right.

CHAPTER II
THE AMERICAN COLONISTS' ATTITUDES
TOWARDS WORK AND WEALTH

Early Colonial Discussions of the Promise
and the Peril of Capitalism

Perhaps the key component to the American economic novel is the idea that America is (or should be) a place where individuals are commensurately rewarded for their labors. The idea that societies should guarantee commensurate reward for productive labor is not exclusively American, of course, but this idea was a key one to the British colonists in the New World. Much of the very first pieces of "American" literature, produced by John Smith about the Jamestown colony, focuses on the immense rewards available for a modicum of labor in Virginia. Smith thus helped establish a traditional American preoccupation with the rapid accumulation of wealth--getting rich quick. A few years after the founding of Jamestown, another colony sprang up in the Massachusetts area. The Pilgrims of this colony did not, of course, come over primarily for profits, but their synthesis of worldly pursuits with higher spiritual values provided a standard from which to criticize society--a standard to which later economic novelists are heavily indebted.

John Smith, best known for being the intrepid leader of the beleaguered Jamestown colony, in part owes his

reputation to his adeptness as a propagandist. He was the most important of those writers who touted America as the place of plenty and established the idea that a property-less Englishman could come to the colonies and soon be (relatively, at least) rich. A glance through his A Description of New England (1616) reveals economic broadsides fired at every level of English society. For all, he promises that in America ". . . nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in England we want, or it costeth us dearely." For fishermen, he promises "He is a very bad fisher, who cannot kill in one day with his hooke and line, one, two, or three hundred Cods." For tenant farmers, who have been paying rent up to 50 shillings a year per acre of land in England, Smith promises land "at least as good" which costs "nothing but labor." Craftsmen who will bring over apprentices will soon be rich and be able to retire. He even appeals to gentlemen, who will find an abundance of game unheard-of in England (Smith 1: 347-48).

Smith never says that wealth can be had for no labor at all; his bitter experiences with the inordinate number of gold-seeking and otherwise lazy colonists who almost dragged Jamestown down to ruin precluded so unwise a claim--but he does emphasize America as the land of economic opportunity:

Who can desire more content, that hath small meanes; or but only his merit to advance his fortune, then to tread, and plant that ground hee hath purchased by the hazard of his life? If he have but the taste of virtue, and magnanimitie, what to such a mind can bee more pleasant, then

planting and building a foundation for his
Posteritie, gotte from the rude earth, by Gods
blessing and his own industrie, without prejudices
to any? (Smith 1: 343)

This virtually creedal statement is typical in setting forth America as the land where the hard-working individual of any class or profession can find commensurate reward for his labor and gain economic independence.

The 1616 edition of Smith's A Description of New England, with its emphasis on individual effort and commensurate rewards, coincided with some practical measures taken by the Virginia Company of London to ensure that such conditions did indeed exist; earlier, they really did not. This colony, primarily a profit venture, almost foundered because its leaders overlooked the necessity of self-interest as a motivating force among the colonists themselves. Settlers arriving at the colony before 1614 did so as indentured servants who had to work for the company seven years without any private profits; everyone drew the same rations from the company storehouse. These conditions subverted individual initiative and effort, contributing to the low morale and general unproductivity of the colony during its first few years of existence. Restrictions on individual enterprise were as harsh as any in Stalinist Russia:

All fishermen . . . shall give a just and true account of all such fish as they shall take by day or night, of what kinde soever, the same to bring unto the Governour . . . upon perill for the first time offending herein, of loosing his eares, and

for the second time to be condemned to a yeare to the Gallies, and for the third time offending, to be condemned to the Gallies for three yeares . . . (Strachey 32)

To remedy the situation, the company began allowing new colonists to rent three acres of land for their own use in exchange for one month's service to the company and a portion of the harvest. If a settler brought his whole family, twelve acres of improved land were given to him for one year rent-free. Colonists who had arrived earlier and who were still under the original indenturing agreements also began to be allotted time to work rented land for their own profit (Billings 9-10). These attempts to guarantee rewards for individual effort effectively produced a viable agricultural economy with tobacco as the primary cash crop, and the colony's survival was finally insured (Nye and Grabo 1: xvi).

In 1620, some hundreds of miles north of the Jamestown colony, the Pilgrims founded the colony at Plymouth, the first of several colonies in New England devoted primarily to providing a safe haven for religious dissidents. Despite this fundamental difference between Plymouth and Jamestown, on an economic level there are some striking similarities between the two colonies. In the first place, the Pilgrims, like the settlers at Jamestown, were expected to turn a profit; money for the voyage over and for supplies was provided by London investors who expected a profit from their loans. After the colony finally began to prosper, the

Pilgrims faithfully repaid the investors. But the colony was not profitable at first; as with Jamestown, its economic development was hampered due to a failure to exploit self-interest. At Jamestown, initially, individuals had a disincentive to work because all the profits went to the company; at Plymouth, individual initiative was undermined by the colony's experiment with communal living.

From their landing in 1620, the Plymouth colonists had struggled to find enough food to survive. During the "starving time" (the winter of 1620-1621) almost half of the colonists died. Governor William Bradford recounts how the colony was delivered:

So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the Governor (with the advice of the chieftest among them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular. . . . And so assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number, for that end. . . . This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been. . . . The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression. (120)

The colony had learned a practical lesson in the impact of communal economics on individual incentive. Bradford realized that communism ("community") was inherently flawed:

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that among godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients

applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labour and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and not able to do a quarter the other could; this was thought injustice. . . . Let none object this is men's corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them. (120-21)

The fitter course was an affirmation of private property, profits, and individual incentive to work, all of which were necessary before the British colonies in America could thrive.

For the Puritans, the ownership of private property was not in itself morally good or evil, but diligence in one's worldly profession was certainly encouraged, since God "called" even the laity to their work. The conception of "calling" is the cornerstone of what has been called the Protestant work ethic, and as such it requires some examination. Max Weber, a seminal scholar in the field of socioeconomics, described the "calling" as a life-work, a task set by God, the fulfillment of which was "the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume" (80). Christians thus were enjoined to be diligent in their labors, and since Christians were to bring glory to

God in everything they did, the use of accumulated wealth on frivolous distractions was anathema. Wealth was thus continually reinvested and never consumed (which is the basic characteristic of modern capitalism, according to Weber). The eventual result was that many Puritans, in due time, became wealthy (Weber 162-71). Weber does acknowledge that the Puritans had one use for wealth--that it enabled one to increase charitable donations--but he downplays the idea, implying that Puritans tended to hoard their wealth, since it was a sign of grace or election (112, 124, 172-76, etc.).

The truth of many of Weber's interpretations cannot be denied, although some of his emphases seem open to criticism. Puritan scholar Leland Ryken agrees that Puritans felt their callings "glorified God and benefitted society" and that service to God was always their primary consideration. However, he points out that, in the Puritan mind, hard work never guaranteed wealth and that prosperity was never a sure sign of God's favor, just as poverty was not a sign of disfavor. He even argues that Puritans tended to see an inverse relationship between riches and spirituality (30-33, 60-62).

Most Puritans, in fact, foresaw the perennial problems associated with acquiring wealth. They affirmed the goodness of money and private property so long as they were properly held to be gifts from God, but they also knew that

money could become an object of devotion replacing God, that it fostered a dangerous reliance on the self, and that it could absorb too much time and energy. The Puritans counseled against excessive greed, an excessively luxurious lifestyle, hoarding money, and usury or "exploitative interest" (Ryken 62-63).

Rather than having an unhealthy obsession with accruing wealth, a common stereotype reinforced by Weber's description of second-generation Puritans, most writers of the period evince a balanced and even praiseworthy attitude towards wealth, while affirming the necessity of private property and inequalities of conditions. John Winthrop, for example, in a sermon delivered in 1630, writes that "God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some poor; some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection," but also that "the rich and mighty should not eat up the poor. . . ." Man is commanded

to love his neighbor as himself; upon this ground stand all the precepts of the moral law, which concerns our dealings with men. To apply this to the works of mercy, this law requires two things: first, that every man afford his help to another in every want or distress; secondly, that he perform this out of the same affection which makes him careful of his own good. . . . (Winthrop 80)

Winthrop makes it very clear that wealth should not be pursued for its own sake, and that the man of means is obligated to help those without:

But if we . . . shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people . . . we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. . . ." (83)

Winthrop thus warns very strongly about the uncompassionate use of accumulated wealth, a "modern" (really perennial) topic.

John Cotton (1584-1652) echoes the emphasis on the charitable uses of wealth in his sermon, "Christian Calling." In this sermon, Cotton explains three ways a Christian can know he has been "called" into a certain profession. The first is that the calling enables us to look not just to our own good, but also to the good of others: "if they lay up any thing, it shall be for them that cannot work: he would see that his calling should tend to public good" (174). The second is that the person has "gifts of body and mind suitable" to his calling. The third is that the man attains his position through the leading of God and not through "deceit and undermining of others" (Cotton 174-75).

One can see that in the Protestant conception, the idea that work was punishment for sin was downplayed. According to historians Charles H. George and Katherine George, Protestants shifted "from the Thomistic emphasis on the penal quality of labor" to

a contrary emphasis on the positive, creative, and even enjoyable aspects of work. Occasional references to the older view of labor may be found in this [Protestant] literature, to be sure, and none of the ministers specifically or entirely deny the expiatory function of arduous toil. They speak far more often and more fully, however, of the positive, self- and God-satisfying, creative, and useful character of work than of its painfulness. (132)

In the same sermon, Cotton argues against the idea that God will necessarily reward with material wealth those faithful saints who are pursuing occupations to which God has called them. He writes that the man of God

takes all successes that befall him in his calling with moderation; he equally bears good and evil successes as God shall dispose them to him . . . if God prosper him, he had learned not to be puffed up; and if he should be exposed to want, he could do it without murmuring. (179)

The carnal man, Cotton points out, is always fearful and bitter if he loses his vocation, but the Christian can surrender it in faith that God has prepared another work for him to do. And God calls all men to productive work, even those who are independently wealthy: "If thou beest a man that lives without a calling, though thou hast two thousands to spend, yet if thou hast no calling tending to public good, thou art an unclean beast" (Cotton 180-81). The conception of calling was the cornerstone of Puritan attitudes towards work and wealth, what we might generally call the Puritan work ethic.

The Puritan work ethic was certainly an appropriate concept for the economy of the day. There was plenty of

land available, and the colonies tended to suffer from chronic labor shortages, so that anyone willing to work could always find it. Idlers who refused to work were treated with severity, usually being whipped from the town or jailed if convicted. People who legitimately could not support themselves--widows, orphans, and the sick or disabled--were entitled to public assistance. (Including "widows" in this group shows, at this point in history, that the question of whether women could be productive economic players had been answered largely in the negative.) Taxes for these groups were set aside for their maintenance, and private charity supplemented their support (Foster 135-38).

As noted by Weber and others, Puritans were enjoined to work diligently for profit in this world, yet consider the world to be of no account--certainly a difficult position. John Cotton was aware of the paradox, as evident in this advice from his Christ the Fountaine of Life:

For a man to rise early, and goe to bed late, and eate the bread of carefullnesse, not a sinfull, but a provident care, and to avoid idleness, cannot indure to spend any idle time, takes all opportunities to be doing something, early and late and looseth no opportunity, go anyway and bestire himselfe for profit, this will he doe most diligently in his calling: And yet bee a man deadhearted to the world. (Qtd. in Foster 121)

According to one noted Puritan scholar, Perry Miller, the difficulty in being in the world but not of the world was a "razor's edge" (Miller, American Puritans 172).

When the Puritans worked hard and achieved a measure of affluence, the temptations of the world became all the stronger. As early as 1639 the Massachusetts General Court declared a day of prayer and humiliation for, among other sins, engaging in novelties, excess, and idleness (Foster 123). The problem progressively became worse, as witnessed in Increase Mather's 1702 sermon "Ichabod. Or, A Discourse, Shewing what Cause there is to Fear that the Glory Of the Lord, is Departing from New-England":

Herein is the difference between New-England and all other Plantations. As for other Plantations, they were settled with respect to Trade, or some other worldly interest: But it was not so with New-England. Our Fathers in coming into this part of the world, did not propose to themselves worldly advantages, but the contrary. It was purely on a Religious account that they ventured themselves and Little ones over the vast Ocean into this which was then a wast and howling Wilderness. Although of later Times we have too much changed that which was our Glory, not Seeking the Kingdom of God in the First place, not making Religion, but Trade and Land, and Earthly accommodations our Interest: And God has remarkably smitten us in that which has been our Idol. (Mather 86)

Too often, second- or third-generation Puritans could not keep up the religious fervor of the original colonists, and this, coupled with an increasing affluence, tended to divert interests from the kingdom of God to the kingdoms of this world.

According to Weber, the legacy of the Puritan attitudes towards work and wealth gradually became secularized. After the transmogrification, the work ethic takes on the

following characteristics: work and the accumulation of capital are considered morally good in themselves, and idleness and frivolous consumption are frowned upon--thus the precept that capital should always be accumulated and never consumed. People can have a good conscience about making money. People can also be comfortable knowing that "the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence" (Weber 176-77). The Puritans would, no doubt, be quite uncomfortable with such a legacy, which in most ways is diametrically opposed to values they literally considered sacred, but their original ideas and values have not been snuffed out completely. The idea that people have a higher purpose for existence than just grubbing after money, or the idea that accumulated wealth should be used to relieve the distress of the poor, or the idea that people can find a certain degree of fulfillment by being productive members of a community--these are ideas that critics of the American scene, including many notable writers, have frequently drawn upon in the 300 years since the Puritan period.

The experience of the British colonists in America had an important impact on American culture (and the American economic novel) in various ways. First, the practical experiences of the colonists at Jamestown and Plymouth underscored the necessity of an economic system based on self-interest and private property. Their dismal

experiments in communal work and communal rewards, which very nearly caused the failure of both colonies, were ample confirmation for following generations of Americans that a free enterprise system is the most efficient in producing higher standards of living for the individual and for the community (in addition to guaranteeing the most individual freedom). Later experiments in communal living, both on American soil and abroad, have confirmed the serious drawbacks of communal economies.

Even as the colonies were discovering the necessity of individual initiative and enterprise, a body of literature was begun (by John Smith and other colonial propagandists) that championed America as the land of economic opportunity. These accounts--of plenteous game, of fertile land to be had for the clearing, of gold and silver--were, in many respects, exaggerated (and they ignored the claims of native Americans), but the facts that there were jobs to be had and wealth to be gained in the new world are obvious and undeniable. The tradition of celebrating America as the land of economic opportunity will continue with such writers as Benjamin Franklin, Michel-Guillame-Jean de Crevecoeur, and James Fenimore Cooper, among many others.

Traditional American ideas about work and wealth were probably most strongly shaped by the Puritans. On the one hand, the Puritans emphasized the virtues of hard work while condemning idleness and frivolous expenditures. It is

possible that growing out of this emphasis was the capitalists' single-minded devotion to accruing wealth, the proceeds of which were continually reinvested rather than consumed. On the other hand, the Puritans urged the compassionate use of accumulated wealth by advocating the charitable support of the needy at every opportunity. They also emphasized that a person should be suited to his work, should be good at it, and should find it fulfilling. Finally, the Puritans most strongly championed the idea that men and women were not to make wealth their god, but should wholly seek after spiritual rewards. These ideas, too, play a major role in American literature, as writers throughout our history have sought to criticize existing socioeconomic conditions and suggest improvements.

Benjamin Franklin and the American Paradigm

In the revolutionary period, the purest expressions of America as the land of economic opportunity for the individual came from the writings of Benjamin Franklin. In this chapter, I will examine various letters and essays, and the Autobiography, to show how Franklin presented a coherent body of thought regarding work and wealth that was in many ways consistent with the Puritan attitudes. Taken as a whole, Franklin's economic ideas form an American paradigm that still dominates our culture, a paradigm in which the goodness of the fundamental system of capitalism--where a

productive individual is free to accrue wealth and enhance his social standing--is never questioned, while the plight of dispossessed groups, including women and blacks, begins to be discussed (albeit in a tentative fashion).

Franklin held economic views that would, in the twentieth century, be labeled very conservative. That is, he is a great believer in property rights, in minimal government interference in the marketplace, and in individual initiative and responsibility. Franklin, for example, would never have been so naive as to believe that people would willingly sacrifice their own interests for the interests of the larger community, as communal systems require; instead, he is realistic about the power of self-interest. In a letter to Benjamin Vaughan dated July 26, 1784, Franklin writes,

Naturally one would imagine, that the interest of a few individuals should give way to general interest; but individuals manage their affairs with so much more application, industry, and address, than the public do theirs, that general interest most commonly gives way to particular. (Franklin Political Thought 363)

Elsewhere Franklin writes:

Suppose we include in the Definition of Luxury all unnecessary Expence, and then let us consider whether Laws to prevent such Expence are possible to be executed in a great Country, and whether, if they could be executed, our People generally would be happier, or even richer. Is not the hope of being one day able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry? May not Luxury, therefore, produce more than it consumes, if without such a Spur People would be, as they are naturally enough inclined to be, lazy and indolent? (Political Thought 364)

This sentiment echoes the hard lesson learned by the leaders of the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies, the lesson that self-interest is a strong driving force which needs to be properly harnessed for the good of both the individual and the community.

To harness the force of self-interest efficiently, governments should implement a laissez-faire economic policy, according to Franklin. He realizes that government interference and trade restrictions tended to hamper economic growth: "In general I would observe that commerce, consisting in a mutual exchange of the necessities and conveniences of life, the more free and unrestrained it is, the more it flourishes; and the happier are all the nations concerned in it." Franklin knows that economic regulations designed to benefit certain groups always do so at the expense of all the others: "In time perhaps Mankind may be wise enough to let trade take its own Course, find its own Channels, and regulate its own proportions, etc" (Political Thought 351, 168).

One can see practical and (arguably) still applicable free market principles throughout Franklin's essays and letters. He makes the case that wages become suppressed when the supply of labor is abundant, and that minimum wage laws drive up the price of manufactured goods, making them less affordable at home and less marketable abroad--thus hurting business and compounding unemployment among the very

group the government is trying to help with the wage laws in the first place. Franklin was not disturbed by the lack of textile factories in his day and resisted efforts to have the government protect fledgling industries. He saw that American factories in his day could not produce goods as cheaply as Britain's factories, due to the labor shortage in America:

when the Governments have been solicited to support such Schemes by Encouragements, in Money, or by imposing Duties on Importation of such Goods, it has generally been refused, on this Principle, that, if the Country is ripe for the Manufacture, it may be carried on by private Persons to Advantage; and if not, it is a Fallacy to think of forcing Nature. Great Establishments of Manufacture require great Numbers of Poor to do the Work for small Wages; these Poor are to be found in Europe, but will not be found in America, till the Lands are all taken up and cultivated, and the Excess of People, who cannot get Land, want Employment. (Political Thought 343)

Franklin could foresee that the closing of the frontier, the end of the labor shortage, and the rise of industrialism all would occur simultaneously in America--which they did in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Franklin's emphasis on self-sufficiency leads to these thoughts on charity for the poor:

I fear the giving mankind a dependence on any thing for support, in age or sickness, besides industry and frugality during youth and health, tends to flatter our natural indolence, to encourage idleness and prodigality, and thereby promote and increase poverty, the very evil it was intended to cure; thus multiplying beggars instead of diminishing them. (Political Thought 220)

When the rich give increases in wages, too often the poor "consider every encrease of wages, only as something that enables them to drink more and work less. . ." (Political Thought 221). In a similar vein, Franklin explains:

To relieve the misfortunes of our fellow creatures is concurring with the Deity, 'tis Godlike, but if we provide encouragements for Laziness, and supports for Folly, may it not be found fighting against the order of God and Nature, which perhaps has appointed Want and Misery as the proper Punishments for, and Cautions against as well as necessary consequences of Idleness and Extravagancy. (Political Thought 73)

Franklin tends to correlate want with sin (and, by extension, prosperity with divine favor)--a link most Puritans were hesitant to make, despite popular opinion to the contrary. The proto-conservative Franklin is an early and important voice in articulating the view that the parasites in society--the people attempting to usurp wrongfully the productivity of others--are likely to be the common people, the lazy, idle drinkers who are dependant on the charity of the productive wealthy.

These rather harsh comments by Franklin seem to preclude most impulses to charity, and on this basis, one might believe that Franklin himself was regularly uncharitable--and he was, where church support was concerned. But he wholeheartedly supported various secular institutions, including libraries, schools, and charity hospitals, that would benefit communities as a whole and the poor in particular. For example, he supported the proposed

Pennsylvania Hospital in hopes that, "by the judicious Assistance of Physick and Surgery," the destitute sick might "be enabled to taste the Blessings of Health, and be made in a few Weeks useful Members of the Community, able to provide for themselves and Families" (Political Thought 58-59).

Franklin's idea of charity was to provide medical care and educational opportunities for the poor--charity (of limited duration) that enables the person to become a productive citizen. Thus Franklin anticipates later conservatives' emphasis on hard work and self-sufficiency and later liberals' emphasis on equal opportunity for all and relief for those in dire distress. (One finds the same marriage of ideas in the current President's emphasis on welfare reform based on the "two years and out" and "a hand up, not a hand out" ideas.)

Because the wide availability of land and the labor shortage had continued through Franklin's day, most white Americans enjoyed a general prosperity, and socioeconomic stratification tended to be minimized. Conditions were not that way in Europe, as the well-travelled Franklin knew:

I have lately made a tour through England and Scotland. In those Countries a small Part of the Society are Landlords, great Noblemen, and Gentlemen, extreamly opulent, living in the highest Affluence and Magnificence: The Bulk of the People Tenants, extreamly poor, living in the most sordid Wretchedness, in dirty hovels of mud and straw, and cloathed only in Rags. I thought often of the Happiness of New England, where every Man is a Freeholder, has a Vote in publick affairs, lives in a tidy, warm House, has plenty of good Food and Fewel, with whole cloaths from

Head to Foot, the Manufacture perhaps of his own Family. (Political Thought 244)

In a different piece Franklin describes "the happy Mediocrity, that so generally prevails throughout these States, where the Cultivator works for himself, and supports his family in decent Plenty" (385). Franklin, suspicious of the tendency of the poor to become parasites, would likewise condemn European aristocracies for the same reason; their "Affluence and Magnificence" is obviously derived from the oppression of the toiling wretches who serve them.

Franklin, ever the champion of productivity and the enemy of parasites, provides this information for would-be immigrants to America:

people [here] do not inquire concerning a stranger, What is he?, but What can he do? If he has any useful Art, he is welcome; and if he exercises it, and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him; but a mere Man of Quality, who, on that Account, wants to live upon the Public, by some Office or Salary, will be despis'd and disregarded. . . . With regard to Encouragements for Strangers from Government, they are really only what are derived from good Laws and Liberty. Strangers are welcome, because there is room enough for them all . . . and every one will enjoy the profits of his Industry. (Political Thought 338-39)

Franklin discouraged the immigration of nonproductive people to America, but he was astute enough to recognize the phenomenon of the "permanent underclass":

There can be no Country or Nation existing, in which there will not be some People so circumstanced, as to find it hard to gain a Livelihood; people who are not in the way of any profitable Trade, and with whom Money is scarce,

because they have nothing to give in Exchange for it. (Political Thought 382)

Franklin's advice for the unemployed in the cities of America is to go back to farming, the "great Business of the Continent" (Political Thought 385).

To summarize this section, Franklin, in various essays and letters, emphasized that America was the land of economic opportunity, and that if one was willing to work hard, monetary prosperity would be gained. Franklin had nothing but disdain for the "man of quality" who felt that he was owed a living when he did nothing productive; he was equally suspicious of the poor who would become overly dependent upon charity. For the urban poor, he encouraged a return to the farm, and for those temporarily unable to work, he encouraged a short-term charity that would quickly enable them to go back to supporting themselves and their families. The government should insure equality of opportunity (through public education and the abolition of aristocracies) but should not otherwise interfere in the workings of the marketplace.

The same themes are, of course, found in Franklin's more well-known works. Franklin began giving his almanac advice on how to accumulate wealth in the early 1730's, and he collected the best of that advice in the 1758 edition of Poor Richard's Almanac, a piece that has been reprinted innumerable times--145 times in the eighteenth century alone--under the titles "Father Abraham's Speech" and "The

Way to Wealth." The piece's widespread dissemination, no doubt, helped Franklin's ideas become the American paradigm, and, along with the Autobiography, helped establish Franklin as an "archetypical American character" (Nickels 77-78).

Almost everyone is familiar with various of the apothegms strung together within the loose narrative frame of "The Way to Wealth." But Franklin's logical, two-pronged strategy for capital accumulation is perhaps most effectively summarized in his "Advice to a Young Tradesman":

In short, the Way to Wealth, if you desire it, is as plain as the Way to Market. It depends chiefly on two Words, Industry and Frugality; i.e. Waste neither time nor Money, but make the best Use of both. He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets (necessary Expences excepted) will certainly become Rich, If that Being who governs the world, to whom all should look for a Blessing on their honest Endeavors, doth not in his wise Providence otherwise determine. (Political Thought 53-54)

Franklin raises the very Puritan-like possibility that God will shape a man's fortune for his moral and spiritual benefit, and Franklin apparently retains Protestant beliefs that being a productive member of society is a moral good.

Some might object that Franklin's emphasis on industry and frugality are thinly-disguised endorsements of miserliness, but such is not the case; Franklin heartily condemned misers. In his bagatelle "The Whistle--To Madam Brillon," for example, Franklin recounts the story of paying too much for a whistle he coveted when he was a boy. He

goes on to apply the lesson to various people who lose their higher values, including ones too preoccupied with money:

If I knew a miser, who gave up every kind of comfortable living, all the pleasure of doing good to others, all the esteem of his fellow-citizens, and the joys of benevolent friendship for the sake of accumulating wealth, Poor man, said I, you pay too much for your whistle. (Autobiography 182-83)

Note that Franklin includes "comfortable living" as a proper benefit of wealth in addition to "the pleasure of doing good to others"--Franklin's views do show a degree of worldliness with which most Puritans would have been uncomfortable. But Franklin here evidences little of the single-minded, austere pursuit of wealth for its own sake that Max Weber claims is the hallmark of capitalism.

A review of these passages sheds some light on a recurrent problem in Franklin criticism, the problem of finding the authentic authorial voice in Franklin's Autobiography. The first critic to discuss the problem at length was Robert Sayre, who argued that in the Autobiography Franklin creates a series of personae, each equally valid. In Part One, Franklin assumes "the role of a retired country gentleman giving a private account of his unusual and adventurous history," with the emphasis on his transition from penniless waif to prosperous gentleman (Sayre 17-21). In Part Two, the section dominated by the account of the attempt to attain moral perfection, Franklin has assumed the role of the naive "Philosophical Quaker"

(27). In Part Three his identity has become "patriot and civic projector" (31).

Mitchell Breitwieser, in Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality (1984), similarly argued that Franklin's "personal being is in the largest sense rhetorical, an evocation and cultivation of characteristics he felt were in accord with what the age demanded, and a discouragement or concealment of those he felt were not" (171). Breitwieser explains several contrasts between Franklin and the Puritans, noting that Franklin rejected their emphasis on introspection and calling, even though he tends to "posture in Puritan attitudes because he wishes to avoid the appearance of prodigality" (179, 188, 238, etc.).

But the most useful analysis in recent criticism seems to be Malini Schueller's article "Authorial Discourse and Pseudo-Dialogue in Franklin's Autobiography," in Early American Literature (1987). According to Schueller, there is a discernable, coherent voice standing behind all the different roles and perspectives offered in the Autobiography. The author's true voice always stands for moral utilitarianism, and that work is

foremost a didactic treatise in which the experienced author, as cultural spokesman, directs and guides his readers. Seeking to solidify a New World republican citizenry whose most visible sign of success was material well-being, he offers an authoritative official rhetoric as the sole means to individual and social betterment. (94)

Franklin's sections on moral perfection and civic projects are, according to Scheuller, ultimately compatible with his utilitarianism, since in Franklin's mind virtue "is a means to wealth" and "the personal advantage of each individual is furthered by doing good for all" (96, 102).

The authorial presence behind the letters and essays we have reviewed seems consistent with the moral utilitarian voice Scheuller hears running throughout the Autobiography. Certainly a primary purpose, especially in the first part of the Autobiography, is to show himself as a literal rags-to-riches story, a prime example of what an industrious and competent man can do in America (Sayre 17-21). At the start of his Autobiography he writes,

From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and in which I passed my earliest year, I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means, which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances. (Autobiography 1)

A bit later, he describes his entry into Philadelphia--in working clothes, very dirty, pockets "stuffed out with shirts and stockings"--so that "you in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made" (Autobiography 21). Within months of having become an apprentice printer, he can flash around to his brother's journeymen his new affluence, "having a genteel new suit

from head to foot, a watch, and my pockets lined with near five pounds sterling in silver" (Autobiography 26).

Franklin usually eschewed ostentation, of course, which helped ensure his rise to fortune and power, but he could not help making a show in this instance.

Franklin is a master craftsman with his story, and he balances his positive example with numerous negative ones, recounting how various friends and acquaintances came to bad ends due to a lack of industry or frugality. The first in this series is his boyhood friend Collins, a "sober and industrious lad" who resolves to go back with Franklin to Philadelphia after Franklin had found work as a printer there. Collins, however, takes up drinking and gambling, and, according to Franklin, "lost his money, so that I was obliged to discharge his lodgings and defray his expenses on the road and at Philadelphia." One night, in a boat on the Delaware river, Collins refuses to row when it comes his turn, demanding, "'I will be rowed home'." Franklin throws him overboard (Autobiography 29-30). Franklin obviously includes this anecdote as a parable about individual responsibility and pulling one's own weight--a sort of Atlas Shrugged in miniature.

Another negative example is that of David Harry, a rival printer who sets up shop after Franklin is set up on his own. Harry "was very proud, dressed like a gentleman, lived expensively, took much diversion and pleasure abroad,

ran in debt, and neglected his business--upon which all business left him" (Autobiography 61). The examples of Collins and Harry--and there are plenty of others--show that, even in a land of great opportunity, men must be diligent and frugal to succeed.

Although Franklin rejected the formal Puritanism of his day, he certainly drew on their language as he propounded his views of work and wealth in the Autobiography. At the start of the work he declares that, "I desire with all humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned happiness of my past life to his divine providence, which led me to the means I used and gave them success." God, he acknowledges, has the power "to bless us even in our afflictions," even when one has to "bear a fatal reverse" (Autobiography 2). Franklin placed a tombstone over the grave of his parents that read, in part, "By constant labour and industry,/With God's blessing,/They maintained a large family/. . . From this instance, Reader,/Be encouraged to diligence in thy calling,/And distrust not Providence" (Autobiography 9).

In these examples, Franklin may just be using Puritan terminology to meet the expectations of his audiences; however, there are several more important areas where Franklin's views on work and wealth seem to be a natural outgrowth of typical Puritan views. One is the idea that people have a built-in need to be productive. In his

expedition to build forts during the French and Indian War, Franklin recounts that

it rained so hard every other day that the men could not work. This gave me occasion to observe that when men are employed they are best contented. For on the days they worked they were good-natured and cheerful, and with the consciousness of having done a good day's work they spent the evenings jollily; but on the idle days they were mutinous and quarrelsome, finding fault with their pork, the bread, etc., and in continual ill-humor. . . ." (Autobiography 137)

Franklin here echoes traditional Protestant ideas that work was to be a source of joy and fulfillment, not a drudgery and punishment.

Another obvious similarity between Franklin and the Puritans would be their common idea that accumulated capital should not be wasted. The Puritans typically rejected finery and entertainments as frivolous temptations, with time and money spent on them necessarily being a waste of resources; Franklin similarly emphasized abstention from such behaviors--for the purposes of retaining capital and maintaining a businesslike image.

A more crucial similarity is the shared idea that accumulating wealth and/or selfish indulgence is not the end for which man is created, an idea that recurs frequently in the second part of the Autobiography. Certainly Franklin rejected giving money to the church or directly to the poor --two common conceptions of "charity"--but if charity includes activities such as civic duties and expanding the education and health care infrastructure, Franklin was one

of the most charitable men who ever lived. Franklin himself argued that his affluence enabled him to "be a useful citizen" (Autobiography 83), and to write off such statements as pure public relations is to ignore obvious facts. For much of his life, Franklin was a tireless worker for civic improvements. In addition to his support for the Pennsylvania Hospital, Franklin helped start the first public library in America, the University of Pennsylvania, an improved city police force (or "watch"), and an organized volunteer fire department. He also invented a stove that was more fuel efficient and helped warm rooms better. Franklin was offered a patent for this stove which could have been immensely lucrative; he rejected it, saying "that as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by an invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously" (Autobiography 108). These achievements, of course, are all overshadowed by his efforts on behalf of the new American government.

Even for the most cynical critic, such achievements and sentiments should temper ideas that Franklin is the consummate selfish capitalist. In fact, despite the charges of critics like Robert Shulman (in his 1987 book, Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions), there has not been a consensus that Franklin placed ethical living--manifesting itself in community and public service--

below the accumulation of capital. As previously noted, Malini Schueller demonstrated that Franklin's basic philosophy made virtue and philanthropy compatible with, and not necessarily subordinate to, self-interest. Franklin critic Tom Bailey goes even further, arguing persuasively that "Franklin . . . does not preach mindless self-reliance and self aggrandizement, but a radical, generous displacing of selfishness for cultural goals" (94).

Franklin, then, like the Pilgrims a century before, acknowledged that divine providence is ultimately responsible for successes and reverses. Franklin and most Protestants would also agree that work should be a fulfilling part of every one's existence, and that no one should be exempted from having to work. Franklin's idea that the profit motive is ultimately the best spur to productivity was a lesson learned by the Pilgrims during the starving time, and he shared with them an antipathy towards wasting resources on luxuries and entertainment. But probably the most striking similarity between Franklin and the Puritans would be their mutual emphasis that wealth is not to be pursued for its own sake, but rather that affluence should be the springboard for doing good to others.

The language and thought of Franklin, in the Autobiography and elsewhere, thus reflects a secularized version of traditional Puritan attitudes towards work and

wealth, and no one can argue Franklin played an immensely important role in creating the cultural icon of the penniless young man who through pluck and productivity rises to affluence and power. Consciously creating for himself the role as champion of hard work, individualism, and rightfully-accrued wealth--and suspicious of the efficacy of handouts to the poor--Franklin can be seen as the father of those views later centuries would label "conservative." Franklin also, however, helped start charity hospitals, schools, and libraries, and he detested inheritors of wealth (the European aristocrats) who oppressed the toiling masses --aligning him, in effect, with "liberals" in the modern sense. The liberal and conservative sides of Franklin are also evident in a related point, the question of the dispossessed groups in the American system. He realized that the freedoms and benefits inherent to the capitalist system should be celebrated but also should be extended to groups that were (and, to a certain degree perhaps, still are) institutionally excluded from participation--namely, women and blacks.

Franklin, of course, was no proto-feminist. Still, there are hints about an "enlightened" attitude toward women that anticipate some of the arguments of later feminists. For example, in a very early Silence Dogood column (May 21-28, 1722), Franklin argues that, contrary to popular male opinion, women do not sit around idle all day--and if any

do, whose fault is it but that of the men who in "their Folly" choose thusly to maintain them? Silence then "quotes" an "ingenious Writer" on women's education:

I have (says he) often thought of it as one of the most barbarous Customs in the World, considering us as a civiliz'd and Christian Country, that we deny the Advantages of Learning to Women. We reproach the Sex every Day with Folly and Impertinance, while I am confident, had they the Advantages of Education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves Their Youth is spent to teach them how to stitch and sow, or make Baubles. They are taught to read indeed, and perhaps to write their Names, or so; and that is the height of a Womans Education. And I would but ask any who slight the Sex for their Understanding, What is a Man (a Gentleman, I mean) good for that is taught no more? If Knowledge and Understanding had been useless Additions to the Sex, God Almighty would never have given them Capacities, for he made nothing Needless. (Autobiography 161)

Franklin here pokes fun at a society that tolerates both decorative women and decorative Gentlemen--while the women, at least, are capable of being productive members of society.

Franklin likewise comments on women's productivity (or productive potential) in a couple of passages in the Autobiography. He notes that his wife was "as much disposed to industry and frugality" as he was, and that "she assisted me cheerfully in my business, folding and stitching pamphlets, tending shop, purchasing old linen rags for the papermakers, etc." (73). Franklin also recounts how he, in 1733, entered into a partnership with one of his journeymen to set up a printing shop down in Charleston:

He was a man of learning and honest, but ignorant in matters of account; and tho' he sometimes made me remittances, I could get no account from him nor any satisfactory state of our partnership while he lived. On his decease, the business was continued by his widow, who being born and bred in Holland, where, as I have been informed, the knowledge of accompts makes a part of female education, she not only sent me as clear a state as she could find of the transactions past, but continued to account with the greatest regularity and exactitude every quarter and afterwards, and managed the business with such success that she not only brought up reputably a family of children but at the expiration of the term was able to purchase of me the printing house and establish her son in it. I mention this affair chiefly for the sake of recommending that branch of education for our young females as likely to be of more use to them and their children in case of widowhood than either music or dancing. . . . (Autobiography 90)

Franklin obviously would think it prudent to have women educated, productive members of society rather than unproductive decorations.

It would be an exaggeration, based on these rather peripheral references, to say that Franklin was a champion of women's rights. He more publicly took up the cause of the black slaves, albeit late in life. As late as 1750 Franklin owned two slaves, although he writes to Abiah Franklin that he is planning to sell them at the first opportunity, "for we do not like Negro Servants" (Franklin, Writings 3: 4). Clarification of this ambiguous statement can be seen in later correspondence, for example in a letter to Benjamin Rush dated July 14, 1773, which reads in part, "I hope that in time the endeavors of the friends to liberty and humanity will get the better of a practice [slavery],

that has so long disgraced our nation and religion"
(Franklin, Writings 6: 100).

Franklin's private disinclination toward slavery is evidenced by 1773, but he publicly took up the cause of abolition only very late in his life. In 1789, just a few months before his death, Franklin allowed himself to be named the president of the "Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage." On November 9, 1789, Franklin issued the society's initial address to the public, in which he described slavery as "an atrocious debasement of human nature" (Franklin, Writings 10: 67). The piece goes on to say,

The unhappy man, who has long been treated as a brute animal, too frequently sinks beneath the common standard of the human species. The galling chains, that bind his body, do also fetter his intellectual faculties, and impair the social affections of his heart. Accustomed to move like a mere machine, by the will of a master, reflection is suspended; he has not the power of choice; and reason and conscience have but little influence over his conduct, because he is chiefly governed by the passion of fear. He is poor and friendless; perhaps worn out by extreme labour, age, and disease.

Under such circumstances, freedom may often prove a misfortune to himself, and prejudicial to society.

Attention to emancipated black people, it is therefore to be hoped, will become a branch of our national policy; but, as far as we contribute to promote this emancipation, so far that attention is evidently a serious duty incumbent on us, and which we mean to discharge to the best of our judgement and abilities.

To instruct, to advise, to qualify those, who have been restored to freedom, for the exercise and enjoyment of civil liberty, to promote in them

the habits of industry, to furnish them with employments suited to their age, sex, talents, and other circumstances, and to procure their children an education calculated for their future situation in life; these are the great outlines of the annexed plan, which we have adopted, and which we conceive will essentially promote the public good, and the happiness of these our hitherto too much neglected fellow-creatures. (Franklin, Writings 10: 67-68)

Franklin obviously would like to see the black slaves freed, educated, and made productive citizens--and he realizes that it will take the combined efforts of both the federal government and private individuals to realize these goals (thus he ends the piece with an appeal for contributions). Some three weeks before his death, Franklin published an additional piece on behalf of the society, under the name "Historicus" in the March 25, 1790 Federal Gazette, which lampoons slaveowners by placing their arguments in the mouth of an Algerian official defending the practice of taking white, European Christians as slaves (Franklin, Writings 10:86-91). This was the last piece Franklin wrote for publication.

Franklin, champion of hard work, property rights, limited government, and effective use of capital, helped propagate the essential tenets of conservative America. However, he also could also be considered the father of American liberals who champion "enabling" charities--schools and medical care--and who acknowledge that there must be a struggle before all have equal opportunity for participation in an inherently good economic system flawed by

exclusiveness and downright injustice. Franklin failed to address this last topic fully, of course--only rather peripherally acknowledging the capabilities of women, and failing to publicly acknowledge the plight of the black slaves until very late in his life--but in raising the issue at all he helps establish an important theme in our literature, a theme that recurs more strongly, for example, in Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer.

Crèvecoeur's Critique of American Capitalism

Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813, pseudonym Hector St. John), son of a French aristocrat, is, with Benjamin Franklin, one of the most articulate defenders of the free enterprise system in eighteenth-century America. In this chapter, we will examine his Letters from an American Farmer (first published in London in 1782) as a document that extols the virtues of American capitalism while at the same time pointing out some of the American system's flaws--which in many ways aligns it with Franklin's Autobiography. Franklin, as we have already seen, praised the free market system as the one most suited to men's natures, he pointed out that women could be productive participants given the education and opportunity, and he recommended the abolition of slavery. Crèvecoeur goes further in examining the plight of the dispossessed black by looking frankly, if rather briefly, at the slavery-based

society of the southern states, and he is the first notable American writer to show that many of the "monied class" are able to abuse the system so that they are incommensurately rewarded for "labor" that is not really productive. Both of these themes are integral to later American literature of the "social criticism" genre.

The first two-thirds of Crèvecoeur's Letters are parallel to Franklin's works in theme and style. Crèvecoeur's narrator, like Franklin in the Autobiography, is open about didactically teaching the virtues of industry and thrift, saying in the introductory letter that "I had rather record the progressive steps of this industrious farmer, throughout all the stages of his labours and other operations, than examine how modern Italian convents can be supported with doing anything. . . ." (Crèvecoeur 12). Another similarity between Franklin and Crèvecoeur is their fundamental technique of holding up various examples of people who have "made good" in the American system as models to be followed. The first and foremost model is, of course, his American farmer, who is the envy of the world for his economic situation and for his political situation. Early in the Letters Crèvecoeur asks, "where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer, possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us?" (22). Obviously, the independent and

productive American farmer is in an enviable state compared to the wretched and repressed toiling masses in the old country.

Letter III, "What Is an American," echoes Franklin in its emphasis on the contrast between the general prosperity of the industrious and thrifty Americans and the unfair economic stratification of Europe. Crèvecoeur's narrator explains,

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion. . . no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. (40)

Crèvecoeur, like Franklin, saw that the equality of condition was due in large part to the fact that America had virtually unlimited land available for agriculture; an industrial society (with "great manufacturers employing thousands"), he realized, would necessarily be more stratified. Crèvecoeur later writes,

There is room for everybody in America; has he any particular talent, or industry? he exerts it in order to procure a livelihood, and it succeeds I do not mean that every one who comes will grow rich in a little time; no, but he may procure an easy, decent maintenance, by his industry. (57)

Crèvecoeur summarizes his thoughts on the immigrant's opportunities in America with this Franklinesque prescription: "It is not every immigrant who succeeds; no, it is only the sober, the honest, and industrious. . . ." (61).

The idea of self-interest had been grudgingly allowed by the founders of Jamestown and the Pilgrims at Plymouth; but Crèvecoeur, like Franklin, celebrated it as being the cornerstone of the American system. In Letter III, for example, the narrator states, "We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself" (40). Crèvecoeur later writes of the American, "Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want stronger allurements?" (44). At this point in the work, self-interest is a spur to industriousness; later, Crèvecoeur will raise the possibility that unrestrained self-interest can itself subvert the free-market system.

As noted, Crèvecoeur delights in recounting success stories. He devotes a chapter to the history of Andrew, the Hebridean, whose rise to prosperity illustrates that even the poorest and most poorly educated European can make good in America. Andrew came from a Scottish island whose population barely subsisted raising sheep. He came to America with little money and no knowledge of American agriculture. But the Scotchman's honesty and industriousness soon won him knowledge, positions of increasing importance, and finally the capital to purchase his own successful farm. Comments Crèvecoeur's narrator at

the end of the story, "It is astonishing how quick men will learn when they work for themselves" (83-84).

One fascinating section of the Letters has the narrator encounter a Russian visitor who laments the lack of private property and free market opportunities in his mother country, saying,

. . . we should be too numerous, too happy, too powerful a people, if it were possible for the whole Russian Empire to be cultivated like the province of Pennsylvania. Our lands are so unequally divided, and so few of our farmers are possessors of the soil they till, that they cannot execute plans of husbandry with the same vigour as you do, who hold yours, as it were from the Master of nature, unencumbered and free. (189)

The Communist Revolution of 1918 apparently compounded rather than solved the problems Crèvecoeur perceived with Russian agriculture, and only now are Russian leaders moving haltingly in the direction of individual farmers working their own lands to improve the nation's agricultural production.

Crèvecoeur's emphasis on self-interest does not blind him to the fact that self-interest can lead to injustice, and his celebration of America as the place where people are free to reap the rewards of productive labor provides him a standard whereby to condemn the institution of slavery. Lawyers, for example, are vehemently attacked because they are leeches on the backs of productive members of society; they are

plants that will grow in any soil that is cultivated by the hands of others; and when once

they have taken root they will extinguish every other vegetable that grows around them. . . . The most ignorant, the most bungling member of that profession, will, if placed in the most obscure part of the country, promote litigiousness, and amass more wealth without labour, than the most opulent farmer, with all his toils. (140)

Crevecoeur, like Franklin, is ever the champion of the productive man of whatever type--farmer, whaler, botanist--but lawyers, who siphon off the wealth made by the truly productive, deserve no quarter.

Slaveowners are in the same category as lawyers, and for the same reason: instead of being productive themselves, they are parasites off the labor of others. In Letter IX, when the narrator visits the land of the slaveowners--Charles Town, South Carolina--Crevecoeur delivers his most biting critique of the American system. Charles Town is the most opulent city in the colonies, but, as in Europe, the city's prosperity is built on exploiting the productive labor of the dispossessed class, here the slaves. Extreme class stratification--practically unknown in those parts of America where the majority of the people are independent farmers, but all too common in Europe--is the result. As the narrator explains,

On the one side, behold a people enjoying all that life affords most bewitching and pleasurable, without labour, without fatigue, hardly subjected to the trouble of wishing. . . . On the other side, nothing is to be seen but the most diffusive misery and wretchedness. . . . Day after day they [the slaves] drudge on without any prospect of ever reaping for themselves; they are obliged to devote their lives, their limbs, their will, and

every vital exertion to swell the wealth of
masters. . . . (161-62)

The result of such an oppressive system is driven home to the narrator when he finds a negro slave suspended in a cage and left to die for having killed his overseer.

Various critics have pointed out that Crèvecoeur achieved special emphasis in the Charles Town section because it is immediately preceded by a picture of the productive and in many ways idyllic whaling communities at Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.¹ Others have gone even further. Mary E. Rucker, for example, argues that the early letters, with their naive endorsements of agrarian democracy, are undercut by the new, ironic voice most clearly heard in Letter IX. The narrator of the new voice is sophisticated enough to know that a society based on self-interest will inevitably succumb to "greed and licentiousness" (Rucker 193-95, 199-201). Similarly, James C. Mohr sees the earlier letters as rather naive and idyllic (even calling the section on Andrew, the Hebridean "practically a preindustrial version of the Horatio Alger fables"), but by Letter IX Crèvecoeur portrays man as inherently evil, and by Letter XII (the beginning of the revolution), all the people--black and white--are subject to

¹See, for example, Thomas Philbrick, St. John de Crèvecoeur (New York: Twayne, 1970), pp. 257-58; and Robert P. Winston, "'Strange Order of Things': The Journey to Chaos in Letters from an American Farmer," Early American Literature 19.3 (1984/85): pp. 249-67.

turmoil and oppression (Mohr 357-61). David Robinson, however, is not quite so pessimistic about the book's final chapters. He argues that, through the experience of Charles Town and the impending revolution, the narrator refines rather than reverses his vision of man and society. The narrator's education consists in learning the evils of slavery and the fruits of its elimination (Bartram's freed blacks are very productive) and in learning sympathy for the Indian. After his values have been transformed, his hopes to live peaceably and simply among the Indians removes the narrative from "the realm of history" and places it in the realm of "social criticism and utopian thinking" (Robinson 561-570).

Of these critics, Robinson is probably the most perceptive in discerning the artistry behind the discordant voices in Letters. By including the Charles Town and revolution sections after the more celebratory sections, Crèvecoeur reinforces the theme present from the beginning of the work, that America's distinctive source of strength comes from its unique economic system in which productive people are commensurately rewarded for their labors. At the beginning of his work, Crèvecoeur obviously juxtaposes America with Europe to show the superiority of a society where all men can participate freely in making a profit and improving their station. Crèvecoeur then goes on to show the ways that America can slip (or is slipping) back into

the European pattern of a stratified society, where people with power do no productive labor, instead appropriating, for their own benefit, the productivity of others. His first example of such a class is the lawyer; his second is the slaveowner. The obvious danger for America in going to war to become independent from Britain is that, in a period of anarchy and confusion, there are ample opportunities for grabbing power and land--opportunities, in other words, for restructuring society so that ever-larger groups are institutionally excluded from the fruits of their own labor.

Thus Crèvecoeur, while acknowledging the dangers posed by a self-interest unrestrained by reason and laws, never ceases to affirm the necessity of a society based on self-interest, on the profit motive, on the accumulation of capital, and on the possibility of improving one's station in life. Like Franklin, Crèvecoeur would have us extend the opportunity to participate fully in the capitalist system to groups currently excluded. Franklin rather glancingly affirmed that women and blacks, properly educated, could be productive. Crèvecoeur illustrates the plight of the blacks more dramatically, showing that as slaves they have only two options--sullenly acquiesce or lash out in futile rebellion --but as free, educated men they can participate as peaceful and productive members of society.

Crèvecoeur and Franklin, using bricks and mortar supplied by the earliest colonists, helped build a

foundation for much of American literature to come. These two writers largely established the now-stereotypical idea that, in America, given native abilities and hard work, a person can rise to fortune and fame. They also helped establish the dominant strain of social criticism in American literature, the strain that holds up for viewing the usually "invisible" people, the disenfranchised and dispossessed, with the hope of integrating them into the system, "empowering" them for participation in a free but competitive society.

CHAPTER III
THE NEW NATION AND THE EMERGING
ECONOMIC NOVEL

Shaping the New Country: Class Struggle
and the Founding Fathers

America's first (relatively) remembered novelists, Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Charles Brockden Brown, began publishing their work in the 1790's--the first decade under the new Constitution. That a new American government and a new American literary form were born practically simultaneously is probably no coincidence. The discussions about the Constitution, specifically, and the broader social discourse about egalitarian issues had a definite impact upon our early novelists, as will be demonstrated in this and subsequent sections.

From the early 1780's, when discussions about a new federal government began in earnest, until the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, debates about economic equity and class struggle were frequent in various forums, from popular pamphlets to the Federalist essays to the formal debates at the constitutional convention itself. In fact, discussions among the founding fathers about class struggle and economic inequity continued even after the Constitution took effect in March of 1789; Jefferson and Adams, for example, continued to correspond about egalitarian issues for many years thereafter. These debates were, of course,

heavily dependent upon the ideas, experiences, and writings of all those earlier colonists (especially Franklin and Crèvecoeur) who discussed America as being the quintessential place where productive labor is commensurately rewarded.

The debate, in broad terms, was between those who championed the common men, the small, often-indebted farmers, and those who championed the monied interests, the people who possessed a disproportionate (in light of egalitarian ideals) amount of wealth, commercial interests, or land. But underlying the differences between the two positions there was some common ground. Both sides consistently agreed that men of ability should be free to profit from their productivity, and no one ever advocated the idea that America should set up a system of hereditary nobility, an aristocracy based on European models.

One good example of the bias against anything smacking of a hereditary nobility can be seen in the vigorous attacks on a proposed fraternity called the "Order of the Cincinnati." The Order was to be composed of Revolutionary War officers and their eldest male posterity, but it was roundly attacked as a creating a neo-aristocracy. One voice opposing the Order was that of Aedanus Burke in his 1783 pamphlet, "Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati." In this pamphlet Burke writes,

This Order is planted in a fiery, hot ambition, and thirst for power; and its branches will end in

tyranny. The Cincinnati will soon be corrupted, and the spirit of the people depressed; for in less than a century it will occasion such an inequality in the condition of our inhabitants, that the country will be composed only of two ranks of men; the patricians or nobles, and the rabble. (Burke 8)

Burke praises the "gallant efforts" of the Revolutionary War soldiers, but he points out that these efforts were "the offspring of the equality and independent temper of men, who fought for themselves, and not for masters" (Burke 10).

Burke also warns that creating an American aristocracy would have negative consequences for Europe:

Our example too would serve to strengthen tyranny in Europe, by evincing that a people brought up under a monarchy, and accustomed to be governed by others, are too degenerate to govern themselves in a state of liberty; and that after all we have done, we will still keep a hankering after the orders, titles and trumpery we have been used to under the royal government, where the people are so bewitched, that abilities, virtue, or wealth itself, are not such objects of reverence as a star or ribbon. (Burke 15)

Burke is clearly in the camp of the defenders of equality and the common man, those who would have America continue to be a place where men of "abilities, virtue, or wealth itself" are revered.

The clash between the truly productive man and the "parasite" that lives off of him was humorously portrayed by Franklin (when he knocked his one-time friend into the river for refusing to row) and seriously portrayed in Crevecoeur (the encounter of the caged slave left to die for killing his overseer). In the mid-1780's, a period of economic

down-turn and specie shortage, another version of the conflict could be seen as indebted farmers lobbied for paper money as they were squeezed by bankers. An essayist for The Political Intelligencer, and New-Jersey Advertiser (January 25, 1786 edition) made the case that it has always been customary for "industrious husbandmen and mechanics" to borrow money "to purchase land and build with, and furnish themselves with the materials to work with at their occupation, and thereby they commonly became useful members of the community." But now the "moneyed-men" are calling in debts while hording specie, making it impossible for the productive men to repay the loans. As the essayist argues, these creditors are attempting to

. . . set their nest on high and not be under the necessity of getting their bread by industry, but live by the labour of the honest farmer and mechanic, without being any service to church or state, but that of holding the purse in unrighteous hands--rioting in luxury by means of oppression, and living in idleness by other men's toil. (Greene 492)

Crevecoeur had attacked lawyers and slaveowners as societal parasites living off the productivity of others; here bankers and creditors are placed in the same category. Ranged against the monied interests are the Franklinesque farmers and mechanics, whose productivity make them the truly "useful members of society."

The monied interests, too, had their spokesmen, and a point to note is that they also see themselves as defending the essential American way in championing property rights,

profits legitimately made, and even honesty and industriousness. In the January 4, 1786 Political Intelligencer, and New-Jersey Advertiser was a typical piece defending the monied interests. The essayist argued that debtors deserved no special relief from their obligations, claiming instead that all the blame lies with the borrowers: "What business had you to buy the land, (or rather steal it, for buy it you did not, since there has been no payment made) when you did not foresee the least probability of clearing yourselves from the incumbrance!" He leaves open the possibility that some "deserve more compassion" because they have been victims of "inevitable misfortune," but concludes by saying,

We trust, however, that such men will find relief, but they seek it where it is not to be found, if they league themselves with those of the other description [who clamor for debt relief] The better way would be, by discountenancing every thing that is dishonest, and uniting with those who feel for the real interest of their country, join in every measure that will tend to restore confidence, and confidence once restored their remedy is at hand, the HONEST AND INDUSTRIOUS will never suffer. (Greene 489)

The writer sees debt relief as undermining property rights and fair profits; receiving even more ire from property owners and monied interests are suggestions of overt property redistribution and equalization:

An equality of property . . . has charms irresistible, and there is no man, that lacks honesty as much as he wants money, but would embrace the delusive idea with rapture, and would petition, too, with all his soul, to procure so ravishing a distribution--But will anyone say,

that a virtuous legislature would give a more serious attention to so chimerical a proposal, than if such petitioner had prayed to have all noses reduced to the same standard, or all understandings to the same level? No they would tell this humble suppliant, that they were the guardians of the people--that they were not set over them to sport with, but to protect their rights--that they were not assembled to give one man's property to another--that the right to property, whether acquired by industry, purchase or descent, was as sacred and indisputable as the right to noses or intellects. (Greene 484)

This writer is obviously prepared to defend inequities in the distribution of wealth as being pre-ordained--analogous to inequities in the sizes of intellects or noses.

The same issues carried over into debates about the structure of the new federal government, especially of the upper house of the legislature. One side held that the senate should somehow be reserved for an enlightened, propertied class; the other side held that the senate, like the house, should be responsive to the majority of the people. Charles Pinckney was the primary spokesman for the latter view. He argued, in the Constitutional debate on June 25, 1787, that the people of the United States are unique:

Among them there are fewer distinctions of fortune & less of rank, than among the inhabitants of any other nation. Every freeman has a right to the same protection & security; and a very moderate share of property entitles them to the possession of all the honors and privileges the public can bestow: hence arises a greater equality, than is to be found among the people of any other country, and an equality which is more likely to continue--I say this equality is likely to continue, because in a new Country, possessing immense tracts of uncultivated lands, where every temptation is

offered to emigration & where industry must be rewarded with competency, there will be few poor, and few dependent. . . . None will be excluded by birth, & few by fortune, from voting for proper persons to fill the offices of Government.
(Farrand 1: 398)

Note that Franklin and Crèvecoeur, among others, had also argued that Americans would enjoy a general equality of condition as long as frontier lands were open. In Pinckney's terms, "that vast extent of unpeopled territory which opens to the frugal & industrious a sure road to competency & independence will effectually prevent for a considerable time the increase of the poor or discontented . . ." (Farrand 1: 400). Thus Pinckney was confident that the American people could elect both houses of Congress without fear that the poorer classes would pressure the lawmakers into passing unwise legislation such as that mandating the redistribution of property.

James Madison was one of those opposing Pinckney, holding that the Senate should counterbalance the will of the masses. The people and their representatives, he argued, are likely to err "from fickleness and passion. A necessary fence agst. this danger would be to select a portion of enlightened citizens, whose limited number, and firmness might seasonably interpose agst. impetuous counsels" (Farrand 1: 422). Madison admitted that the people of the United States were not yet characterized by the extremes of wealth and poverty to be found in Europe, but that even then Americans could not be regarded as "one

homogeneous mass," and that further class stratification was likely to occur, with possibly dire consequences:

In framing a system which we wish to last for ages, we shd. not lose sight of the dangers which ages will produce. An increase of population will of necessity increase the proportion of those who will labour under all the hardships of life, & secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings. These may in time outnumber those who are placed above feelings of indigence. According to the equal laws of suffrage, the power will slide into the hands of the former. No agrarian attempts have yet been made in this Country, but symptoms of a leveling spirit, as we have understood, have sufficiently appeared in certain quarters to give notice of the future danger. How is this danger to be guarded agst. on republican principles? How is the danger in all cases of interested co-alitions to oppress the minority to be guarded against? Among other means by the establishment of a body in the Govt. sufficiently respectable for its wisdom & virtue, to aid on such emergencies, the preponderance of justice by throwing its weight into that scale. (Farrand 1: 422-23)

The compromise solution, that Senators should be elected by their state legislatures and serve six-year terms, largely reflected the victory of the Madison forces. It was not until 1913, with the passage of the seventeenth amendment, that Senators became popularly elected. (Some two decades later, during the Great Depression, Congress began legislating some redistribution of wealth--vindicating, perhaps, Madison's fears.)

After the delegates to the convention finally agreed on the Constitution, the job of selling it to the various states for ratification began. Chief among the battlegrounds was the state of New York, where Alexander

Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay led the propaganda effort in behalf of the Constitution with the publication of the Federalist essays from October 1787 to April 1788. Not surprisingly, many of the same issues debated on the convention floor were again addressed in the Federalist papers, including efforts by the agrarian class to abolish debts and equalize property.

In the Federalist No. 10, for example, James Madison reaffirmed that the United States is and always would be a place of social distinctions, class stratification, and factions:

the most common and durable source of factions, has been the various and unequal distribution of property.--Those who hold and those who are without property, have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors and those who are debtors fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a monied interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 131)

Madison goes on to explain that a republican form of government, with elected representatives--rather than a direct democracy--will help prevent a large faction from gaining control of the government: "a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union, than a particular member of it" (134).

Thus the founding fathers attempted to steer a middle ground in egalitarian issues. The bicameral legislature, with representatives being popularly elected and senators being elected by state legislatures, was an attempt to make sure that no one faction gained control of that branch of the government. Proposals from foundering farmers for debt relief, or more radical proposals for the equal division of property, were considered pernicious--as were any efforts to create an American aristocracy (Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution says that "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States"). The cumulative effect is a re-affirmation of principles held by the earliest colonists: that private property and self-interest are necessities, that those with much money and power should not be allowed to oppress the less fortunate, and that the United States should strive to achieve an equal prosperity for all. As historian Richard B. Morris writes,

What the Founding Fathers were committed to was equality of opportunity, an equality made possible by the availability of freehold land under a national land system devised for an expanding frontier. Equality of opportunity would not be curbed by special privileges, monopolies, titles of nobility, or hereditary honors, and would be promoted in the states by the abolition of primogeniture and entailed estates and a variety of other reforms in education and in criminal and civil law. (Morris 163)

The Constitution of the United States, then, institutionalized the experiences, ideas, and writings of colonists from John Smith to Crèvecoeur. But the debate

over social inequities was far from over, even among the founding fathers themselves. The leading spokesman for egalitarian interests and the small farmer, Thomas Jefferson, discussed these issues for nearly five decades (from the 1770's until his death in 1826). In a letter to James Madison dated October 28, 1785, Jefferson recounts talking to a poor laboring woman in the French countryside, which led him to reflect on ". . . that unequal division of property which occasions the numberless instances of wretchedness which I had observed in this country and is to be found all over Europe." While property is "absolutely concentrated in a very few hands," the most numerous class is "the poor who cannot find work." Jefferson concludes,

I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. But the consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property, only taking care to let their subdivisions go hand in hand with the natural affections of the human mind. The descent of property of every kind therefore to all the children . . . is a politic measure, and a practicable one. Another means of silently lessening the inequality of property is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, and to tax the higher portions of property in geometrical progression as they rise. Whenever there is in any country, uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. . . . It is too soon yet in our country to say that every man who cannot find employment but who can find uncultivated land, shall be at liberty to cultivate it, paying a moderate rent. But it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of the state. (Jefferson 8: 681-82)

With such sentiments Jefferson obviously demonstrates a sympathy for squatters and debt-strapped farmers struggling to make a living off the land. Still, he knows that calls for equal land distribution are chimerical, and all measures must accord with "the natural affections of the human mind," in other words, based on the premise of the profit motive.

Jefferson's emphasis that men of ability should have the opportunity to prosper is perhaps most clearly seen in a letter to John Adams dated October 28, 1813, a letter in which Jefferson contrasts the "natural aristocracy," founded on "virtues and talents," with the "artificial aristocracy," founded on "wealth and birth." In this letter, Jefferson argues that the Senate does not need to be a protection against "the Agrarian and plundering enterprises of the Majority of the people," and he says the citizens should be free to separate "the aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi" (Cappon 1: 388). Jefferson goes on to enumerate some of the legislation he wrote to help prevent the establishment of an American aristocracy:

At the first session of our [the Virginia] legislature after the Declaration of Independence, we passed a law abolishing entails. And this was followed by one abolishing the privilege of Primogeniture, and dividing the lands of intestates equally among all children, or other representatives. These laws, drawn by myself, laid the axe to the root of Pseudo-aristocracy. (Cappon 1: 389)

The laws to which Jefferson refers (entails, privilege of primogeniture, etc.) involve the prevention of all of a

family's wealth going to a particular heir (typically the oldest son), thus helping to ensure that the wealth and property an individual might amass in his lifetime will be at least partially broken up in the succeeding generation. In the same letter, Jefferson describes other egalitarian reforms he advocated, including a free but competitive public school program in which the best (male) students were awarded high school and university educations at the public's expense: "Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and compleatly prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts" (Cappon 1: 390). Note that Jefferson's focus is on a level playing field to ensure that men of ability are commensurately rewarded for their labor--in other words, equality of opportunity, not of condition.

As he concludes this optimistic letter, Jefferson's claims about opportunities in America strongly echo such writers as Crèvecoeur, Franklin, and even John Smith:

Here every one may have land to labor for himself if he chuses; or, preferring the exercise of any other industry, may exact for it such compensation as not only to afford a comfortable subsistence, but wherewith to provide for a cessation of labor in old age. Every one, by his property, or by his satisfactory situation, is interested in the support of law and order. And such men may safely and advantageously reserve to themselves a wholesome controul over their public affairs, and a degree of freedom. . . . (Cappon 1: 391)

Jefferson was the most optimistic about the abilities of the common man and the most articulate proponent of egalitarian measures among the founding fathers.

Less optimistic about the common man was John Adams, whose conservative views tended to favor the propertied class; typical would be his claim, in a letter to Jefferson written in August of 1813, that "the Idea of the 'Well born'. . . is the Ordonance of God Almighty, in the Constitution of human nature, and wrought into the Fabrick of the Universe" (Cappon 1: 365). Late in his life, however, Adams had obviously developed a low view of both the pseudo-aristocracy and of the masses, as is demonstrated by a letter he wrote to Jefferson in November 1813:

When I consider the weakness, the folly, the Pride, the Vanity, the Selfishness, the Artifice, the low craft and mean cunning, the want of Principle, the Avarice, the unbounded Ambition, the unfeeling Cruelty of a majority of those (in all Nations) who are allowed an aristocratical influence; and on the other hand, the Stupidity with which the more numerous multitude, not only becomes their Dupes, but even love to be Taken in by their Tricks: I feel a stronger disposition to weep at their destiny, than to laugh at their Folly. (Cappon 1: 398)

Adams, a perpetual opponent of Jefferson, ultimately perceived similarities between their positions:

You suppose a difference of Opinion between You and me, on the Subject of Aristocracy. I can find none. I dislike and detest hereditary honours, Offices [and] Emoluments established by Law. So do you. I am for ex[c]luding legal hereditary distinctions from the U.S. as long as possible. So are you. I only say that Mankind have not yet discovered any remedy against irresistable Corruption in Elections to Offices of great Power

and Profit, but by making them hereditary.
(Cappon 1: 401)

Adams went so far as to attack monied interests as neo-aristocracies in a letter to Jefferson dated December 1813: "An hundred other foreign Aristocracies have sown and are sowing their seeds in this Country: and We have an Abundance of them springing up in this Country not from Virtues and Talents so much as from Banks and Land Jobbing" (Cappon 1: 409). Thus both Adams and Jefferson, among many others, rued the rise of a monied class that seemed to profit off the labor of others.

The founding fathers, then, emphasized and institutionalized equal economic and political opportunities, freedom, and legitimate profits for productive labor--all the traditional ideas about what America should be--culminating in the great works of the period such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These rights and freedoms were guaranteed for all persons; unfortunately, the fathers' definition of persons was too often limited to white males with property. An egalitarian like Jefferson could still frown on the idea of women's suffrage, and legislation continued to severely restrict the rights of married women to own property. Most Native Americans had their lands confiscated and were forced into exile. Despite some early anti-slavery measures, blacks were still largely considered as property rather than as human beings. Even white males were regularly imprisoned

for indebtedness, or if convicted of vagrancy were often sold at auction into bound servitude (Morris 181-84). Reforms to extend economic opportunity to these groups were beginning, but progress was tragically slow.

Benjamin Franklin, as noted earlier, did take a rare public stand against slavery; similarly, only a few notable voices of the period were raised on behalf of women. One such voice was that of Abigail Adams, the only woman in our nation's history to be both the wife and the mother of U.S. presidents. A woman of great strength and intellect, she shared her husband John's federalist views on most issues. On the issue of the woman's place in society, however, she and her husband had some lively debates, recorded in their correspondence.

The opening salvo is in a letter from Abigail to John dated March 31, 1776. Abigail first criticizes the Virginians' slave system, writing, "I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs" (Butterfield 120). Later in the letter, Abigail addresses another dispossessed group, women:

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy--and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular

care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. (121)

It is interesting that Abigail mentions the injustice of slavery and the unjust treatment of women in the same letter; for the next hundred years, the leading champions of women's rights were also abolitionists.

John Adams's reply of April 14, 1776 includes several points worthy of note. He answers a question of hers about the state of Virginia's and North Carolina's defenses, and then makes the following comment about North Carolina:

The Gentry are very rich, and the common People very poor. This inequality of Property, gives an Aristocratical Turn to all their Proceedings, and occasions a strong Aversion in their Patricians, to Common Sense. But the Spirit of these Barons, is coming down, and it must submit. (Butterfield 122)

Shortly afterwards he adds,

Whenever Vanity, and Gaiety, a Love of Pomp and Dress, Furniture, Equipage, Buildings, great Company, expensive Diversions, and elegant Entertainments get the better of the Principles and Judgments of Men or Women there is no knowing where they will stop, nor into what Evils, natural, moral, or political, they will lead us. (122)

These are rather egalitarian sentiments; Adams, despite his belief in the "well born" and his distrust of the common people, was never a lover of aristocracies. He was, however, a male chauvinist and a latent racist, as his reply to Abigail's suggestion that the new government treat women as equals illustrates:

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient-- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. . . .

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the [sic] to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell. (122-23)

What he meant for Abigail to read in the blank of the last sentence one can only conjecture, but "females" is the most polite possibility.

Abigail continued the discussion in a letter dated August 14, 1776; in this letter she prefaces her plea for better education for women with a more general description of war conditions having broad social implications:

You remark upon the deficiency of Education in your Countrymen. It never I believe was in a worse state, at least for many years. . . . The poorer sort of children are wholly neglected, and

left to range the Streets without Schools, without Business, given up to all Evil. (152)

Abigail connects lack of education, poverty, and social disorder--three intertwined evils that obviously still plague the American scene. Later in the letter she makes these comments on women's education:

If you complain of neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it. With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my debth, and destitute and deficient in every part of Education.

I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen, and Philosophers, we should have learned women. The world perhaps will laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity, But you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the Sentiment. If much depends as is allowed upon the early Education of youth and the first principals which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must arise from literary accomplishments in women. (153)

Abigail never fully explores the connection between women, education, and economic participation, but the general tenor of her ideas in these and other letters is clear: women should be given equal education, should be given equal property rights ("Do not put such unlimited power into the hand of the Husbands"), and should be allowed to participate meaningfully in social and political institutions outside the home.

I have traced the prevailing social discourse of the period in an attempt to build a context for the following sections on period novelists. The novelists have their

unique perspectives, of course, but each is intimately concerned with issues of class stratification, social mobility, work and wealth--the same issues which dominated the larger socio-political discussions of the period.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry:
The Man of Ability versus the Man of Money

Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry (first published in 1792-1793, with additional parts published in 1804-1805 and 1815) is notable for this study because it presents two apparently contradictory themes: the idea that the productive man should be commensurately rewarded for his productivity, and that people should not aspire to stations beyond their suitability. In his attempts to reconcile these two ideas, Brackenridge clearly reflects the conservative side of the social and political debates of the early national period.

Brackenridge himself is a good example of the American experience at its best. Born in Scotland in 1748, his family emigrated to the Pennsylvania frontier when Brackenridge was five. The family was so poor that they had to sell their surplus clothing to get the money to complete their journey (Newlin, Life 2). Brackenridge early evidenced a keen mind, and a local clergyman provided him with some education in the classics. Needing money to pursue a college career, Brackenridge began teaching school at the age of fifteen, and five years later had the

resources to attend the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). There he was friends with men like James Madison and Philip Freneau (Newlin, in Brackenridge, Modern ix-x).

During the Revolution, while serving as a chaplain, Brackenridge wrote some notable patriotic plays. Later he helped found the (short-lived) United States Magazine and the more successful Pittsburgh Gazette, through which he championed passage of the Federal Constitution. He also practiced law, served briefly in Pennsylvania's state assembly, and was appointed justice to Pennsylvania's supreme court. As noted, he published the first volume of Modern Chivalry in 1792, and he continued adding to it the rest of his life (Brackenridge, Modern xii-xxiv).

Modern Chivalry reflects conservative thinking very similar to the positions taken by John Adams. According to Brackenridge scholar Claude M. Newlin, the book's primary themes concern "(1) the ambition of unqualified persons to rise to high position, (2) the lack of intelligent discrimination on the part of voters, and (3) the excesses of democracy" (Brackenridge, Modern xxx). Brackenridge evidences a deep distrust of the uneducated masses, but he is no defender of aristocrats, either. Instead, he takes the position common (ultimately) to both Jefferson and Adams that people of ability should be free to rise to their proper station. (People, however, also need to have enough

sense to know when they have exceeded their station, according to Brackenridge--a conservative idea typical for the period.) Brackenridge also attacks those in society who accrue wealth without being truly productive, a group that includes government employees, slave owners, and land speculators.

Brackenridge uses a rambling, episodic narrative structure to make his satirical points and propound his ideas, writing,

I mean this tale of a Captain travelling, but as a vehicle to my way of thinking on some subjects; just as the ancients introduced speakers in a dialogue, occasionally at banquets; or as the philosophers in their walks and conversations, moralized in parables, and feigned cases, a way of reasoning, and address less offending the self-love of men than what has the appearance of immediate and direct instruction. (Brackenridge, Modern 350)

One can rightly expect, then, that Brackenridge will present various points of view, but the normative voice of reason will generally prevail--Brackenridge being a typical child of the Enlightenment.

Brackenridge sets up his picaresque novel by describing his protagonist, John Farrago, called the Captain from his service in the militia. The Captain is in his early fifties, "whimsical" but with "good natural sense," having an "academic education" but living "the greater part of his life on a small farm." His current servant, Teague O'Reagan, is a stock Irishman; says the narrator, "I shall say nothing of the character of this man, because the very

name imports what he was" (6). Teague is a lover of good food and drink, unlettered but good-natured, always eager to secure for himself some station to which he is thoroughly unqualified (unqualified, that is, when viewed objectively; to the ignorant mobs which they frequently encounter, Teague seems eminently worthy of various higher offices).

The premise of the novel is that the Captain decides to "ride about the world a little, with his man Teague at his heels, to see how things were going on here and there, and to observe human nature" (6). Wherever they go, the Captain comments on American society as he gets Teague out of various situations and scrapes. Brackenridge critic John Engell has pointed out that the Captain, although a person of integrity, is too naive to be considered a totally trustworthy spokesman for Brackenridge in Part I of Modern Chivalry (Engell 52-53). However, the Captain is a man of reason and conservative values--like Brackenridge himself--as is evidenced in the novel's first episode. He and Teague come upon some men racing horses, which provokes these comments on aristocratic bloodlines in men:

It is remarkable, that as estates have seldom lasted three generations, so understanding and ability have seldom been transmitted to the second. . . . Was I to lay a bet for a great man, I would sooner pick up the brat of a tinker, than go into the great houses to chuse a piece of stuff for a man of genius. (7-8)

Here the Captain, voicing values with which Brackenridge would agree, acknowledges the seminal American tenet that men of ability can arise from any class.

The Captain and Teague continue their travels, and they come upon men holding an election for a position to the state legislature, with an uneducated weaver running against an educated man. The Captain makes a short speech on behalf of the educated man, saying that for the weaver "to rise from the cellar to the senate house, would be an unnatural hoist. . . . There is nothing makes a man so ridiculous as to attempt what is above his sphere" (14). Distrustful of aristocracies, the Captain obviously has reservations about the sense and abilities of the common man, too--and his fears prove well founded when the people take a liking to Teague and pledge their votes to him. The Captain again takes the stand to dissuade them from their new choice, arguing that Teague

is totally ignorant of the great principles of legislation; and more especially, the particular interests of the government. . . . Though doubtless, in such a government, the lowest citizen may become chief magistrate; yet it is sufficient to possess the right; not absolutely necessary to exercise it. (15)

The people, however, will not be dissuaded, and the Captain retains his servant only by telling him that being in the legislature is "a worse stain than stealing sheep. . . . Let it never be said, that you quitted an honest livelihood, the taking care of my horse, to follow the new fangled whims

of the times, and to be a statesman" (17). Most of the episodes of Part I parallel this one, with common people being routinely duped or otherwise exercising poor judgement. The repetition reinforces the impression of Brackenridge's conservatism; Brackenridge, like his friend Madison, was distrustful that popular elections would ensure that the best candidate would regularly be elected.

Having escaped the election with Teague still in tow, the Captain next meets with a conjurer--an expert on the gullibility and shallowness of the common man. The Captain poses the question why people "were so disposed to elevate the low to the highest station." The conjurer's reply is worthy of note:

The common people are more disposed to trust one of their own class, than those who may affect to be superior. . . . Moreover, there is in every government a patrician class, against whom the spirit of the multitude naturally militates: And hence perpetual war; the aristocrats endeavoring to detrude the people, and the people contending to obtrude themselves. And it is right it should be so; for by this fermentation, the spirit of democracy is kept alive. (19)

In this scene, too, Brackenridge, creates a speech very like ones heard from Madisonian conservatives in the Constitutional debates, who argued that class stratification and class conflict were likely to increase as the population expanded, but that balancing measures such as a bicameral legislature would help ensure that both rich and poor are fairly represented (Farrand 1: 422-23).

The reasoning of the conjurer continues, and Brackenridge is able to re-affirm the traditional American middle ground, avoiding a blind commitment to the wealthy or the poor, instead emphasizing ability:

I would not mean to insinuate that legislators are to be selected from the more wealthy of the citizens, yet a man's circumstances ought to be such as afford leisure for study and reflection. There is often wealth without taste or talent. I have no idea, that because a man lives in a great house and has a cluster of bricks or stones about his backside, that he is therefore fit for a legislator. There is so much pride and arrogance with those who consider themselves first in a government, that it deserves to be checked by the populace, and the evil most usually commences on this side. (21)

The conjurer's conclusion is a classic statement of American faith in the man of ability, the "natural aristocracy" affirmed by Jefferson and Adams alike:

Men associate with their own persons, the adventitious circumstances of birth and fortune: So that a fellow blowing with fat and repletion, conceives himself superior to the poor lean man, that lodges in an inferior mansion. But as in all cases, so in this, there is a medium. Genius and virtue are independent of rank and fortune; and it is neither the opulent, nor the indigent, but the man of ability and integrity that ought to be called forth to serve his country. (21)

In this section, Brackenridge demonstrates his concern for the crucial question of the period: how to set up a government in which the "man of ability and integrity" will rise to power and influence.

The tension between the would-be aristocrat and the uneducated mob is perhaps most clearly seen in the Hudibrastic poem "Cincinnatus" found early in Part 1, Volume

3. In the poem, a new member of the Order of Cincinnatus (an exclusive order of Revolutionary War officers) rides into a village adorned with his order's medal on his breast. Immediately a pedagogue attacks the sentiment of the medal's "barbarous Latin" inscription ("Relinquit omnia, servare Rempublicam"). A clergyman attacks the eagle image as idolotrous. More tellingly, various veterans (non-officers all) attack the medal and the order it represents as unfairly exclusive, since they all fought as valorously as the officers. The medal, in their view, is the symbol of a neo-aristocracy; one citizen says,

There have been found out many ways,
To tickle fancies of the fools.
There scarcely is a king but gulls,
His courtiers with appendages,
(At least when he is moneyless)
Proud of a feather that is red,
Or blue, because they take't in head,
It does them honour with the prince;
And here behooves us to have sense,
And real merit of our own,
And not a mark to make it known,
Hung up like sign at tavern door. (180)

The officer argues that "those who have but little sense / And lower quality of brains, / Should occupy a sphere beneath" (186), but his words only serve to incense the veterans and the crowd further, and the Cincinnat must retreat ignominiously to avoid being lynched. The Cincinnat, fatigued from his run, has a dream that he has been received into the company of all the chivalrous knights of yore (thanks to the "baublet" on his chest)--but Cincinnatus himself is not there, since,

. . . as in life, [he] had been a ploughman,
And wore no badge, or dress uncommon;
So now he troubles not his head,
With these; but walks among the dead,
The Romans or obscurer Greeks;
That wore no pendle at their necks. (194)

The comic deflation of the Cincinnati is another indication that Brackenridge is no lover of aristocracies; at the other end of the spectrum, the ominous mob, whose "humour was with bat, / and brick, t' attack the Cincinnat" is held up to equal scorn. Brackenridge's normative value in the poem is clear--that the person of ability, no matter what his "rank," deserves commensurate reward.

In Modern Chivalry, Brackenridge also explores the phenomenon of the American parasite, who would abuse the system to secure wealth without doing any productive labor. The Captain's first encounter with this class comes when he is approached by a man who wants to borrow Teague so that Teague can play the part of an Indian chief before government commissioners empowered to treat with the Indians and "distribute goods" to them. The Indian agent explains that it is no easy matter "to catch a real chief," and even if "at some expence one was brought, the goods would go to his use; whereas, it is much more profitable to hire substitutes and make chiefs of our own" (55). When the Captain refuses to go along with the proposed fraud, the agent rejoins, "It is a very common thing for men to speculate, now a-days. If you will not, another will. An 100 dollars might as well be in your pocket as another

man's" (56). Brackenridge is one of the first American writers to recognize that the bureaucratic government itself is an easy target for those who desire wealth without work.

Brackenridge reinforces his theme that wealth should only be accrued by productive labor when an old woman of some fortune falls for Teague. The Captain tries to reason with Teague, telling him,

For the man who surrenders himself to the arms of a superannuated female, for the sake of fortune, acts a part not less unworthy and disgraceful, than the prostitute who does the same for half a crown. While a man has the use of his limbs and arms, he ought to be above such mercenary motives; and true happiness can be found only in congruity, and what is natural. (98)

The Captain obviously sees hard work as the only legitimate way to make a fortune. Teague, however, does not have so strong a work ethic, and he is not dissuaded from the marriage until the Captain tells the superstitious Teague that the old woman is an evil witch. (One may wonder at the Captain's use of outright lies to influence Teague. The Captain, no doubt, would defend himself by pointing out that he always uses reason first, but it never works. Still, the way the Captain buys into [or makes callous use of] various prejudices--against the Irish, old women, etc.--is a bit unsettling to modern sensibilities.)

Brackenridge has another opportunity to endorse the Franklinesque virtue of industry when the Captain encounters men who are making--and losing--instantaneous fortunes by engaging in land speculations (purchasing, on credit, huge

tracts of undeveloped land from the government; proposing cities and other developments; and then selling the land in tracts or lots to other speculators at inflated prices).

The Captain observes,

There can be nothing more hurtful to a people than sudden losses, and sudden gains to individuals. Happiness depends on a gradual accession of attainment . . . sudden gains out of the way of common industry, affect the sensations of others, who partake not; and feel chagrin and dissatisfaction with their state in life. Such gains sap the foundation of common industry. For what man will be equally content to labour in his vocation, and pursue the common means of a livelihood when he sees his neighbor all at once, by some fortunate cast, so far before him in his acquisitions. It is on this principle that our legislatures have prohibited gaming, lotteries, &c. . . . The attainments of men are made to depend usually upon their industry. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. In well regulated societies this oeconomy is imitated. (222)

Brackenridge's repeated references to "industry" and his Biblical allusion ("As ye sow, so shall ye reap") recall the influence of Franklin and, further back, the Puritans upon the traditional American work ethic.

In various episodes from Part II of Modern Chivalry, Brackenridge makes the case that the work ethic is most strongly found in the agricultural settlements, and that the city is the breeding ground for the parasite class--lawyers, speculators, etc. (The same basic case--similar to the assertions of the French Physiocrats--had been made by Crevecoeur with his opposition between the productive American farmer and the opulent but non-productive residents of Charles Town.) For example, when Teague is invited to

participate in another fraudulent scheme (to become a fortune teller), a city lawyer argues to the indignant Captain that the only morality is the morality of profits: "The great matter is, the profits of it. Does it make the pot boil? If the bog-trotter [Teague] finds his account in the service, and makes money, the world will wink at the means" (503). Although Brackenridge regularly holds up the frontier people as gullible and unthinking, at least they are not usually overtly dishonest, while the city-dwellers, obsessed with money, often as not are.

Brackenridge, like Crèvecoeur but unlike most of the founding fathers, was willing to see the implications of his individualistic values when applied to the negro slaves. In the last edition of his United States Magazine (December 1799), Brackenridge writes,

It casts a shade upon the face of this country that some of those who cultivate her soil are slaves; slaves, not to Britain, but to men who are themselves free. I know that many things are said to justify or palliate the circumstance, for it is with great reluctance that men admit the truth in cases where their interest is in question.
(Brackenridge, A Hugh Henry Brackenridge Reader, 104)

Brackenridge recounts meeting a Calvinist who argued that negroes "were fore-ordained to wretchedness and slavery in the present state." He has met with others who claim that "the slaves of their families were not in a worse situation as to food and clothing than their masters." Brackenridge counters, "Yes, but they are in a worse situation as to

liberty, which is (a phrase common in our ears every day) a most valuable blessing." He goes on to consider "in what manner it may be possible to enfranchise these people," suggesting that they might be given frontier land to colonize as a workable solution (104).

Brackenridge's writings, especially Modern Chivalry, illustrate the continuing development of themes present since American literature's inception, including the idea that America should be a place where people of ability, no matter what their race, should have the opportunity to prosper. Brackenridge also represents an increasing awareness of the money culture present especially in America's cities. His array of con men, speculators, and lawyers, all ready to make a buck off the system or off the gullibility of the people, shows an increasing preoccupation with materialism among urban Americans, a materialism that proves morally debilitating. Chief among his values, however, is a rationalism that condemns both mob violence and useless aristocracy, a rationalism that undergirds an ordered democracy.

The Failure of Capitalism in Charles
Brockden Brown's Ormond and Arthur Mervyn

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), a contemporary of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, can be considered America's first writer of economic novels of the "realistic" type (with basically coherent plots and a sustained attempt to simulate

or mirror reality--as opposed to Brackenridge's loose narrative structure and exaggerated tone). Especially in Brown's Ormond and Arthur Mervyn, socio-economic concerns underlie much of the action. In these two novels, Brown deals with the following themes, all of which have been discussed in conjunction with earlier American writers: the rise of social stratification among the general population of the new American states; the struggle of people to survive in harsh economic conditions; the rise to fortune of a destitute young man; the rise of a class of wealthy people who are not productive but instead are parasites feeding off the productivity of others; the plight of a dispossessed class--in this case, women--who are institutionally prevented from exercising their full economic potential; and the problems associated with unrestrained self-interest. In Brown, these themes are not always developed as fully and artistically as one might hope, but Ormond and Arthur Mervyn remain seminal works, providing a more thorough-going critique of the American system than is found in any writer until Melville. Brown, in presenting working people struggling sometimes unsuccessfully to achieve economic security, in presenting capitalists as amoral predators, and in ironically undercutting his Franklinesque figures, attacks the essential premise that America is a place where the hardworking individual is assured of reward commensurate to one's effort and productivity.

Ormond, first published in 1799, details the struggles of Constantia Dudley against oppressive social and economic forces ultimately embodied by the villain Ormond. Brown's Ormond actually has a two-part attack on the socio-economic conditions of the day. Through Constantia and the minor female characters, Brown shows women to be as capable (of serving in the military, of conducting business affairs, of just plain, hard work) as men, yet they are largely deprived of opportunities to develop and demonstrate these capabilities. The second part of Brown's socioeconomic criticism comes from his handling of Ormond and the minor character Craig, both of whom live according to unrestrained self-interest and gain wealth (at least temporarily) off the productivity of others.

Brown leaves no doubt from the beginning that Ormond is intended to include socio-economic commentary. In the prefatory letter "To J. E. Rosenberg," Brown states,

The distinctions of birth, the artificial degrees of esteem or contempt which connect themselves with different professions and ranks in your native country, are but little known among us. Society and manners constitute your favorite study, and I am willing to believe, that my relation will supply you with knowledge, on these heads, not to be otherwise attained. (Brown, Ormond 3)

Brown seems to be inviting Rosenberg to read Ormond as a work which will extol the uniform prosperity, productivity, and social equality of the American condition as compared to conditions in Europe--as Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and others

had done. Brown's invitation holds a veiled irony, however, because he will document American economic and social stratification and the evil of unrestrained self-interest throughout the work. The irony continues with Brown's variations on the Franklinesque theme of the young man's rise to prosperity through "industry and frugality."

Brown opens Ormond with the background of Stephen Dudley, the heroine's father. Stephen Dudley, as this expository section recounts, indulged in painting until his father's death forced him to find a way to make a living, to "regulate his future exertions by a view to nothing but gain." He takes over his father's place as an apothecary, and he seems to be assured of success because of his Franklinesque qualities. Brown writes, "The knowledge of his business was acquired in no long time. He was stimulated to the acquisition by a sense of duty, he was inured to habits of industry, and there were few things capable to resist strenuous exertion of his faculties" (6). Dudley, however, is doomed because his artistic sensibility can find no fulfillment in the repetitive tasks he must perform:

The drudgery of the shop, where all the faculties were at a stand, and one day was an unvaried repetition of the foregoing, was too incongenial to his disposition not to be a source of discontent. This was an evil which it was the tendency of time to increase rather than diminish.
(7)

Dudley is an early example of a character who finds the drudgery and repetition of modern employment to be stifling; this type character will recur in the works of writers from Melville (with "Bartleby, the Scrivener") to Sinclair Lewis (Babbitt) and beyond.

Brown quickly introduces another character, the promising young man Craig, who also seems to possess many Franklinesque qualities. Craig, with "fearlessness and frankness," inquires whether Dudley can take him on as an apprentice. Brown describes Dudley as "manly and blooming," yet exhibiting a "modest and ingenious aspect." His story seems to be a set-up for a classic American rags-to-riches tale along the line of the "Andrew, the Hebridean" section of Crèvecoeur's Letters:

he stated that he was a native of Wakefield, in Yorkshire; that his family were honest, and his education not mean; that he was the eldest of many children, and having attained an age at which he conceived it his duty to provide for himself, he had, with the concurrence of his friends, come to America, in search of the means of independent subsistence. (8)

Dudley takes Craig on, and Craig appears to be a valuable asset:

The young man improved daily in the good opinion of his master. His apprehension was quick, his sobriety invaluable, and his application incessant. Tho' by no means presumptuous or arrogant, he was not wanting in a suitable degree of self-confidence. All his propensities appeared to centre in his occupation and the promotion of his master's interest, from which he was drawn aside by no allurements of sensual or intellectual pleasure. (8)

After three years, Dudley takes Craig on as partner, and they continue thus for two more years. Dudley and Craig seem to be set on the road to capitalist heaven: "Mr. Dudley's condition might be esteemed prosperous. His wealth was constantly accumulating. He had nearly attained all that he wished, and his wishes still aimed at nothing less than splendid opulence" (10).

The prosperity, however, evaporates when Craig absconds with the family's fortune. It turns out he had been regularly embezzling their capital and using the credit of the business to secure extensive loans to himself. Brown writes, "Craig had gone to participate in these spoils, while the whole estate of Mr. Dudley was insufficient to pay the demands that were consequently made upon him" (16-17). Dudley falls into the hands of heartless creditors:

It was his lot to fall into the grasp of men, who squared their actions by no other standard than law, and who esteemed every claim to be incontestably just, that could plead that sanction. They did not indeed throw him into prison. When they had despoiled him of every remnant of his property, they deemed themselves entitled to his gratitude for leaving his person unmolested. (17)

Dudley is now much worse off than he was before. With no business, no capital, and no credit, he is thrust out into a cold economic world:

It was not merely frugal fare and an humble dwelling to which he was condemned. The evils to be dreaded were beggary and contempt. Luxury and leisure were not merely denied him. He must bend

all his efforts to procure cloathing and food, to preserve his family from nakedness and famine.
(18)

As bleak as his situation is, Dudley still retains his Franklinesque work ethic: "His spirit would not brook dependance. To live upon charity, or to take advantage of the compassion of his friends, was a destiny far worse than any other . . . he determined to procure his bread by the labor of his hands" (18). Unfit for any manual labor, Dudley becomes a scrivener, and in this telling section Brown attacks both lawyers and the tediousness of office work:

When his life became uniform, and day followed day in monotonous succession, and the novelty of his employment had disappeared, his cheerfulness began likewise to fade, and was succeeded by unconquerable melancholy. His present condition was in every respect the contrast of his former. His servitude was intolerable. He was associated with sordid hirelings, gross and uneducated, who treated his age with rude familiarity, and insulted his ears with ribaldry and scurril jests. He was subject to command, and had his portion of daily drudgery allotted to him, to be performed for a pittance no more than would buy the bread which he daily consumed. The task assigned him was technical and formal. He was perpetually encumbered with the rubbish of law, and waded with laborious steps through its endless tautologies, its impertinent circuities, its lying assertions, and hateful artifices. (19-20)

All of Dudley's exertions in the scrivener trade go for naught, however, when the cruel nature of the work causes his eyes to fail. He thus becomes the first fictional character of his type: an intelligent and industrious American man who, despite his best efforts, cannot earn a

decent living for his family--thanks to bad luck, some unwise decisions, and a duplicitous associate.

Dudley's debilitation is accompanied by the death of his wife; his only child which survived infancy, Constantia Dudley, becomes the de facto head of the household. This lovely girl has "a mind susceptible of high improvement." When first introduced, she is hesitating to marry a young suitor of some fortune, fearing that he might not turn out to be a proper match for her. The youth, however, breaks it off with Constantia upon hearing that her father had lost his fortune--thus even in the most undeveloped background scenes Brown helps establish the harshness of the economic climate and the value men put upon money, in addition to establishing the theme that men and women should try to find proper mental and spiritual matches before they marry (22).

Constantia realizes she and her father must economize if they are to survive, so her first move is to dispose "of every superfluous garb and trinket." After selling nearly all their possessions, she moves the household into cheaper lodgings. The cheaper lodgings turn out to be in a bad neighborhood, full of profligates of both sexes, where she is constantly buffeted "by the clamours of debauchery." Constantia, consequently, goes out and finds lodgings that are even cheaper but are among the hard-working, honest poor. (In a period when most writers were still praising the uniform prosperity of Americans based on the widespread

availability of land, Brown is one of the first to acknowledge the growing underclass in American cities' slums.)

Such measures, Constantia realizes, will only delay the inevitable, so she decides to seek employment. Her education was certainly broad--she studied Milton, Tacitus, Newton, and Hartley, and her father "unveiled to her the mathematical properties of light and sound, taught her as a metaphysician and anatomist, the structure and power of the senses, and discussed with her the principles and progress of human society" (33). However, her world does not allow a woman to teach men. She cannot even become a teacher of women--her "accomplishments tended to render her superior to the rest of women, but in no degree qualified her for the post of a female instructor." Why not? Brown answers, "Women are generally limited to what is sensual and ornamental: Music and painting, and the Italian and French languages, are bounds which they seldom pass" (33-34). Constantia, for all her education, is not skilled in these areas. Constantia is forced to try to earn a living with her needlework. She, too, becomes a Franklinesque figure, laboring and saving, remaining fiercely independent:

It was the business of Constantia's life to alleviate those sufferings, to cherish and console her father, and to rescue him, by the labour from dependance on public charity. For this end, her industry and solicitude were never at rest. She was able, by that industry, to provide him and herself with necessaries. Their portion was scanty, and, if it sometimes exceeded the

standard of their wants, not less frequently
fell short of it. (28)

Franklin, of course, being an unencumbered male with a marketable skill, had little trouble finding work that would enable him to live and even save money, if he was frugal. Constantia fights a losing economic battle, living in a society that precludes her from using her mind and talents.

Brown continues to explore the plight of the laboring poor through the first part of the book. Constantia comes to the point where there is not enough money for both food and the rent. She considers that "to bereave herself and her father of bare subsistence was surely no dictate of duty" (38). The greedy landlord, M'Crea, comes to collect the rent:

He was not unconscious of the inhumanity and sordidness of this proceeding, and therefore, endeavored to disguise it by the usual pretenses. All his funds were exhausted. He came not only in his own name, but in that of Mrs. Matthews his aunt, who was destitute of money. . . . These excuses were abundantly fallacious, but Mr. Dudley was too proud to solicit the forbearance of a man like this. (50)

After paying the rent, the father and daughter have practically no money left, and they are reduced to eating gruel made from Indian corn for several months. In this scene, Brown establishes the now-classic confrontation between the affluent but inhumane landowner and the frugal, hardworking tenants who become his victims.

Brown creates another scene worthy of remark when a frugal but comfortable Scotsman, Balfour, falls in love with

Constantia and offers to marry her. She declines his proposal, telling him bluntly, "The company of one with whom we have no sympathy, nor sentiments in common, is, of course, of all species of solitude, the most loathsome and dreary." Brown, through his character, again sets forth the idea that men and women should make sure they have compatible intellects and interests before they marry, but marriage also has economic implications:

Now she was at least mistress of the product of her own labour. Her tasks were toilsome, but the profits, though slender, were sure, and she administered her little property in what manner she pleased. Marriage would annihilate this power. Henceforth she would be bereft even of personal freedom. So far from possessing property, she herself would become the property of another. (84)

Constantia clearly stands in the heart of the American economic ideal--being productive (at least marginally) and having the independence to use her property as she will--but these basic rights will be taken away from her if she marries. Through the character of Constantia, Brown, in a much more comprehensive way than Franklin or even Abigail Adams had earlier, encourages Americans to look at women's potentiality as productive partners in our economic system and at the injustice of institutionally depriving them of the chance to participate on an equal footing. Constantia is an all too rare acknowledgement that the period's restrictive laws concerning women were inherently unjust and antithetical to America's egalitarian promise.

Brown creates two other minor characters that reinforce his theme of the equality of the sexes. Sophia Westwyn, the narrator of the novel, turns out to be an "expert in the management of all affairs, relative to property" (253). A more colorful character, Martinette Beauvais, turns out to be an equal to men anywhere, including the battlefields of Europe. She told Constantia, "My hand never faltered when liberty demanded the victim. If thou wert with me at Paris, I could shew thee a fusil of two barrels, which is precious beyond any other relique, merely because it enabled me to kill thirteen officers at Jamappe" (206).

With the introduction of the title character, Ormond, the book loses some of its focus on economic issues. There are, however, several links between this character and themes Brown has already introduced. For example, Ormond, like M'Crea and Craig, is a pragmatist, driven by self-interest rather than humanitarian impulses or conventional morality:

It was the business of the wise man [in Ormond's mind] to form a just estimate of things, but not to attempt, by individual efforts, so chimerical an enterprize as that of promoting the happiness of mankind. Their condition was out of the reach of a member of a corrupt society to controul. . . It did not follow from these preliminaries that virtue and duty were terms without a meaning, but they require us to promote our own happiness and not the happiness of others. (112)

Consequently, Ormond uses his considerable resources to gratify himself--"His income was large, and he managed it nearly on the same principles as other men. He thought

himself entitled to all the splendor and ease which it would purchase. . ." (113). In keeping with his pragmatism, Ormond is a man of temperance who tended to rationalize sexual liaisons: "So far as temperance regards the maintenance of health, no man adhered to its precepts with more fidelity, but he esteemed some species of connection with the other sex as venial, which mankind in general are vehement in condemning" (117).

So far, Ormond sounds to be a rather typical American success story--capable, cool, pragmatic, intelligent, and wealthy, very like Dreiser's Cowperwood, for example, and with several similarities to the Franklin of the Autobiography. Later in the novel, however, his character degenerates, especially as his treatment of women is revealed. First he rather callously dumps his mistress, Helena, which drives her to suicide. Later Sophia reveals to Constantia that Ormond, while a young volunteer in the Russian army, kidnapped a Tarter girl, raped her, and then stabbed her to death. In the final scene of the novel, the confrontation between the now-deranged Ormond and Constantia in the locked house, Ormond admits that he made Craig kill her father, Stephen Dudley, since Dudley would not approve of her marriage to him. The ultimate depth of Ormond's cruelty and baseness is revealed when he tells Constantia that he will have his way with her whether she is "living or dead" (285).

In presenting Ormond as a rather typical American success story, and then showing him to be duplicitous and depraved (a pattern first used with the character Craig), Brown launches an effective attack on the morality behind our economic system.¹ Rather than ensuring that virtue and productivity are rewarded, the system apparently is too easily abused by people who use questionable means to secure money and power, people like Craig and Ormond who are all too ready to exploit the honest but vulnerable people around them. Constantia may have a stroke of good fortune in felling the murderous Ormond, thus ensuring a happy ending for the novel, but the economic and social inequities woven into the fabric of the novel remain intact at its end.

Brown's novel Arthur Mervyn or Memoirs of the Year 1793 (Part 1 published 1799, Part 2 published 1800) provides additional twists to the American rags-to-riches tale. As he did in Ormond, Brown creates a range of characters that, taken as a whole, embody a critique of American attitudes towards work and wealth.

Mervyn's story begins as follows. He is raised on his family's farm, but there comes a time when his father tells him he must provide for himself. He sets out for the city, and on the journey is almost immediately swindled--charged a

¹Arguing that the darkening of Ormond's character is an artistic flaw is G. St. John Stott in "Second thoughts About Ormond," in Etudes Anglaises: Grande-Bretagne, Etats-Unis 43 (April-June 1990): 157-68.

quarter (one third of his "estate") for a breakfast of stale bread, sour milk, and "cheese the greenest imaginable" (Brown, Arthur Mervyn 26). Later that day he is charged fifty cents for a dinner of bread and milk, and he has exhausted his purse. Upon arriving in the city, he negligently leaves his bundle of possessions on a seat, and when he returns for it, it is--of course--gone. Critic Robert S. Levine describes this sequence as "a dark version of Franklin's Philadelphia journey" (149).

A young man of some means then "befriends" Mervyn and invites him to share a bed in his chamber. Mervyn, a firm believer in the American dream of the young man of ability coming into a lucrative situation, sees nothing extraordinary in the offer:

I was a youth, destitute of experience, money, and friends; but I was not devoid of all mental and personal endowments. That my merit should be discovered, even on such slender intercourse, had surely nothing in it that shocked belief. (33)

Mervyn's "benefactor" has nothing more in mind than a rather dangerous joke; he leads Mervyn to a bedchamber, blows out the candle, and leaves, locking the door. While locked in the chamber, Mervyn overhears a husband and wife plotting to defraud a man (Welbeck) of money--their rationalization being that Welbeck's riches flow "from a bad source." As he did in Ormond, Brown is creating an urban economic landscape that is stark and amoral, where people are all too ready to prey on the weaknesses of others. Perhaps the major

question of the novel is whether Mervyn himself succumbs to the lure of easy money, and ultimately, I believe, the answer is he does.

There are indications early on that Mervyn is willing to rationalize away monetary obligations. Mervyn, for example, had avoided paying the bridge toll when he entered the city: "Scrupulous honesty did not require me to turn back and awaken the vigilance of the toll-gatherer," Mervyn had said. When he learns of the plot against Welbeck, Mervyn reacts by pondering, "By means as inscrutable as those which conducted me hither, I may hereafter be enabled to profit by this detection of a plot" (41) [emphasis mine].

Mervyn resolves to leave the city and secure a job on a farm, but he needs some ready money, so he applies to a stranger (none other than Welbeck, coincidentally) for a loan. Welbeck, obviously wealthy, invites Mervyn back to his house, and Mervyn immediately re-engages in his fantasies of achieving instantaneous wealth and position:

When I dwelt upon the incidents of my past life, and traced the chain of events from the death of my mother to the present moment, I almost acquiesced in the notion that some beneficent and ruling genius had prepared my path for me. . . . But what was the fate reserved for me? Perhaps Welbeck would adopt me for his own son. Wealth has ever been capriciously distributed. The mere physical relation of birth is all that intitles us to manors and thrones. (57)

Mervyn's fantasies are a combination of various strands of thought. Primary among those is the idea that America is the place where men of true virtue and talent are rewarded,

no matter how poor they are to begin with. Mervyn also buys into the idea that a benign Providence is watching out for him. A third idea, and one which is seemingly incompatible with the first two, is that men become wealthy, not due to industry and intelligence, but through the working of a capricious fortune.

Welbeck, Mervyn's new mentor, turns out to be a rascal, and his story reads like a parody of American rags-to-riches tales. He tells Mervyn,

I was left, by the insolvency of my father (a trader of Liverpool), without any means of support, but such as labour should afford me. Whatever could generate pride, and the love of independence, was my portion. Whatever can incite to diligence was the growth of my condition; yet my indolence was a cureless disease; and there are no arts too sordid for me to practice. (85-86)

After seducing and ruining a married woman, Welbeck had fled, penniless, to the city. When "there was no choice between penury and diligence," Welbeck managed to find a third option--forgery. "My pride regarded as vile and ignominious any employment which the town could afford," he tells Mervyn (88-89). Fortune, however, smiled on Welbeck, and he was given \$20,000 by a man named Lodi to take care of his sister, Clemenza. Welbeck immediately started living a life of opulence with the money (and proceeded to seduce Clemenza while he was at it). Welbeck is not productive; he never creates wealth (his one legitimate venture, investing in a ship, goes sour when the British seize it and its cargo), but lives instead off the wealth of others. Thus

he, like Ormond, is a parasitical figure all too common, Brown obviously believes, in a diseased socio-economic system.

Welbeck turns out to have been intentionally ruined, by another of Brown's successfully drawn capitalist villains, Thetford. Thetford is willing to sacrifice anything--even the life of a servant--for his own interest. He refused, for example, to leave the city even when a deadly pestilence began to spread throughout it, as his neighbor explains to Mervyn:

No one was more timorous; but he seemed to think himself safe, as long as he avoided contact with infected persons. He was likewise, I believe, detained by a regard to his interest. His flight would not have been more injurious to his affairs, than it was to those of others; but gain was, in his eyes, the supreme good. (158)

Thetford later sent his servant girl to the plague hospital when she showed signs of a slight indisposition (not the plague), even though she begged him not to. The girl dies in the hospital, of course; Thetford's neighbor blithely explains that "the rank and education of the young woman, might be some apology for his [Thetford's] negligence" (159). Throughout this middle section of the novel, Brown adeptly uses the plague as a physical manifestation of a moral corruption afflicting the city, corruption obvious in the actions of men like Thetford and Welbeck.

Brown continues his attack on the monied men of the day by exposing how Thetford gains his wealth. Thetford had

purchased, at a greatly reduced price, the cargo lost by Welbeck--the whole affair of the British seizure was apparently tainted. Mervyn concludes that the Welbeck-Thetford affair was "a lesson on the principles of human nature; on the delusiveness of appearances; on the pervasiveness of fraud" (137). But Thetford's primary source of income is usury. Brown writes that he

was one of those who employed money, not as the medium of traffic, but as in itself a commodity. He had neither wines nor cloths, to transmute into silver. He thought it a tedious process to exchange to day, one hundred dollars for a cash or bale, and to-morrow exchange the bale or cash for an hundred and ten dollars. It was better to give the hundred for a piece of paper, [for] which, carried forthwith to the money changers, he could procure an hundred twenty-three and three-fourths. In short this man's coffers were supplied by the despair of honest men and the stratagems of rogues. (227)

Between their treatment of those under their power and the schemes by which they make their money, Thetford and Welbeck are clearly in the same camp as those elements--slaveowners, aristocrats, etc.--which stand opposed to the American ideal of productive labor and commensurate reward. The two characters thus show Brown's radical enlarging of the idea of the American parasite to include virtually all people of wealth.

Mervyn, of course, is a foil to Welbeck and Thetford. But a question is how much he opposes their values and how much he mirrors them. As we have noted, from the beginning of the novel he exhibits a tendency to fantasize about

gaining wealth and an enhanced social position without really doing any work--an attitude of which Welbeck and Thetford are also guilty. There are further indications of Mervyn's shallowness and tendency to rationalize shortcuts when it comes to money. For example, when Susan Hadwin dies, Mervyn immediately buries her himself, with his justification being that a funeral would only prolong her sister Eliza's grief and cause "her fortune be needlessly diminished, by the expences unavoidably to be incurred" (280). Mervyn is interested in the size of Eliza's fortune because he is tempted to marry her, especially when she inherits a farm that would make him, if not rich, at least independent. Mervyn hesitates, however, seeming to have doubts about whether he and Eliza would be equally matched. But as he considers the situation, he asks such questions as, "Could I rely upon the permanence of her equanimity and her docility to my instructions?" (292). Such a statement would seem to undercut his initial, "enlightened" consideration about marital compatibility. He argues to Eliza that, after he receives the education he intends for himself, she will no longer be a suitable partner. But the spunky Eliza points out what a hypocrite he is:

Have I not the same claims to be wise, and active, and courageous as you? If I am ignorant and weak, do I not owe it to the same cause that has made you so; and will not the same means which promote your improvement be likewise useful to me? You desire to obtain knowledge, by travelling and conversing with many persons, and studying many scenes; but you desire for yourself alone. Me,

you think poor, weak, and contemptible; fit for nothing but to spin and churn. Provided I exist, am screened from the weather, have enough to eat and drink, you are satisfied. As to strengthening my mind and enlarging my knowledge, these things are valuable to you, but on me they are thrown away. I deserve not the gift. (296)

This appeal, which recalls statements of Silence Dogood and Abigail Adams, is arguably the best proto-feminist speech in Brown's novels. Mervyn, however, talks himself out of taking a chance on Eliza: "Would not time lead me to the feet of one who more nearly approached that standard of ideal excellence which poets and romancers had exhibited to my view?" (297). He finds his ideal woman in his "Mamma," Mrs. Achsa Fielding. In comparison to the beautiful young Eliza, Mrs. Fielding seems to have little to recommend her: she is low in stature and "almost sallow" in complexion. Mervyn claims he is attracted "by her heart and by her intellect," but he goes on to admit she owns a "splendid fortune"--and that, a cynical reader might suspect, is the deciding factor (415).

Some other critics have a more sympathetic view of Mervyn. Robert S. Levine, for example, argues that Mervyn's actions during the yellow fever passages ("the emotional core for the book") redeem his character:

A disinterested benevolence emerges as a triumphantly moral act in a world of self-interested cowards, which is why Stevens [the doctor] and Mervyn, despite hints that their narratives may be suspect, emerge as admirable figures. They willingly risk their lives in the service of others and, in an age of emerging

institutionalization, demonstrate the paramount efficacy of individual action. (Levine 151)

Mervyn does often act from an apparently good heart.

Nevertheless, his callous treatment of Eliza Hadwin--rather reminiscent of Ormond's treatment of his mistress Helena--and his decision to marry Achsa Fielding cast doubt on his essential motivations.

Brown is notable as an economic novelist primarily because he creates a range of characters, both major and minor, who illustrate the darkening of the economic dream in America. Constantia Dudley is Brown's most normative character, functioning as the "spokesman" for the traditional American attitudes towards work and wealth, valuing as she does a broad education, hard work, frugality, charity, and a fierce independence, but she is up against a male-dominated society that largely deprives her of opportunities to exercise her abilities and be commensurately rewarded for them. A more problematic protagonist is Arthur Mervyn. The story of his rise from poverty to affluence seems to be typically American--but his values remain questionable. Certainly shallowness and naivete (in hoping to secure a position of prominence immediately, including marriage to a lady of fortune) are excusable and even expected for a penniless country bumpkin coming in to the big city, but the resolution of the novel seems to show that he retains these characteristics to the end.

The villains in Brown's economic novels, Ormond, Craig, M'Crea, Welbeck, and Thetford--monied men all, at one point or another--are too willing to cut ethical corners and to appropriate the labor and wealth of others for themselves. Standing in opposition to traditional egalitarian American values, these men represent a disturbing and growing American aristocracy, an aristocracy whose values include the ostentatious expenditure of riches, a disregard for the rights and even lives of others, and a disinclination towards productive labor.

Unlike Brackenridge and Rebecca Rush, who will be examined in the next section, Brown leans toward the populist side of early national period socioeconomic debate. He has an obvious distrust of monied interests, and he invests considerable effort in demonstrating the complementary idea that the poor are very likely to be honest and hardworking but owe their condition to vicious economic forces. Through his novels, Brown seems to hint that the system is fundamentally flawed, that some basic reorganization is necessary to restore some equity to the economic system--making Brown the most radical voice in our literature until Herman Melville.

"Some People Just Don't Belong": Rebecca
Rush's **Kelroy** and Conservative Sensibility

The 1980 movie Caddyshack pitted a mean-spirited country club owner against an able, aspiring caddy and a

comically gross parvenu; advertisements for the movie included the tag line, "Some people just don't belong." Although the movie lacked any redeeming social value, it illustrates that conflicts deriving from social aspirations are a perennial theme in American culture. The conflicts in Rebecca Rush's 1812 novel Kelroy are based on the same theme, and her underlying views on money, social climbing, and character are an interesting synthesis of the conservative views of the period--a synthesis that advocates entrepreneurship, living within one's means, and being charitable, all the while taking for granted a social structure that includes levels where "some people just don't belong." Thus in its underlying social views, the novel is very similar to Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry and is not nearly so radical as Brown's Ormond or Arthur Mervyn.

As Dana Nelson points out in her introduction to the 1992 Oxford edition of Kelroy, the novel presents "a stinging critique of class pretensions" and questions "the drive toward excess accumulation of wealth"--while at the same time it "structures a desire in precisely that direction: because the aristocratic classes are depicted as better people living better lives" (Rush xviii, xx). An examination of the characters shows why Nelson was led to such apparently contradictory conclusions.

The dominant figure in the novel, Mrs. Hammond, demonstrates the danger of avarice and preoccupation with

social standing. She is introduced as a woman of "boundless ambition" who "retained an unabated relish for show and dissipation" (3-4). The narrator later explains that she had the habit of

yielding to the suggestions of that intemperate pride which blinds its votaries to all beyond the vain splendour of the moment. . . . Dress, public amusements, frequent, and extravagant entertainments, and the current expenses of her family, together with a passion for cards, by which she oftener lost than won . . . not only consumed the whole of her ready money, but plunged her . . . deeply in debt. (98)

The basic action of the novel, which involves Mrs. Hammond trying to ensure that her daughters are wedded to men sufficiently wealthy to keep herself in a high lifestyle, precludes any real sympathy for her--even before her final treachery towards Emily is revealed. Nelson tries to salvage her character somewhat by arguing that, in view of existing social conditions (which exclude women from other economic options), Mrs. Hammond's actions are understandable, if not excusable (Rush xvii). But by creating Lucy and Emily as, respectively, a mirror and a foil to Mrs. Hammond, Rush shows there is a better way that Mrs. Hammond rejects.

Rush describes Lucy Hammond as "the very counterpart of her mother, both in person and mind." She is beautiful, "but there was a haughty reserve in her manner which prevented her from being generally beloved . . . her heart was cold, and her understanding warped by the pernicious

principles which had been instilled into a mind originally selfish" (6). When Lucy weds the aristocratic but admirable Walsingham, Emily has these thoughts:

She saw Lucy, cold, and heartless, in possession of the undivided affections of an amiable man, whose worth she was incapable of appreciating, and mistress of immense wealth which she would never employ to any better purpose than the attainment of luxury or fashion. (43)

Lucy sacrifices any higher impulses to the attainment of wealth and status, and she reaches the pinnacle of a very shallow fulfillment when allowed to circulate among the gentry of England. By creating her as a "counterpart" of her mother, Rush is able to reinforce her attack on the character-sapping nature of Mrs. Hammond's materialism.

Emily, the younger daughter, embodies a normative set of values by which one can judge Lucy and Mrs. Hammond. She has a "mind of the highest order, and her quick feelings, and keen perceptions . . . happily blended with sweetness and equanimity of temper" (6). In nearly every way, she is the opposite of her haughty mother and sister, and one can begin to see her attitude towards their materialism in this early description:

She had some vanity, but was totally devoid of arrogance, and the consciousness of her attractions served only to increase her pleasantry and good humor. She felt that she had a heart, nor could all the sage assurances she had heard to the contrary, prevent her from believing that excellence was not always the companion of prosperity. (6-7)

At one point Lucy, characteristically, belittles the idea of charity, but Emily defends a "disinterested generosity" that "finds an unfailing reward in its own benevolent intentions" (85). Emily obviously espouses a charitable attitude that would be anathema to her avaricious family.

Emily's character is most clearly evinced, of course, by her choice of Kelroy, a young man of refined sensibility and genteel education--but penniless. When Mrs. Hammond disparages Kelroy's potential earning ability, Emily's response is telling, saying,

she was not quite so romantic as to imagine that love could compensate for the total want of what was generally meant by better things; but as she was not of an aspiring temper, a very moderate share of them would content her; and from poverty, in the strict sense of the word, she had every reason to believe she should always be secure.
(116)

When Dana Nelson justifies Mrs. Hammond's behavior by saying "we cannot overlook the social circumstances that so sharply define her self-interest by so harshly limiting her alternatives" (xvii), she is overlooking the obvious alternative that was available to Mrs. Hammond, the alternative Emily espouses--living simply, within one's means. Emily eschews "an aspiring temper" and stands for moderation, in the face of a mother driving herself to ruin because of her preoccupation with ostentation, pleasure, and status. Emily, who advocates charity and a modest lifestyle, represents the "traditional values" championed by the Puritan divines and Benjamin Franklin, among others.

One could expect to find the same values mirrored in Emily's lover, Kelroy, and, indeed, if the novel was not a tragedy, one could envision Kelroy conforming to the "poor boy makes good" role so common to American works centered on themes of money and aspirations. But Kelroy is a more complicated character, and the success of Mrs. Hammond's plottings thwart our expectations. Kelroy is a man of refined sensibility; we first see him "absorbed in reflections foreign to the scene before him" (26), and when Emily sings a plaintive song, Kelroy retires, weeping (29)--his refined sensibilities obviously have him closely in tune with his "feminine side." An old dowager responds to the scene by saying,

These people of refined understandings as they are called . . . are in my opinion not much to be envied. They are constantly in search of a romantic sort of happiness which has not existence but in their own imaginations; and because they cannot find it, conceit that they are miserable. If these are the fruits of genius, commend me to common sense. (30)

The dowager here is the spokesman for the man of action, the hardy, commonsensical type associated with the Franklinesque tradition. Kelroy, obviously, does not fit this mold.

Kelroy had anticipated a life of "ease and affluence," courtesy of his father's considerable estate, but he returns from extended European travels to find that his father has lost all his money in "wild speculating scheme." Kelroy immediately institutes a suit to try and recover the estate

--an understandable response, but hardly one that smacks of the traditional American emphasis on generating wealth through productive labor.

But just before we lose all faith in Kelroy as an effete, would-be aristocrat, Rush salvages his character, placing him back in the Franklinesque tradition of the enterprising entrepreneur. We are told "he is not of a temper indolently to await the result" of the lawsuit but instead was preparing for a voyage to India to repair his fortunes (36). Kelroy, in fact, evinces a very moderate attitude towards wealth:

Wealth he had never despised, but he coveted not an excess of it; . . . he refrained from useless repinings at an evil which a few years might probably repair; and resigned himself to the prospect of labours untried, and climes unknown with the calmness of a practical philosopher.
(44)

And later, after his enterprise to India has succeeded in securing him wealth, but his love has (apparently) jilted him, Kelroy wanders Europe, "dispensing with a liberal hand towards the relief of the wants, and weaknesses of his fellow beings" (191-92). Having earned his money productively and used it charitably, Kelroy, bit player though he may be in a novel that bears his name, is another exemplar of the traditional values of hard work, moderation, and charity, and another opponent of the avarice and love of ostentation that characterize Mrs. Hammond.

In the world of the novel, it is obvious that obsession with wealth and status is wrong and leads to villainy. Nevertheless, there is also an inherent bias against too much social mobility; the novel smacks of a latent assumption that "some people just don't belong" in certain circles. Rush slants the story toward this mindset in two ways. First, in spite of the shallowness of Lucy and the treachery of Mrs. Hammond, the people in the novel who are born into wealth are generally likeable, well-adjusted, cultured people. The one true "aristocrat," Walsingham, shows an understandable disdain when Mrs. Hammond touts her late husband's distant relation to a British duke, but he is generous with his money and makes a magnanimous attempt to pressure Mrs. Hammond into letting Emily marry the penniless Kelroy. Helen Cathcart, Charles Cathcart, Emily, Kelroy, and Dunlevy, all born into families with money, are always gracious and spend their time discoursing, listening to music, reading poetry, going to parties where they can mix with others of their ilk; they are, in Dana Nelson's words, "depicted as better people living better lives" (xx).

The second way Rush works in her conservative ideas on class structure is by including a series of people who don't belong--primarily, Doctor Blake, Mr. Marney, and the Gurnets. The doctor is in many ways a sympathetic character. Aside from Kelroy's trip to India, he seems to be the only white person doing any work (patching up

Dunlevy's servant Sancho, for example). In the social order, he definitely ranks above the parvenu Marney, as Blake is well aware; he tells Marney in a heated exchange,

I'm a gentleman, sir, if a good education, a genteel profession, and a little more brains than a certain person I could name are sufficient to make me one--not of the mushroom sort neither, that pop up in a night's time out of the dirt nobody can tell how; but come of a decent old stock, that has been a growing some time.
(149)

The doctor's definition of a gentleman seems to be a good one, but he has left off the element of social polish which he himself lacks. His lack of a genteel polish, which precludes his suitability for mingling in the highest circles, was established in an earlier party scene, where the somewhat clumsy fellow has been an annoyance. Near the end of this scene, he tells Charles Cathcart,

"Great people . . . grand quality!--tip-top gentry to be sure!--I'll behang'd [sic] if I hav'n't been at a husking-frollick in the country where they behav'd better!--I drop a spoonful of coffee on one ugly thing, 'you're a Hottentot,' says she.--I stand behind another old witch, and ask her a civil question, and she snaps my head off!--Oh! if these are your tea-drinkings, the mischief may take 'em for me!" (62)

In this slickly done scene, Rush is able to attack the pretensions and incivility of both the interloper (the doctor) and the socialites at the same time.

Mr. Marney, the novel's secondary villain, is unlikable in every way. As with the doctor and the Gurnets, he does his best to break in to the socialite circle, and indeed is better at aping the necessary veneer than they are, but his

lack of education and character make him a tool and a fool. Rush is careful to undermine any sympathy for Marney from his introduction:

[He] ascribed his birth to a distant spot, and very humble parents, by whom he was bred a mechanic of the lowest order; and after a few years application to his trade, acquired a little sum which prompted him to leave his native place in search of adventures; and aided by those unaccountable causes which frequently influence human affairs, he rose rapidly from a state of indigence to the possession of an immense fortune; and filled with ideas of his own importance and ingenuity, determined to commence a buck of the first order, without delay. (68)

Marney copies the manners of his betters "with tolerable success," and he secures some favor "by an affectation of generosity and profusion; whilst his real avarice was such, as induced him to practice in secret the most disgusting meanness" (68). Marney, according to this description, is like a darkly comic parody of Benjamin Franklin, that apostle of frugality, ambition, and public relations. Rush even strips Marney of the dignity of having amassed his own fortune, ascribing his rise in prosperity to "those unaccountable causes which frequently influence human affairs."

Marney, now showing up at the best parties, affects to be "a complete connosseur [sic] in matters of taste," but his lack of education betrays him when he disparages a poorly-done garden of Eden scene (in which Adam has three wives, and no snake is to be seen) that is actually a painting of the judgement of Paris (68, 76-77). The others

present can barely restrain themselves from open laughter. Marney, in addition to being a fop, turns out to be a malicious gossip, and, ultimately, a thorough villain when he conspires with Mrs. Hammond to break up Kelroy and Emily through forged correspondence.

Rush's last attack on social climbers comes through her portrayal of the Gurnets, adeptly described by Dana Nelson as "a family of nouveau-riche whose antics are depicted as nothing short of vaudevillian" (xix). Mr. Gurnet, unlike Mr. Marney, seems to have really earned his money, having started life as a peddler, then, "having by unwearied frugality and perseverance, scraped together a sufficient capital, opened a sort of shop which he styled a wholesale huckstery," and finally by becoming a salt merchant (153). At this point,

elated with this sudden flow of wealth, which he believed to have accrued solely from his own prudence and management, Gurnet now began to enlarge his views, and extend his intercourse to those better classes of society from which he had hitherto been altogether excluded. (154)

The Gurnets are a virtual parody of the Hammond family. Mrs. Hammond had arranged the most genteel education available to ensure that her daughters will move freely in the highest social circles; Mr. Gurnet sends his daughters to a "genteel boarding school" for the same reason. The Hammond daughters become steeped in the fine arts-- literature, music, paintings. The Gurnet daughters, likewise, complete their studies having learned "the 'nasty

piano" and having completed "a parcel of smeared-looking drawings" (154). Mr. Gurnet, like Mrs. Hammond, is eager to show off his daughters at fancy parties, where

they were perpetually committing blunders which subjected them to unavoidable ridicule; yet their opulence shielded them from open derision, and their house abounded too much in the solid comforts of good eating and drinking for them to be in any danger of neglect. (155)

This passage "deconstructs" itself when one examines the values of the personages involved; the Gurnets are the ones being hospitable and generous, while the socialites are obsequious to wealth and, apparently, governed by their stomachs. Whether or not Rush recognizes the irony inherent to her description is open to question.

Certainly, Rush highlights those aspects of the Gurnets that disqualify them from admittance into the better circles of society. Mrs. Gurnet was once a serving girl and still does her own cooking. The daughters remain functionally illiterate despite three years of schooling. Their dress is characterized by "ill-chosen, gaudy finery," and their appetites are "admirable" (154, 161). Gurnet beats a black servant, and threatens to box the ears of his daughters, all while company is present. As Nelson points out, "the very fact that they must labor over their manners brands them true members of the working class," while "the naturally genteel visitors barely restrain their laughter until they are out of hearing" (xix).

Rush's sense of limits to social mobility seems incongruous in a novel whose title character is an able and aspiring but penniless young man. However, Rush came from an affluent, well-established, politically-powerful family, and her sensibilities are typical of the conservative views of her day. John Adams, for example, a year after Kelroy was published, wrote that "the Idea of the 'Well born'. . . is the Ordonance of God Almighty" (Cappon 1: 365). Rush evinces a similar bias by creating a class of characters who are obviously "quality." Adams also, however, condemned "the weakness, the folly, the Pride, the Vanity, the Selfishness, the Artifice, the low craft and mean cunning, the want of Principle, the Avarice, the unbounded Ambition, [and] the unfeeling Cruelty" of most aristocrats (Cappon 1: 398)--a list of characteristics that would pretty well describe Mrs. Hammond in Kelroy.

Kelroy, then, with its emphasis on natural gentility, stands with Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry as two of the best examples of early national novels that reflect the conservative distrust of aspiring commoner while at the same time attacking a culture increasingly preoccupied with wealth and ostentation.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRIDENT VOICES OF THE JACKSONIAN PERIOD

Jacksonian Democracy and the Modern Temper

The "Jacksonian" era in American history has generally been used to describe the expansionist period that took place after the War of 1812 and before the sectional conflicts of the 1840's and 1850's presaged the American Civil War.¹ In the Jacksonian period America began in earnest the process of changing from an agricultural society to an industrial society. Attendant with such a radical change were a number of related problems with a distinctly modern temper, problems that had been foreseen by perceptive Americans like Franklin but only to a limited degree experienced. These problems included wild swings between boom and bust economic cycles, increasing stratification between the poor and the wealthy, and a harsh urbanization. Throughout the changes, much debate centered on the question of whether America was still the place where the individual of ability could reap commensurate reward for productive labor. In this section, I will review the socioeconomic changes during the Jacksonian period, survey pieces from representative writers on the subject of the productive

¹See, for example, Frank Otto Gatell and John Mr. McFaul, Jacksonian America 1815-1840 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

individual, and examine an early critique of the new economic period in a famous sketch by Washington Irving.

Historians have posited various theories for why there was such a radical paradigm shift in American society in the Jacksonian period. In The Age of Jackson (1945), Arthur Schlesinger maintained that this period was the first to see the growth of a "public conscience," a liberal, activist government dedicated to combatting the increasingly predatory business community (510, etc.). John M. McFaul similarly argues that the most fundamental change initiated in the period was the democratization of political power (211). Bray Hammond, in his 1957 work Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War, had a different emphasis, suggesting that the transformations the period engendered could be traced to a rising class of entrepreneurs who appropriated populist, agrarian vocabulary in their attacks upon the conservative business community centered in Philadelphia (328).

The first major bust of the nineteenth century occurred in the Panic of 1819. What "busted" was a period of widespread land speculation and shady bank practices that were commonly used to create instant fortunes. Unregulated "wildcat" banks were to blame, at least in part. These were banks set up by speculators who invested as little capital as possible for reserves of gold and silver and then issued as many paper promissory notes as possible. These notes

were treated as money, but their value fluctuated wildly, depending on depositors' confidence in the bank. If there was any run on the bank's resources, the bank would squeeze debtors hard for ready cash. If it could not raise enough revenue, it failed, and depositors--often farmers, laborers, and merchants--lost everything. After recovery from the Panic, the cycle of speculation and inflation began again, until another bust hit with the Panic of 1837 (Hofstadter 82-83; Pessen 141-44, 149-53). After the Panic, pressure from the new Democratic party for hard-money and other reforms were successful in curbing bank power over money supply and economic cycles (Sharp 328).

Land speculation and banking schemes notwithstanding, there were important gains made in the country's industrial infrastructure during the period. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 provided western (Ohio valley) farmers with access to East Coast markets, a process that continued with the expansion of the canal networks and the introduction of the railroad. Prices of manufactured goods moving east also dropped, as did the prices of goods moving up and down the Mississippi river on the newly-developed steamboats. Railroads also helped spark the growth of the corporate form of business venture with their heavy capital requirements (Pessen 128-36). According to historian Edward Pessen, the "transportation revolution" opened up "great new markets for western produce, stimulated a vast interest in either the

settlement or speculation in western lands, and bound the nation into something appropriating a common market" (95). He also states that the revolution "brought forward the merchant capitalist as a leading figure in the industrial as well as the commercial and financial life of the nation" (114).

About two-thirds of the people of the period were employed on farms, where the quality of life for even the free citizens was poor due to the long, monotonous working hours and few opportunities for leisure or improvement (Pessen 49). Conditions in the cities, however, were even worse. German immigrants, being as a whole more affluent and industrious than the other groups, generally did well. The Irish, less fortunate and less welcome, could usually find only the most menial labor and were crowded into squalid slums. The lot of the free negroes in the northern cities was worse than that of the poorest European immigrants; they faced such severe discrimination that their social and economic condition was abysmal (Pessen 60-64).

Most manufacturing was still being done in homes or small shops, but factories were beginning to spring up in the cities. Working conditions at the new factories were brutal; a thirteen hour day was common, and in the overcrowded and unsanitary company boarding houses women and children workers often faced abuse.

Poverty, overcrowding, backwardness, and sharp landlord practices turned their housing into slums

marked by filth, the absence of windows and toilet facilities, crime, prostitution, disease, and a high mortality rate. (Pessen 61)

In winter, factories often shut down, leaving workers idle and unpaid. When master craftsmen and factory owners started hiring as much unskilled labor as possible to cut costs, threatened journeymen began forming trade unions. Leaders of these unions often proposed broad social reforms, including abolishing imprisonment for debt, abolishing all licensed monopolies, and creating public schools (Schlesinger 134).

As one may infer from the previous descriptions, the Jacksonian period, often characterized as an age of egalitarianism, was actually a time when class distinctions became ever sharper (Pessen 47). Representatives from the monied class published defenses of capitalism and entrepreneurship; representatives from the working classes cried for radical reforms. A good example of the latter is Orestes Brownson's "The Laboring Classes," published in the July 1840 Boston Quarterly Review--a piece not included in Brownson's collected works (edited by his son, Henry F. Brownson), apparently because it was deemed too radical. In the essay, Brownson predicts a coming struggle between "wealth and labor":

All over the world this fact stares us in the face, the workingman is poor and depressed, while a large portion of the nonworkingmen, in the sense we now use the term are wealthy. It may be laid down as a general rule, with but few exceptions that men are rewarded in an inverse ratio to the

amount of actual service they perform. . . . Even in seasons of general prosperity, when there was only the ordinary cry of "hard times," we have seen hundreds of people in a not very populous village, in a wealthy portion of our common country, suffering for the want of the necessities of life, willing to work, and yet finding no work to do. Many and many is the application of a poor man for work, merely for his food, we have seen rejected. (Brownson 367-68)

Brownson paints a painfully modern picture of the unemployed, and his assertion that "men are rewarded in an inverse ratio to the amount of actual service they perform" cuts to the heart of the American economic dream. Brownson even equates the wage-paying employer with the slave-owner:

We stand and look at the hard working men and women hurrying in all directions, and ask ourselves, where go the proceeds of their labors? The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, revelling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket On thing is certain; that of the amount actually produced by the operative, he retains a less proportion than it costs the master to feed, clothe, and lodge his slave. Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders. (370)

In this passage, Brownson has expanded the "parasitic" class to include virtually all the owners of capital, in addition to politicians--a radical idea which recalls the novels of Brown.

Why are wages so suppressed? Because of labor surpluses--and the urban poor, according to Brownson, lack real opportunity to get back to the "great Business of the

continent"--farming--as Franklin had counselled (Franklin, Political Thought 385). The frontier might not be declared officially closed for another half century, but Brownson points out that homestead land is already largely unavailable:

. . . fifty years ago, health and industrious habits, constituted no mean stock in trade, and with them almost any man might aspire to competence and independence. But it is so no longer. The wilderness has receded, and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy. (Brownson 372)

At the mercy of the factory employer, Brownson notes, "the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor" (347). Brownson calls for the proletariat to unite: "Now the great work for this age and the coming, is to raise up the laborer, and to realize in our own social arrangements and in the actual condition of all men, that equality between man and man, which God has established . . ." (373). Brownson's proposed reforms, however, for all his rhetoric, do not go so far as to include the abolition of private property. Brownson advocates eliminating the current banking system, dissolving all monopolies, and banning the hereditary descent of property (392-94)--proposals which seem more akin to Thomas Jefferson's than Karl Marx's, thus demonstrating that even the most radical rhetoric often masks ideas that are relatively mainstream.

The new Democratic party echoed such sentiments as it strove to galvanize the popular vote. Typical would be this statement, issued by Democrat legislator Frederick Robinson on July 4, 1834:

"There always exists, in every community, two great interest[s]--that of the producer, whose interest it is to secure to himself, as much as he can of the fruit of the labor, of his own hands; and that of the capitalist, whose interest it is to take from the producer as much as he possibly can of the productions of his industry. A contest between these two classes is always going on in every country, where the capitalist has not completely reduced the producer to a state of slavery. . . . [The producers are] obliged to labor on, from generation to generation, the servile tenants of haughty landlords . . . or in the monotonous, never-ceasing labor of the mills--devoting whole lives, perhaps, to the daily toil of watching the progress of a single thread in the looms." (Schlesinger 168)

Robinson and Brownson obviously believe that truly productive people are the farm laborers and factory workers, and that the capitalists who own the land or the factories are parasites doing no productive labor. This view of society has its roots in the traditional American antipathy towards aristocracy, and it began to be applied to people of wealth in America as least as early as Crèvecoeur.

The monied class, understandably, views things differently. Capitalist entrepreneurs see themselves as squarely in the American tradition of being productive individuals who deserve rewards commensurate to their productivity. This view, too, had its advocates in the public press. One such defender was Calvin Colton in the

Junius Tracts, published in 1844. In Volume VII of the tracts, Colton attacks Jackson's policies of undermining corporations and monied interests generally and banking and currency stability specifically. Colton begins Volume VII with the seminal American view on productivity and wealth: "Industrious labor of any kind, in a country like ours, with economy, and being applied where labor is in demand for wages, is a sure foundation for wealth" (Colton 98). Colton argues that opportunities for employment are derived from capitalist enterprise, and any disincentives to enterprise or penalties on the rich end up hurting the poor more (103-05, etc.). The government, then, should enhance the synergy between the productive laborer and the productive capitalist:

for government . . . to open the way, by its policy, for the profitable use of money, is the same as to provide for the success and fair reward of industry and work; and that policy which destroys the profit of money, destroys the profit of labor. (104-05)

Even Colton admits that monopolies are dangerous, but corporations, he argues, are a legitimate way for the common people to be owners of the means of production. He also acknowledges the benefits of some previous egalitarian legislation (initiated by men like Jefferson):

Where the laws of primogeniture and entail are abolished, as in this country, and where everything is put under the control of labor, industry, and enterprise, there is substantial equality. All property, among us, tends to the hands of those who work and wait for it. (102)

Colton, like the more conservative voices that preceded him, tends to downplay the idea of America's increasing economic stratification.

Then, in a nicely done statement that smacks of Smith, Franklin, and Crevecoeur, Colton concludes that the American economic dream is still alive and well:

Ours is a country, where men start from an humble origin, and from small beginnings rise gradually in the world, as the reward of merit and industry, and where they can attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves. No exclusive privileges of birth, no entailment of estates, no civil or political disqualifications, stand in their path; but one has as good a chance as another, according to his talents, prudence, and personal exertions. This is a country of self-made men. . . .
(111)

Even a defender of capitalist interests like Colton can point to egalitarian measures as being just, but his is the traditional stance that America should be a place of equality of opportunity, not equality of condition.

Debates over equality of opportunity and equality of condition were common at every level of American society during the Jacksonian era. In vetoing the charter of the Bank of the United States, for example, Andrew Jackson wrote,

It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth cannot be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue,

every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society--the farmers, mechanics, and laborers--who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government. . . . If [government] would confine itself to equal protection, and, as Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing. (Jackson, "Veto" 5: 534)

Even an egalitarian like Jackson would never attempt to guarantee equality of condition through the power of the government, but he is articulate in warning that people of the monied class are always likely to use government powers to enrich themselves at the common people's expense.

Jackson's farewell address (delivered March 4, 1837), focuses on similar issues. Jackson began the speech by attacking the self-interest which seemed to be undermining the very foundations of the society:

No free government can stand without virtue in the people and a lofty spirit of patriotism, and if the sordid feelings of mere selfishness shall usurp the place which ought to be filled by public spirit, the legislation of Congress will soon be converted into a scramble for personal and sectional advantages. Under our free institutions the citizens of every quarter of our country are capable of attaining a high degree of prosperity and happiness without seeking to profit themselves at the expense of others. . . . (Jackson, "Farewell" 6: 302-03)

Jackson, like Brackenridge, recognized that the lure of instant fortunes from land speculation tended to subvert

traditional ideas of attaining wealth through thrift and industry:

These ebbs and flows in the currency and these indiscreet extensions of credit naturally engender a spirit of speculation injurious to the habits and character of the people. We have already seen its effects in the wild spirit of speculation in the public lands and various kinds of stock which within the last year or two seized upon such a multitude of our citizens and threatened to pervade all classes of society and to withdraw their attention from the sober pursuits of honest industry. (6: 305-06)

Jackson railed against paper money, which fostered "this eager desire to amass wealth without labor," and against the creations of the monied class--corporations and a federal bank--which could lead to oligarchy:

The planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer all know that their success depends upon their own industry and economy, and that they must not expect to become suddenly rich by the fruits of their toil . . . unless you become more watchful in your States and check this spirit of monopoly and thirst for exclusive privileges you will in the end find that the most important powers of Government have been given or bartered away, and the control over your dearest interests has passed into the hands of these corporations. (6: 308)

Jackson clearly affirms the fundamental idea that rewards should come from productive labor, and he mistrusted schemes by which men would come into fortunes without real productivity. He fears the rise of a new American aristocracy, based on raw political power, which, like the aristocracies of Europe, have government-derived and government-protected wealth and which perform no productive labor.

No overview of the thought of the period would be complete without a look at the writings of the traditionally dispossessed groups. The Narrative of Frederick Douglass (1845) will be examined in some detail in a separate section as a persuasive argument for letting blacks participate freely in the capitalist system. Women, likewise, were beginning to publish in greater numbers well-written protests against the status quo, and the abolitionist movement and the women's right movement flourished together. Typical would be the work by Sarah Grimke (1792-1873), a Quaker activist on behalf of both blacks and women. Grimke, writing in a society that took for granted that nearly all white women would become homemakers, focused her pleas on better education opportunities for women--the foundation for them achieving a more productive role in society at large, as is stated in this passage from her essay "The Education of Women":

. . . it will be enquired, why we desire an extended education, since we already have what is sufficient for all the duties of woman's narrow sphere. What is the use of higher educational privileges, when there is no field for the exercise of our powers, after we have spent years in their cultivation. First, we ask education as a means to an end; that end, is greater fitness to fulfil our duties in all domestic and social relations. There can be no attainment too high, no learning too profound, not to be advantageously turned to account in the sacred circle of Home. Second, we ask it, because we covet an enlarged sphere of usefulness; we feel a thirst for improvement which can only be quenched by drinking freely of the streams of knowledge. (Grimke 122)

As Abigail Adams had before her, Grimke argues that better education will help women in their accustomed role as housewives, but she slips in the more radical idea that women can be productive players in society at large toward the end of the thought.

Grimke elaborates on the idea of coveting "an enlarged sphere of usefulness" thusly:

[Girls] study under the paralysing idea that their acquirements can never be brought into practical use; they may subserve the purposes of promoting individual pleasure, domestic and social enjoyment. But what are they in comparison with the grand stimulation of independence and self reliance and of the capability of contributing to the comfort and happiness of those whom they love as their own souls? Many a talented and highly educated girl feels no pleasure in looking beyond her school life, because she sees no bright and useful future beyond. Delighted as she is with the acquisition of knowledge, she yet sends forth the plaintive inquiry, What shall I do? My learning can purchase for me neither independence, nor the ability to minister to the wants of others. My food, my raiment are not the product of my own industry. Shall this touching appeal meet with no response in the heart of fathers, husbands, and sons? (Grimke 123)

Self reliance, the capability of contributing, independence, and industry--these are standard American ideals, built into the economic system; but the system is flawed insofar as it has excluded women from equal participation.

Grimke focuses more specifically on economic issues in a letter to her sister dated 1837 (one of a collection published in Boston in 1838), particularly, the issue of pay inequities between women and men in the workforce; after

discussing the fact that women are generally considered intellectually inferior to men, she writes:

There is another way in which the general opinion, that women are inferior to men, is manifested, that bears with tremendous effect on the laboring class, and indeed on almost all who are obliged to earn a subsistence, whether it be by mental or physical exertion--I allude to the disproportionate value set on the time and labor of men and of women. A man who is engaged in teaching, can always, I believe, command a higher price for tuition than a woman--even when he teaches the same branches, and is not in any respect superior to the woman. This I know is the case in boarding and other schools with which I have been acquainted, and it is so in every occupation in which the sexes engage indiscriminately. As for example, in tailoring, a man has twice, or three times as much for making a waistcoat or pantaloons as a woman, although the work done by each may be equally good. In those employments which are peculiar to women, their time is estimated at only half the value as that of men. A woman who goes out to wash, works as hard in proportion as a wood sawyer, or a coal heaver, but she is not generally able to make more than half as much by a day's work. The low remuneration which women receive for their work, has claimed the attention of a few philanthropists, and I hope it will continue to do so until some remedy is applied for this enormous evil. I have known a widow, left with four or five children, to provide for, unable to leave home because her helpless babes demand her attention, compelled to earn a scanty subsistence, by making coarse shirts at 12 1/2 cents a piece, or by taking in washing, for which she was paid by some wealthy persons 12 1/2 cents per dozen. All these things evince the low estimation in which woman is held. (Grimke 59)

Note that Grimke raises the "modern" concept of equal pay for equivalent work; one could conjecture about the level of modifications to the free market system that would be required for such equities to be institutionalized, and merely by mentioning the problem Grimke could be taking a

stand, like Charles Brockden Brown's, that there should be some radical revisions to the way the American economic system operates for women to be fully integrated and for socioeconomic inequities to be resolved.

Grimke is not singular in her sentiments (nor in her linking of the possessed black with the dispossessed woman, which she frequently does). Similar ideas were widely disseminated by others, including, for example, Margaret Fuller, another well-known abolitionist-feminist. Fuller, in "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women," from the July 1843 Dial (and reprinted in the 1855 collection of her works, Woman in the Nineteenth Century), argues explicitly that "As men become aware that all men have not had a fair chance, they are inclined to say that no women have had a fair chance" (Fuller 24). Fuller addresses both the ideas of commensurate reward for productive labor and the parasite who lives off the labor of others in this essay, arguing,

It may well be an Anti-Slavery party that pleads for woman, if we consider merely that she does not hold property on equal terms with men. . . . We will not speak of the innumerable instances, in which profligate or idle men live upon the earnings of industrious wives; or if the wives leave them and take with them the children, to perform the double duty of mother and father, follow from place to place, and threaten to rob them of the children, if deprived of the rights of a husband, as they call them, planting themselves in their poor lodgings, frightening them into paying tribute by taking from them their children, running into debt at the expense of these otherwise so over-tasked helots. (Fuller 31-32)

Elsewhere in the essay, Fuller calls for giving girls "as fair a field as boys" in education: "Give the soul free course, let the organization be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called" (Fuller 95, 96). She takes a more practical turn in her essay "The Wrongs of American Women. The Duty of American Women," in which she points out that a vast number of unmarried and widowed women are already forced into providing for themselves, but the progress they are making into respectable and lucrative professions is agonizingly slow. She recommends more women go into the fields of teaching and nursing, professions suited to their natures and enlarging to their capacities (Fuller 221-223).

Fuller and Grimke for the most part do not seem to stand outside the pale of mainstream American thought, insofar as they recommend a level playing field and commensurate reward for productivity. They do tend to extend the definition of the "parasite" class to include men in general--an understandable reaction from persons who had to surrender rights to their property to their husbands--and they hint that some fundamental changes in attitudes and institutions will be required before women become legitimate players in the American economic system.

We have already seen how Crevecoeur, Brackenridge, and Brown made use of current socioeconomic problems to develop critiques of the American system in their works. When we

turn to the fiction writers of the Jacksonian period, we see a similar preoccupation with economic themes. Especially with the increasing volatility of the Jacksonian boom and bust cycles and the periodic speculation fever that gripped the nation, Jacksonian writers began focusing even more attention on the American man of wealth. An early example in the period was Washington Irving (1783-1859), famous for his satirical and sentimental fictional sketches. One sketch in particular, "The Devil and Tom Walker," published in his collection Tales of a Traveller by Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1820), seems especially colored by the Panic of the year before, and it contains a number of elements that make it worthy of review.

The setting for the tale is 1727, "just at that time when earthquakes were prevalent in New England, and shook many tall sinners down upon their knees" (Irving 217). The setting, at the start of the Great Awakening, is significant in that this was America's first great revival period, when huge numbers of people were convicted about, among other things, their rampant materialism.

In the story Tom, a poor, lean Yankee farmer, meets up with a dark, wild figure--old Scratch himself, the Devil. The Devil shows him a stand of trees, each marked with a name, which he hews with his axe. Irving, like Hawthorne a few years later, delights in throwing off the hypocritical facade masking the leading Puritans in the community; Tom

beheld one of the great trees, fair and flourishing without, but rotten at the core, and saw that it had been nearly hewn through, so that the first high wind was likely to blow it down. On the bark of the tree was scored the name of Deacon Peabody, an eminent man, who had waxed wealthy by driving shrewd bargains with the Indians. (219)

The tree on which Tom is sitting "bore the name of Crowninshield; and he recollected a mighty rich man of that name, who made a vulgar display of wealth, which it was whispered he had acquired by buccaneering." Tom subsequently sees in the paper a notice of Crowninshield's death announcing that "a great man had fallen in Israel" (223). Crowninshield and Peabody are not exceptions; "most of the tall trees [were] marked with the name of some great man of the colony, and all more or less scored by the axe" (219).

Irving manages to pinch various classes of people who made wealth without doing any productive work--buccaneers, Indian traders, speculators--but he saves some of his best satire for slave dealers. The Devil offers Tom a chest of treasure, and proposes that Tom

should employ it in the black traffick; that is to say, that he should fit out a slave ship. This, however, Tom resolutely refused; he was bad enough in all conscience; but the devil himself could not tempt him to turn slave dealer. (222)

The Devil settles for Tom becoming a usurer, "looking upon them as his peculiar people" (223). Irving is a master at twisting the language of the Puritans for satiric effect,

here playing on the idea of "election" with the term "peculiar people."

It turns out that Irving's fictional 1727 looks suspiciously like the reality of 1819:

It was a time of paper credit. The country had been deluged with government bills; the famous Land Bank had been established; there had been a rage for speculating; the people had run mad with schemes for new settlements. . . . In a word, the great speculating fever which breaks out every now and then in the country, had raged to an alarming degree, and every body was dreaming of making sudden fortunes from nothing. As usual the fever had subsided; the dream had gone off, and the imaginary fortunes with it; the patients were left in doleful plight, and the whole country resounded with the consequent cry of "hard times." (223)

Such times, no matter what the century, are perfect for a man with liquid assets to make a killing, and Tom Walker, armed with the treasure chest, is ready for the opportunity:

The needy and the adventurous; the gambling speculator; the dreaming land jobber; the thriftless tradesman; the merchant with cracked credit; in short, every one driven to raise money by desperate means and desperate sacrifices, hurried to Tom Walker. (224)

Tom turns out to be the consummate heartless capitalist, as is seen in this irony-laced description:

Thus Tom was the universal friend of the needy In proportion to the distress of the applicant was the hardness of his terms. He accumulated bonds and mortgages; gradually squeezed his customers closer and closer; and sent them at length, dry as a sponge from his door. (224)

Irving then has Tom turn religious with the same fervency that he pursues wealth:

Having secured the good things of this world, he began to feel anxious about those of the next. He thought with regret on the bargain he had made with his black friend, and set his wits to work to cheat him out of the conditions. He became, therefore, all of a sudden, a violent church goer. (224)

Irving is drawing on a stock literary character, of course: "religious" figures that turn out to be motivated by avarice are at least as old as Chaucer's Pardoner. But Tom Walker has a distinctly American flavor. For one thing, he seems totally unaware of his gross hypocrisy (in contrast to the self-aware and ironic Pardoner): "He prayed loudly and strenuously as if heaven were to be taken by force of lungs. Indeed, one might always tell when he had sinned most during the week, by the clamour of his Sunday devotion." Irving also integrates Tom's devotion to keeping accounts with his works theology: "Tom was as rigid in religious, as in money matters; he was a stern supervisor and censurer of his neighbors, and seemed to think every sin entered up to their account became a credit on his own side of the page" (224).

Tom's end is especially well-crafted. He is "on the point of foreclosing a mortgage, by which he would complete the ruin of an unlucky land speculator for whom he had professed the greatest friendship." The land jobber begs for more time to pay: "My family will be ruined and brought upon the parish," he pleads, but to no avail. "Charity begins at home," replies Tom. "I must take care of myself in these hard times" (225). The Devil then appears,

catching Tom totally off guard: "He had left his little bible at the bottom of his coat pocket, and his big bible on the desk buried under the mortgage he was about to foreclose" (225). After he has been carried off, people go through his assets, of which little remain:

On searching his coffers all his bonds and mortgages were found reduced to cinders. In place of gold and silver his iron chest was filled with chips and shavings; two skeletons lay in his stable instead of his half starved horses, and the very next day his great house took fire and was burnt to the ground. (226)

Tom Walker is an effective caricature of those second-generation Puritans who became affluent and lost the essential Puritan attitudes towards work and wealth. Unlike the true Puritans, he has his eyes only on material gain and never really on the spiritual life. The true Puritan was to find joy in productive work he or she felt called to do; Tom only finds joy in making money through the sterile profession of usury. The Puritans emphasized that wealth was to be used for charity; Tom exhibits only a feigned charity to make money from people in distress. The Puritans had an intense sense of their own unworthiness and God's grace; Tom has a warped works theology based on a blind comparison of his own sins with the sins of others. Finally, the Puritans felt themselves to be chosen of God to be separate from the world; Tom becomes part of an infernal elect--the nonproductive class out to exploit people in this world.

"The Devil and Tom Walker" is a continuation of Crèvecoeur's and Brown's attack on the non-productive American aristocracy--but it is just a sketch, with a light, ironic, detached tone, and is not an attempt to wrestle with the most glaring problems of the period, problems with class stratification and an increasingly brutal urbanization. Fiction writers later in the Jacksonian period continue the critique in more fully developed works, and from a variety of perspectives. The two writers who articulate the fullest assessments of American capitalism of the Jacksonian period, James Fenimore Cooper and Charles Frederic Briggs, come to startlingly different conclusions about both the problems and the solutions.

James Fenimore Cooper and the Capitalist
as Hero

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), best known for helping create the American myth of the heroic frontiersman, was an articulate defender of a range of conservative values, especially the ideas of individualism, property rights, and the rule of law. Although he has been criticized for being too strident and insensitive (in addition to other attacks on his artistry),² Cooper stands

²Criticism of Cooper's artistry has been regularly attacked, with "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" by Clemens being the seminal piece despite its exaggerations. Even sympathetic Cooper scholars today, such as John P. McWilliams in *Political Justice in a Republic: James Fenimore Cooper's America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1972), label

squarely in the great tradition of American economic thought as he champions the idea that America should be the place where all people--including property owners--deserve to reap commensurate rewards for legitimate productivity. In this chapter, three Cooper novels, The Pioneers (1823), The Chainbearer (1845), and The Crater (1847), will be examined to show how Cooper explored this and related themes from his decidedly conservative viewpoint.

In a work as early as The Pioneers, long before the rent conflicts of the 1840's turned Cooper's attention specifically on the rights of landowners, Cooper was exploring the legitimacy of property ownership. In fact, one can read The Pioneers as Cooper's attempt to answer the question of what it would take for a white American to establish an inviolable claim to property.³ The problem is a sticky one; Native Americans had prior claims which may or may not have been legitimately forfeited, as did British loyalists--and coupled with legal considerations are moral ones about property ownership and the exploitation of nature.

certain plots (such as that in The Redskins) as failures due to their implausibility. McWilliams also finds in The Redskins a blindness to the injustices of the leasehold system that undermines the novel's credibility.

³This discussion is indebted to Walter Benn Michaels, who, in his book The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), explores The House of the Seven Gables as Hawthorne's attempt to establish what an absolutely secure property right would involve.

Early in The Pioneers is this optimistic description of the American landscape:

The vales are narrow, rich, and cultivated; with a stream uniformly winding through each. Beautiful and thriving villages are found interspersed along the margins of the small lakes, or situated at those points of the streams which are favorable to manufacturing; and neat and comfortable farms, with every indication of wealth about them, are scattered profusely through the vales, and even to the mountaintops. (Pioneers 15)

This seems to be the utopia envisioned by Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and Jefferson, with small farming and manufacturing operations ensuring prosperity for all thrifty and hard-working Americans. This broad vision is, of course, blind to the struggles over displacement and property ownership inherent in the process of turning wilderness into farmland.

Cooper's primary protagonist, Judge Temple, owns much of the developed land in the area. Part of the land was descended from an ancestor, Old Marmaduke, a wealthy emigrant who had secured "many thousands of acres of uninhabited territory" in the Pennsylvania colony (Pioneers 30). The heirs, however, fail to retain possession of most of the land:

Accustomed to ease, and unequal to the struggles incident to an infant society, the affluent emigrant was barely enabled to maintain his own rank, by the weight of his personal superiority and acquirements; but the moment that his head was laid in the grave, his indolent, and comparatively uneducated offspring, were compelled to yield precedence to the more active energies of a class, whose exertions had been stimulated by necessity. (Pioneers 30-31)

Cooper thus introduces the themes of class struggle, the rise of the productive man, and the natural aristocracy versus the artificial aristocracy.

Judge Temple inherited only a portion of his wealth; he has amassed most of it through shrewd investments. But part of his capital, as it turns out, came in trust from the estate of a Tory friend named Effingham, and, in a fittingly ironic twist, a portion of the Judge's land was purchased "at, comparatively, low prices" from holdings seized from Tories during the Revolution (Pioneers 36). To his credit, Temple rightly believes Effingham dead, and the search for Effingham's heirs has turned up nothing. Still, the legitimacy of Temple's property rights are, to a degree, called into doubt, before the question of prior Indian claims are even mentioned.

Despite the questions, Temple remains a paragon of conservative, capitalist values, representing, as one critic summarizes, "all the aspects of authority--institutional stability, organized religion, class stratification, [and] property" (Henry Nash Smith 62). Cooper makes it clear he deserves to reap the rewards of his holdings. At one point he contemplates, "with philanthropic pleasure, the prospect of affluence and comfort, that was expanding around him; the result of his own enterprise, and, much of it, the fruits of his own industry" (Pioneers 46). Not only has Temple worked hard for his rewards, he is also a genuinely enlightened and

moral man, as shown by his practice of freeing his black slaves after a certain period of labor. Cooper thus takes pains to distance him from the "parasitic" class of slaveowners, lawyers, etc., criticized elsewhere.

A final technique Cooper uses to reinforce Temple's moral qualification for owning the land is his concern for ecological conservation. He forbids, for example, the burning of maple trees for firewood, and he explains,

Really, it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests, as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way [cutting timber indiscriminately], twenty years hence, we shall want fuel. (Pioneers 105)

Temple similarly condemns the wasteful slaughter of fish and pigeons, thus establishing himself as a good steward of his lands.

Despite being a capable and just landowner, Judge Temple demonstrates some sensitivity to the issue of prior ownership claims when he rather testily makes this defense of his property title:

. . . the Indian title was extinguished so far back as the close of the old war; and if it had not been at all, I hold under the patents of the Royal Governors, confirmed by an act of our own State Legislature, and no court in the county can affect my title. (Pioneers 237)

Judge Temple is industrious and moral, he is a faithful steward, and he has a legal claim to the land. But the presence of the old Indian Mohegan, his mysterious young

friend (Effingham, who is rumored to be a half-breed), and the Leatherstocking himself (who personifies extreme individualism and freedom) keep up throughout the novel a tension about who should truly possess the land.

The idea of competing claims to the land recurs in this exchange between Elizabeth Temple (the Judge's daughter and only heir), and Oliver Effingham (who has disguised his identity). Elizabeth says, "I own that I grieve when I see old Mohegan walking about these lands, like the ghost of one of their ancient possessors, and feel how small is my own right to possess them." Effingham replies, "But there is one thing that I am certain you can and will do, when you become the mistress of these beautiful valleys--use your wealth with indulgence to the poor and charity to the needy;--indeed, you can do no more" (Pioneers 280). Leatherstocking also sees that injustice has been done to the Indians, commenting wryly that "I've known the whites talk fair, when they wanted Indian lands most" (Pioneers 206).

How, then, does Cooper legitimize beyond doubt the claims of the white Temple to the land? The key, of course, is Oliver Effingham. Although he is not really a half-breed (being a half-breed would make his marriage to Elizabeth problematic), his father was the adopted son of Mohegan, and since Mohegan is the last of his tribe, Oliver Effingham is the only one left to represent his claim to the land.

Effingham also, of course, represents the Tory interests in the land, since his father was the Tory who left his estate in the hands of the Judge during the Revolution. And Effingham, being a fellow-hunter with Natty Bumppo, can function as the surrogate woodsman. Thus when Effingham weds Elizabeth Temple, all legal claims to the land--Indian, British, and American--converge. The moral claims converge also. The Judge has demonstrated his industry and stewardship, Elizabeth has evidenced humility and concern for the Native American, and Oliver Effingham has counseled using the wealth the land generates for the relief of the poor. The Pioneers, then, ends with Cooper's affirmation of private property even while he establishes high standards about who landowners should be.

The Pioneers was, in part, an early attempt by Cooper to demonstrate that legitimate claims to property could be made if the landowner is honest, moral, industrious, and sensitive to the claims of others. Two decades later, in the early 1840's, controversies over land ownership and the legitimacy of perpetual rent systems in New York state appeared (to Cooper) to be threatening the country's socio-economic foundations. Tenant farmers in the region argued that their contracts with landlords should be annulled and that the land should be re-appropriated by the government to be made available for sale in inexpensive tracts; landlords, who had held exclusive rights (patents) to large estates for

generations, argued that the existing system was fair and legally binding. The farmers began forming anti-rent associations and, disguised as Indians, often disrupted local sheriffs' attempts to serve various legal notices. More importantly, the antirenters formed a powerful voting block heeded by both Democrat and Whig candidates, and the patent holders were eventually pressured to capitulate (Ellis 263-98, etc.). This controversy caused Cooper to focus his attention again on the landowner, and the Littlepage trilogy was his reactionary attempt to rescue the status quo. The second work of the trilogy, The Chainbearer (1845), is Cooper's finest exposition on the character and rights of the landowner. In this work Cooper effectively presents the landowner as hardworking, productive, and basically egalitarian, and therefore deserving of appropriate reward for his labor.

The ideal landowner in The Chainbearer is Mordaunt Littlepage, son of Cornelius Littlepage. Mordaunt, though wealthy, is no snobbish aristocrat; he is basically egalitarian, ready to properly recognize people of character and ability no matter what their station or fortune. He has little regard for those who make an ostentatious display of their wealth, saying "Money is a thing on which few persons of cultivated minds pride themselves. The purse-proud are, almost invariably, the vulgar and ignorant" (Chainbearer 226).

Mordaunt most clearly demonstrates his egalitarian impulses in his relationships with the chainbearer, Andries Coejemans, and his niece, Dus Malbone. Littlepage is willing to grant that Coejemans is a gentleman based on his loyalty, ability, and integrity, despite his lack of education and wealth. Cooper critic Donald A. Ringe explains Littlepage's (and Cooper's) position this way:

Since men are fundamentally unequal, position in society should come as the reward of virtue and talent; and once achieved, it should be accepted by the fortunate few with Christian humility and a deep submission of self to the moral laws of the universe. (99)

Littlepage's egalitarian impulses do not mean he advocates equality of condition, of course, but equality of opportunity, equality under the law:

The law should be equal and just; and the poor are the last people who ought to wish them otherwise, since they are certain to be the losers when any other principle governs. Rely on it . . . the man who is forever preaching the rights of the poor is at bottom a rogue, and means to make that cry a stalking-horse for his own benefit; since nothing can serve the poor but severe justice. No class suffers so much by a departure from the rule, as the rich have a thousand other means of attaining their ends, when the way is left clear to them, by setting up any other master than the right. (Chainbearer 274)

For Littlepage, "the right," means, among other things, property rights and a laissez-faire policy that enables landlords to charge tenants whatever they wish for rent.

Property rights, in fact, are the cornerstone of civilization, according to Littlepage. At one point in the

novel he explains to his Indian friend Susquesus why the whites are more advanced than the Indians:

Now, all the knowledge and all the arts of life that the white man enjoys and turns to his profit, come from the rights of property. No man would build a wigwam to makes [sic] rifles in, if he thought he could not keep it as long as he wished, sell it when he pleased, and leave it to his son when he went to the land of the spirits. It is by encouraging man's love of himself in this manner that he is got to do so much. . . . Without these rights of property, no people could be civilized; for no people would do their utmost, unless each man were permitted to be master of what he can acquire, subject to the great and common laws that are necessary to regulate such matters.
(Chainbearer 283)

Littlepage concludes his lecture to Susquesus with these words:

A man must work for himself to do his most; and he cannot work for himself unless he enjoy the fruits of his labor. Thus it is, that he must have a right of property in land, either bought or hired, in order to make him cause that land to produce all that nature intended it should produce. On this necessity is founded the rights of property; the gain being civilization; the loss ignorance, and poverty, and weakness. (Chainbearer 284)

In this speech, Littlepage echoes the experiences of the earliest colonial leaders at Jamestown and Plymouth, who discovered that the colonists would not exert their full efforts to be productive unless they were working land for their own profit.

Cooper has supported his case that landowners are deserving of the rents they charge by making Littlepage a likeable, democratic fellow and by arguing that property rights and self-interest are essential spurs to economic

progress. Cooper also answers the charge that landowners are a part of a "parasitical" class. Cooper sees capitalist landowners as entrepreneurs, members of the productive class--just like the farmers who rent the land--who are therefore deserving of commensurate reward for their labors. Littlepage argues the point to Jason Newcome (who definitely is a member of the parasitic class): "not one dollar of rent has ever yet left the settlement, to go into the pocket of the owner of the estate." The required investments, in fact, had been made for three generations; Littlepage reminds Newcome that "the direct outlays of my grandfather were considerable, in addition to the first cost of the patent" (Chainbearer 296). In fact, Littlepage has just arrived at the point where the patent might begin to turn a profit:

In our case, not a shilling had we, as yet, been benefitted by the property of Ravensnest. All that had ever been received, and more too, had been expended on the spot; but a time had now arrived when it was just and reasonable that the farms should make some returns for all our cares and outlays. (Chainbearer 317)

As critic John P. McWilliams points out, the landlords assumed serious risks from Indians, invested their own money heavily, and granted generous terms to leaseholders--and thus felt justified in specifying "any terms of leasehold on legally deeded property" (314).

Littlepage is a spokesman for a number of other conservative ideas, including ones about Franklinesque

industry and the availability of land. At one point he says, "Land is so plenty in tis country, no man need go without a legal interest in his hundred acres, provided he be only sober and industrious" (Chainbearer 370). (These are ironic words, of course, from a man whose family has secured thousands of acres and thus demonstrated just how quickly the open lands could be gobbled up.) Through Littlepage, Cooper also censures the materialism he sees rampant among even the "religious" people of his settlement, echoing the criticisms of Washington Irving and various Puritan preachers before him: "This mingling of God and Mammon is by no means an uncommon thing among us, though the squatters would probably have admitted themselves that they had fallen a little away, and were by no means as good as their forefathers had once been" (Chainbearer 377).

Littlepage has two primary foils in the novel, Jason Newcome and Aaron Thousandacres, both of whom seek to subvert Littlepage's right and ability to make legitimate profits from his extensive patent, Ravensnest. Newcome's name is obviously symbolic:

Newcome is the representative new man because he cites natural rights, individual freedom, and the equality of man under the law as arguments to gain the legal power with which these concepts can be subverted He preaches that each man has a natural right to whatever amount of his neighbor's property will make the two equal in wealth as in law. (McWilliams 322-23)

Newcome, who has a supervisory position on the patent, abuses his authority in various ways. For example, he

manipulates the principle of majority rule to have a congregational (Puritan) church built, even though only a minority of the renters are congregationalists. He also spreads discontent among renters with insidious attacks on the justice of the leasehold system. Newcome, for all his piety and talk of justice, turns out to be a hypocritical, underhanded rascal when he is observed buying cut-rate timber logged illegally by the squatter Thousandacres. Newcome thus joins the class of American parasites, using the property and productivity of others to enrich himself.

The squatter Aaron Thousandacres, though another member of the parasitic class, is a more sympathetic and interesting character. He has many of the same qualities of Natty Bumppo, including a fierce independence and belief that the bounty of the wilderness should be available to any willing to put out the effort to grasp it. He is, according to Donald Ringe, the "apostle of unrestrained democracy" (99).

Thousandacre reasons that unoccupied lands should become the property of whoever occupies them. Thus an absentee landlord who owns thousands of acres of unoccupied wilderness would forfeit his property right to the squatter who actually occupies and works the land. He even can refer to an unquestionable authority to back his claims, since the Bible says that all descendants of Adam are entitled to have dominion over the earth. When asked how much land a man

should be entitled to, he answers, "Each man would take as much as necessary for his wants . . . and hold as much as he possessed" (Chainbearer 388). In a nicely ironic twist, Thousandacres sees himself as a champion of the self-made man, a member of the productive class justly seeking commensurate reward for his labor, saying, "It's high time honest labour met with its reward," and "What a man sweats for he has a right to" (Chainbearer 345, 349).

Thousandacres, however, advocates a brand of democracy that would soon descend into anarchy if widely followed, as is obvious when he makes statements like "If there warn't no claims and chainbearers, there could be no surveyors; and, if there warn't no surveyors, there could be no boundaries to farms but the rifle; which is the best law-maker, too, that man ever invented" (Chainbearer 345).

One critic points out that any arguments Littlepage makes against Thousandacres, Thousandacres can write off as being motivated by self-interest. But Thousandacres is also opposed by the plain, honest, property-less chainbearer, Andries Coejemans, who cannot be accused of self-interest as he defends property rights (McWilliams 321). The ultimate destructiveness of Thousandacre's point of view is concretely evidenced when both he and the chainbearer are fatally shot at the novel's climax.

Juxtaposed against the tragedy resulting from Thousandacre's extreme individualism is Cooper's final

affirmation of legitimate egalitarianism manifested in the affluent Littlepage's marriage to the property-less Dus Malbone, niece of the chainbearer and a chainbearer herself. In fact Dus is another early presentation (continuing characterizations in Franklin and Brown) of a productive, intelligent woman who can stand shoulder to shoulder with men in the working world. When Littlepage evidences surprise at finding Dus herself bearing the chains for the surveyors, she responds,

why should you look upon that little toil as so shocking, when it is healthful and honest? . . . women can perform it; and, as uncle Chainbearer will tell you, perform it well It is not so easy to say what is the proper sphere of a woman. (Chainbearer 312)

Dus goes on to admit that, in general, women might belong in the home, but there is a place for an active, intelligent woman in the work force when the choice is between "beggary or exertion" (Chainbearer 312).

By the end of The Chainbearer, people's moral choices have pretty much played out in a "just deserts" pattern. Thousandacres has died violently, as was predetermined by his anarchic philosophy. Jason Newcome dies poor and in debt, a fitting end for a man too ready to exploit anyone--landowners, renters, and squatters--for his own selfish purposes. In a meritocracy-in-miniature, Littlepage has rejected more affluent matches for the beautiful and capable chainbearer, Dus Malbone. The only exception to the rule of poetic justice is the Chainbearer himself, Andries

Coejemans, the selfless spokesman for industry and property and proof that men of integrity come from all classes.

Coejemans is shot by a member of the Thousandacres clan, and his death illustrates the danger of their lawlessness; he does, however, pass away in a peaceful, Christian manner.

The Crater (1847), completed immediately after the Littlepage trilogy and Cooper's penultimate novel, is a utopian vision of the productive man in conflict with nature and with the parasitic forces that tend to undermine a society based on law and property. Using the scenario of the castaways forming their own society on a deserted island, Cooper can describe a budding capitalistic meritocracy at its formation, its growth into prosperity, and its decline into factionalism and parasitism. Using this island microcosm, Cooper is able to critique the American experience, modeling his island colony especially after the experience of the New England colonists.

The protagonist of the novel is the young, intelligent, capable sailor, Mark Woolston. His qualities quickly enable him to advance from being a seaman to being an officer: "In that day there was a scarcity of officers in America, and a young man of Mark's advantages, physical and moral, was certain to get on rapidly, provided he only behaved well" (Crater 11). On a voyage through the Pacific, Woolston spots a dangerous reef and gives the warning. The drunk and reckless captain, however, proceeds on and strikes the reef.

This precipitates a series of unfortunate accidents which leaves Woolston and one older sailor, Bob Betts, stranded on an island of bare rock--although they do have access to the ship and its stores, which they saved intact. The ingenious sailors use guano and seaweed for soil in which to grow fruits and vegetables from the ship's store of seed.

With this premise, Cooper is ready to establish his ideal society. This society's foundation is a devout faith in God which supplements their own hard work, as the narrator explains:

The Sabbath ever dawns on the piously-inclined with hope and a devout gratitude to the Creator for all His mercies. This is more apt to be the case in genial seasons, and rural abodes, perhaps, than amidst the haunts of men Still greater is the influence of absolute solitude, and that increased by the knowledge of a direct and visible dependence on the Providence of God for the means of even prolonging existence. In the world, men lose sight of this dependence, fancying themselves and their powers of more account than the truth would warrant, and even forgetting whence these very boasted powers are derived; but man, when alone, and in critical circumstances, is made to feel that he is not sufficient for his own wants, and turns with humility and hope to the divine hand that upholds him. (Crater 50)

The narrator's statement is obviously indebted to the experience of the New England colonists. Note that the stranded sailors do not use belief in Providence as an excuse to sit around, eat the ship's salt pork, and wait for rescue. These men are by nature productive, they fear scurvy, and they believe that God wants them to be industrious, as is evidenced when they eat their first fresh

melons: "Mark had the gratification of tasting some of the bounties of Providence, which had been bestowed as a reward of his own industry and forethought" (Crater 62).

The two men are finally able to build a smaller, manageable craft in which they re-establish contact with the outside world. On the way, they discover a larger, more inhabitable but totally deserted island that they begin to colonize with family and friends. The capable and intelligent Woolston is the colony's leader, of course, which is fine with the colonists:

In our island community, most of its citizens were accustomed to think that education and practice gave man certain claims to control Happily they were as yet far, very far, from that favorite sophism of the day, which would teach the unexperienced to fancy it an advantage to a legislator to commence his career as low as possible on the scale of ignorance, in order that he might be what it is the fashion to term "a self-made man!" (Crater 120)

In this sequence, which parallels the speech of the Captain in Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry when the mob wanted to make the ignorant Teague a state legislator, Cooper illustrates the conservative version of the rise of the "natural aristoi." Woolston, who began as a common seaman, has what it takes to head the ruling elite:

The governor [Woolston] now seldom ate with his people. He knew enough of human nature to understand that authority was best preserved by avoiding familiarity. Besides, there is, in truth, no association more unpleasant to those whose manners have been cultivated, than that of the table with the rude and unrefined. (Crater 148)

This defense of class stratification sounds almost like parody, but Cooper's criticism may have been provoked by excesses he witnessed during the Jackson administration, such as the inauguration fiasco where mobs nearly tore the White House apart (Remini 16-17).

Now-governor Woolston consequently begins to formulate the patterns by which the island could be governed. He quickly discards ideas of any sort of communal property and government:

Mark Woolston was much too sensible a man to fall into any of the modern absurdities on the subject of equality and a community of interests He was of the opinion that civilization could not exist without property, or property without a direct personal interest in both its accumulation and its preservation. (Crater 161-62)

Woolston reasoned that the attempt to force people into a community of labor and interests would result in "more restraints" and "less liberty," noting that "of all sophisms, that is the broadest which supposes personal liberty is extended by increasing the power of the community" (Crater 162).

Having rejected communism, Mark attempts to articulate the principles upon which his new colonial government would be founded. The best government, he decides,

should be of a character to encourage and not depress exertion. So long as a man toiled for himself and those nearest and dearest to him, society had a security for his doing much that would be wanting were the proceeds of the entire community were to be shared in common; and, on the knowledge of this simple and obvious truth, did our young legislator found his theory of

government. Protect all rights equally, but, that done, let every man pursue his road to happiness in his own way; conceding no more of his natural rights than were necessary to the great ends of peace, security, and law. (Crater 174)

Woolston's governmental principles are, of course, basically the same as those of the Founding Fathers, who envisioned a national government strong enough to meet the "great ends of peace, security, and law" but which would otherwise leave most matters to the states or the people themselves.

Governor Woolston's policies turn out to be a resounding success. The colonists are first given lots, by lottery, and then they are left to their own industry:

Then, indeed, were the results of the property-system made directly apparent. No sooner was an individual put in possession of his deed, and told that the lot it represented was absolutely his own, to do what he pleased with it, than he went to work with energy and filled with hopes, to turn his new domains to account . . . experience proves that each individual usually takes the best care of his own interests, and that the system is wisest which grants him complete opportunity to do so. (Crater 178)

This account mirrors Governor William Bradford's account of the colonists at Plymouth being assigned their own parcels of land, which "had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious" (Bradford 120).

Woolston disallows slavery--not from his Christian morality, but from his commitment to industriousness and productivity. After the colony was established, some of the colonists wanted to take nearby natives as slaves, but the governor would not let them:

The governor knew well that the usefulness, virtue, and moral condition of his people, depended on their being employed, and he had no wish to undermine the permanent prosperity of the colony, by resorting to an expedient that might do well enough for a short time, but which would certainly bring its own punishment in the end. (Crater 181)

Through Woolston, Cooper condemns slavery as a dangerous practice from a very utilitarian standpoint--since allowing it would engender a parasitic class of slaveowners that would lack "usefulness."

For all his emphasis on the benefits of self-interest as a spur to productivity, and despite having created characters that touted private property as the basis of civilization, Cooper was never naive enough to believe that the pursuit of wealth even through legitimate business enterprises ("trade") engendered morality for any of the participants. In fact, Cooper, like his Puritan forbearers, knew that an obsession with accruing wealth, through any means, was immoral. The nameless narrator of The Crater says, "Trade, perhaps the most corrupt and corrupting influence of life . . . is proclaimed to be the great means of humanizing, enlightening, liberalizing, and improving the human race"--but the Christian church alone can "give the world that liberty and happiness which a grasping spirit of cupidity is so ready to impute to the desire to accumulate gold!" (Crater 190).

Thus as the colony begins to prosper, it is therein threatened. The narrator laments that the colonists, like

many second-generation Puritans, begin to devote their fervor to money rather than God:

As the man who lives only to accumulate is certain to have all his nobler and better feelings blunted by the grasping of cupidity, and to lose sight of the great objects of his existence, so do whole communities degenerate into masses of corruption, venality, and cupidity, when they set up the idol of commerce to worship in lieu of the ever-living God. (Crater 207)

The original colonists, Mark Woolston and Bob Betts, retained their piety throughout their rise to power and affluence. Other colonists did not; "the tendency . . . was to place self before God, and not only to believe that they merited all they received, but that they actually created a good share of it" (Crater 230).

The island colony's prosperity undermines not only the colonists' piety and morality but also their equanimity and work ethic. Religious factions spring up when clergymen of various denominations are introduced. A rash of lawsuits initiated for purposes of "speculation and revenge" occurs when lawyers are introduced. A newly begun newspaper stirs up the people to pressure the government into unfair seizures of private property and the redistribution of land, and even before Woolston, Betts, and families leave to re-visit America, proceedings to seize their lands have begun (Crater 241). Thus bringing down the colony are the traditional parasitic groups--lawyers, slaveowners, spineless politicians, hypocritical clergymen--and to this

list Cooper adds the perilous purveyors of the popular press, the editors of The Crater Truth-Teller.

When Woolston returns from America, there is nothing left of the island; it and its inhabitants have sunk beneath the sea during a volcanic eruption. But the natural cataclysm is merely God's instrument in destroying the backslidden colonists, and the narrator concludes,

Let those who would substitute the voice of the created for that of the Creator, who shout 'the people, the people,' instead of hymning the praises of their God, who vainly imagine that the masses are sufficient for all things, remember their insignificance and tremble. (Crater 246)

Cooper's works clearly continue dialogue on whether America is truly a place where the individual can look forward to enjoying rewards commensurate with his or her productivity. His answer of course, is yes, and that capitalist landowners are also productive and legitimately deserve the rewards of whatever rents their lands will produce. In fact, one can see how Cooper heightened the productive nature of the landowners studied in these three novels. Cooper's earliest landowner, Judge Temple, is demonstrated to be a moral man with a legitimate claim to his property, but we never really see him doing any labor (when he does shoot at a deer in the novel's opening scene, he misses). Mordaunt Littlepage, in contrast, actually participates in the survey and development of his wilderness patent, and he discusses the capital investments and lack of

return involving the property. Mark Woolston is the most active of the three as he wrests a living from bare rock.

Cooper's affirmation of the legitimacy of property rights, individual effort, and the rule of law are coupled with a warning. If Americans decide to take the easy way, trying to appropriate the productivity of others through lawsuits, slavery, the remission of rent, or the redistribution of land, then anarchy and destruction will be the inevitable results. His answer to the pressing problems of the Jacksonian period is, ultimately, a simple one: a laissez-faire policy toward the capitalist, which will, in the long run, ensure an increase in productivity and opportunities for all honest, hard-working individuals. So Cooper affirms the conservative vision of American economics and society. Other period writers, such as Charles Frederic Briggs, were not so optimistic about the promise of unrestrained capitalism.

Charles Frederic Briggs's Darkening Vision of the American Dream

Journalist, magazine editor, and novelist Charles Frederic Briggs (1804-1877) is an interesting foil to his near-contemporary James Fenimore Cooper. Both men affirm the idea of the individual working hard to secure his place in the American economic system, but there are notable differences in their approach to this theme. The conservative Cooper, as noted in the previous chapter, held

that men of ability will form a "natural aristocracy" that will justly and inevitably differentiate itself from the common people. He also argued that men of capital are productive and should be entitled to retain and profit from whatever property they can legitimately accrue. Although Briggs also is interested in the self-made man, he is less optimistic about the monied class in America and more sensitive to the plight of the "permanent underclass" who struggle in vain to achieve prosperity, no matter how honest and hard-working they are.

In this chapter, we will examine three of Briggs's novels, The Adventures of Harry Franco (1839), Working a Passage (1846), and The Trippings of Tom Pepper (1847), in order to show how, in Briggs's view, America was becoming a place where it was much harder for the penniless but productive individual to make a living, and, conversely, where the monied class tended to be ever more callous towards the plight of the poor. In addition to these two major concerns are these corollary ideas: that many Americans were tending to become unhealthily obsessed with ostentatious wealth and that socio-economic stratification had made urban centers shabby and dangerous places where the poor had little hope for productive lives.

According to scholar Bette Wiedman, Briggs had two main interests in writing The Adventures of Harry Franco (1839): "realistic, detailed descriptions of city scenes; and

satirical caricatures of the confidence men who repeatedly dupe Harry" (Briggs, Adventures 1: v). Wiedman also states that "Briggs's purpose was to emphasize the failure of mere honesty and effort to succeed in 'democratic' America" (1: ix). If Wiedman's second insight is correct, then Briggs's novel is an attack on the very heart of the American economic dream, the idea that the productive individual is guaranteed commensurate reward in America. In this first of Briggs's novels, about a destitute young man's rise in fortunes, such radical indictments appear only intermittently. Nevertheless, the rise of Harry Franco is accompanied by some disturbing commentary on the economic environment of the time.

Briggs signals at the novel's beginning that one conflict will concern aristocratic impulses versus American individualism and its meritocratic foundation. Harry, who narrates his own story, immediately announces,

It is a generally received opinion in some parts of the world, that a man must of necessity have had ancestors; but, in our truly independent country, we contrive to get along very well without them. That strange race, called Aristocrats, it is said, consider every body a nobody, unless they can boast of at least a dozen ancestors. . . . But in this blessed country, as is known to all the world, men rest their claims to notice on their own merits . . . we neither hold ourselves accountable for the vices, nor take credit to ourselves for the virtues of our ancestors. (Adventures 1: 1-2)

The Adventures of Harry Franco affirms the principles of individuality and commensurate reward that have pervaded

American literature since its beginnings, but it also follows the tradition established by Crèvecoeur and others of critiquing the excesses and failures that are, apparently, increasingly plaguing the American system.

When Harry begins his narrative, he is, in Franklinesque tradition, practically destitute. His grandfather, indeed, had wealth but left it all to an uncle. His father was largely ruined due to the embargo during the War of 1812 and lost the remnants of his money "in a legal contest with a stubborn lawyer" (Adventures 1: 5). Thus Harry is left without the crutch of a patrimony.

In this expository section Harry also establishes his nemesis, a snooty cousin who is wealthy without ever having worked for it--a "proud, overbearing boy" who loses no occasion to ridicule Harry's lowly circumstances. In response, Harry feels "desires and aspirations" springing up in him that nearly drive him mad (Adventures 1: 10). Harry's reaction to his cousin's taunts show that, even though Horatio Alger was yet to write his first tale, boys in Briggs's day were already steeped in the American rags-to-riches tradition:

. . . the dreadful words of my cousin grew more and more indistinct, and in their place came thronging into my brain the many wonderful stories I had read, of good luck befalling the poor and friendless; of great men having taken a fancy to adventurous boys, who had left their homes with nothing but a wallet and a mother's blessing; and of their making their fortunes, and returning with their pockets lined with gold. . . . I resolved at once, that I would set out in quest of a

fortune myself, and trust to that friendly divinity for aid, who had conferred favors on others no better entitled to them than myself. (Adventures 1: 11-12)

Harry, like Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn, demonstrates an unfortunate tendency to believe that wealth can be instantly realized through a benefactor or some other divine aid, and the impulse will occasion some trouble for the naive young man.

This tendency is seen again when he departs for New York to make his fortune. His parents have counseled him to become a clerk in a counting house, this being "one of the genteelest avenues which led up to the temple of the fickle goddess," but Harry makes the mental reservation "that fortune should not be rejected, let her approach in what guise she might, but particularly if in the shape of a young and beautiful heiress" (Adventures 1: 13).

Thus Briggs creates a character motivated to work hard but also ready to jump at any chance for an instant fortune. His work ethic is seen when, on his way to New York, Harry vows "never to despair, nor to slacken in my exertions, until I had attained to wealth and fame, and proved my haughty cousin a liar" (Adventures 1: 33). On the other hand, once he gets to the city, he is immediately duped into engaging in a fruitless speculation, purchasing a locked chest at an auction. The auctioneer claims, "Any gentleman as wants to make an operation, has now a beautiful opportunity to make four or five hundred dollars, by

purchasing this splendid article" (Adventures 1: 48). Harry decides to invest: "The demon of avarice whispered in my ear that now was my time to turn a penny, and I resolved to bid for the casket, and so lay the foundation of my fortune" (Adventures 1: 48). Briggs gets a lot of comic mileage from the scene, since Harry becomes so convinced of the treasures inside the chest that he keeps upping his own bid, even though no one else is naive enough to bid at all. In the end, he gets the chest for fifty dollars--practically all the money he has. The contents of the chest, of course, turn out to be a few worthless trinkets. The scene thus turns out to be a parable about the danger of seeking wealth without work.

Harry's lesson in duplicity is reinforced when the feigned friendship of Mr. Lummucks turns out to be an attempt to drum up business for a cloth wholesaler. Harry's reaction shows just how far his naivete has been eroded:

I thought it was well, perhaps, that I had met, at the very outset of life, with such an instance of hollow heartedness and deceit, as it would warn me forever after to be on my guard in my intercourse with strangers, and not to put too much dependance upon their professions of friendship, until I had an opportunity for testing their motives.
(Adventures 1: 77)

Through the episode of the chest and the exposure of Lummocks Briggs is picturing a world where capitalism converges with greed to create a world of commerce where every person is out to get as much as he can for himself,

even if traditional values like honesty and friendship have to be sacrificed in the process.

But these episodes are mere preliminaries; Briggs can show that such attitudes pervade business at every level, from the lowest cons and frauds to men in the highest financial circles. Harry's first acquaintance with a "high roller" occurs when he meets D. Wellington Worhoss, one of the novel's clearest examples of the parasitical class which generates instantaneous wealth apparently out of nothing. In this case, Worhoss is a land speculator, and the fortunes speculators accrue--if they can hold on to them--are ultimately derived from other, less fortunate speculators/investors and from government money.

Worhoss, an unapologetic spokesman for untrammelled greed, tells Harry, "Society, you must know, that is, the civilized world, have agreed that a few of their number shall live in ease and elegance, while the many shall work and sweat like slaves" (Adventures 1: 101). To the charge that he is a member of an oligarchical tyranny, he responds,

Tyranny is an unrighteous exercise of power over those who are incapable of resistance. If seven eighths of mankind choose to endure all manner of privations, that the remaining eighth may enjoy all manner of comforts, you may call it infatuation, but call it not tyranny. (Adventures 1: 102)

Worhoss, and later Mr. Dooitt and Mr. Garvey, represents capitalism unfettered from the traditional (largely Puritan) moral and religious restraints which include ideas that

wealth should not be used for selfish, ostentatious living but instead be used to relieve the distress of the poor.

Throughout the novel, Briggs juxtaposes men like Worhoss with men of more egalitarian views. One example is a nameless fireman who risks the wrath of his peers with this diatribe against hypocrisy and slavery:

we pronounce our own condemnation by making laws which we have not the virtues to observe. It is just the way with us as a nation; our fathers were willing to stake their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honors, to maintain the assertion that all men are born free and equal, while at the same time they held one quarter part of the population of their country in bondage.
(Adventures 1: 122)

The leader of the firemen turns the fireman out for "talking abolition" (Adventures 1: 122).

Hard up for money, Harry decides to try for a legitimate job, as a clerk in a mercantile operation, as his parents had suggested. He seems, finally, to be on the right track, since productive labor is the traditional guarantor of success in the American system, and the still-available frontier land should ensure a chronic labor shortage. But by the time Briggs writes this novel, the days of chronic labor shortages in the cities seem to be over. The young, intelligent, educated Harry feels confident he can readily secure a position, and he sees an opening posted with the (ominously named) firm Stripes & Co.--but Mr. Stripes rejects him on the spot, having already had 683 other applicants and chosen one: "we have engaged a

young man who is to come in the morning," he says. "He is to have nothing for his services the first year, and the empty boxes the second" (Adventures 1: 151). So much for the labor shortage.

Briggs, anticipating the premise of his later novel, Working a Passage, has Harry, desperate for money, attach himself to a ship. There he is under the command of Lt. Wallop, a man obsessed with cleanliness and piety and ready, as his name signals, to flog men nearly to death for minor infractions. Wallop is eventually replaced by Mr. Futtucks, "a good sailor and a strict disciplinarian; under his command the duty of the ship was well performed; the crew were cheerful and obedient, and the cat was dispensed with" (Adventures 1: 266). Futtucks makes a notable statement on how the navy is being run by incompetent officers who used wealth or influence to secure appointments when better-qualified seamen were overlooked:

it eats into my happiness, like salt water on a gilt button, to think that a set of broad-shouldered, strong-fisted, stout-hearted, clear-headed, and free-thoughted, fine fellows, should be at the mercy of a third rate lawyer or a second rate hack novelist--fellows that don't know a cat-head from a cat-harping. (Adventures 1: 269-70)

The ship is, as usual, a microcosm for society, and passages like these are the clearest indicator that Briggs is worried that the traditional foundation for American society, the idea that aristocracies have been rejected in favor of a

meritocracy where men of ability will rise to positions of leadership, is crumbling.

Back on land, Briggs continues his portrait of just what kinds of men are rising, namely Mr. Worhoss and Mr. Dooitt. Worhoss encourages Harry to buy lots in the proposed city of Gowannus, "at the very moderate price of one thousand dollars each; and he assured me if I kept them only one week, I might sell them again for double that sum" (Adventures 2: 17). This, of course, is the same con Harry fell for in the auction scene with the chest, only on a bigger scale, and he falls for it again: "I considered myself already worth a fortune. All my highest wishes were about to be gratified, and more than I had dared to hope for would be realized . . . fortune had now, for a certainty, taken me under her special charge" (Adventures 2: 20). Briggs is again noting the allure of get-rich-quick schemes to those who hesitate to merely depend on hard work to achieve success. He also is exposing how shallow and trivialized the Puritan notion of a Providential calling has become, with Harry's hopes pinned to a vague notion of a beneficent "fortune" which will inevitably smile on him, a young man of integrity and potential.

Harry reaches the nadir of his fortunes in dealing with the treacherous speculator Mr. Dooitt, Briggs's most ironic version of the modern "self-made man." Mr. Dooitt brags that only eight months before he had "a small business in

the hook and eye trade," but now he is worth millions: "But mind you, I don't want it to be known . . . they would make me pay a heap of taxes if they knew how rich I am." Perhaps the tax agents should have looked at his "equipage," which "spoke his immense riches" (Adventures 2: 22-23). Mr. Dooitt introduces Harry to a whole set of entrepreneurs who share Dooitt's values:

I became acquainted with a good many genteel young men, and a good many lucky speculators in lots--noble, whole souled fellows, who spared no expense in promoting their own pleasures, but who were quite indifferent about the happiness of others. (Adventures 2: 33)

The description of these "noble, whole souled fellows" oozes with irony. Gone completely from this economic world are ideas that men should pursue a calling for the good of the community in addition to their own profit and that wealth should be spent on charity rather than ostentatious self-indulgence. These speculators are selfish, dishonest leeches. The leech-like nature of the speculators is revealed beyond any doubt when Mr. Dooitt cons Harry out of the thousand dollars he had been given by his shipmates. Without the money, Harry is flat broke; he pawns his vest for a bowl of beans.

The best action in Harry Franco is the shipboard confrontation with Lt. Wallop, but the emotional core of the novel is the scenes where Harry experiences first-hand the squalor of the new urban underclass in America. The sequence is introduced when Harry, eating in the beanery,

meets a destitute poet who launches a harangue against the "money-making wretches," saying "They toil for silver, I work for fame. They revel in ignominious wealth, I eat my crust with the Muses. Wealth is aristocratic; genius is democratic" (Adventures 2: 55). The poet is, of course, making the radical insinuation that America is no longer the place where people of ability can get ahead; instead, a new, useless aristocracy has sprung up which is usurping the productivity of others.

Harry then ventures into the mean streets, giving this panoramic view of the city's underclass:

A poor seamstress, but slenderly protected from the cold wind by a thin shawl, might be seen here and there, hurrying to her daily task. Little barefooted boys were crying out, "here's the Sun," in shrill piping voices, while their teeth chattered together, and their faces were blue with cold. (Adventures 2: 60)

Seamstresses and paperboys, though pitiable, at least have something to do; the scene degenerates further as Harry winds his way to the city's heart of darkness:

I had unconsciously strayed into a wretched street, the houses of which on either side were disgustingly mean and filthy in their appearance. Vile looking women, negroes, and squalid children, hogs, and all manner of unclean things, were seen all around; and oaths, and lewd talk, and boisterous revelry, without mirth, were heard proceeding from the cellars and shop doors. . . While I was looking around me at the squalid misery on every side, which appeared a thousand times more hideous from its evident association with the most degrading vice, a little bare-headed and bare-footed child asked me for a penny, in a voice so weak and feeble, that it smote upon my heart. (Adventures 2: 62)

After the street scenes, Briggs, like a skillful movie director, zooms in to a close-up interior shot, as the beggar child leads Harry to its mother:

Into one of these hovels I was led by the child. In a low room, destitute of every convenience, was a bed, on which lay a middle aged woman, covered over with a few miserable rags. Two children, smaller than the one that had led me in, were nestling over a few expiring embers; they were almost naked, and their pale and emaciated faces showed too plainly how severely the little innocents had suffered for the want of wholesome food. I could hardly believe that there were human beings living, or rather dying, in such a condition, in the very centre of this great and wealthy city. (Adventures 2: 63)

This scene almost matches in power the scene created a few years later by Melville in Redburn where the title character helplessly watches a mother and her children starve to death in the great city of Liverpool--and both seem to be written for the same purpose, to show that a capitalism unchecked by spiritual or charitable impulses creates unthinkable disparities between the rich and poor that most fiction readers (almost by definition in the affluent class) would rather not consider. The connection between Harry Franco and Redburn has been long since noted, of course; Perry Miller, in The Raven and the Whale, demonstrated that a number of similar scenes exist in the two novels, and that on a deeper level both share a ferocious "cry against poverty" (Miller, Raven 55-57).

Briggs, unlike Melville, does not leave the wretched family without efficacious succor. Instead, he introduces a

new character, Georgiana De Lancey, who, though wealthy, retains the qualities of compassion and charity that the Puritans so valued, and she comes to provide the family with food and care.

At this point in the novel, Harry's fortunes begin to brighten. An old shipmate gives him a little money, and he makes some "prudent resolutions" to live as cheaply as possible and secure some position:

I determined to let no opportunity pass of gaining employment, though it were in ever so humble a capacity. I had waited upon Fortune long enough to find that I was not one of her favorites, and now I meant to depend solely upon my own exertions. (Adventures 2: 91)

He subsequently applies for a clerk's position which "required nothing so much as industry and punctuality," but which "would afford me an opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of mercantile affairs, and fit me for some more important station" (Adventures 2: 96-97). When he is given the position, he works diligently. And even though the work is rather dull, copying mercantile letters, he does begin to learn the business. This turn of events undercuts, to some degree, the attacks of the previous sections in which Harry could not find work or the poor were struggling just to survive.

The most interesting character in the firm of Mr. Marisett is Mr. Garvey. He buys and sells for the firm, and he seems to be the consummate capitalist in Weber's

conception, since he lives to make profits but is utterly austere in his personal expenditures:

What man could suspect another of mercenary or knavish feelings, who wore horn buttons on his drab coat, and called every body by their first names. Mr. Garvey was Philadelphian by birth, and he had a becoming contempt for the vain things of this world; there was no affectation in his plain coat, nor hypocrisy in his sentiments. The achievements of art, the revolutions of fashion, and even the gay trappings of nature herself, had no allurements for him. Mr. Garvey cared nothing for worldly trifles; his sole aim was to make money. (Adventures 2: 103-04)

Beyond the obvious irony of the last sentence in this description, this passage is quite subtle, since the extent of Garvey's hypocrisy is only revealed much later. Garvey, unlike Worhoss and Dooitt, eschews the shallow show of wealth, but his links with those parasitical rascals becomes clear in the novel's final sections. Sure, he engages in legitimate profit-taking: "If he sold an article, he got more for it than anyone else could, and in his purchases, he always bought a little under market" (Adventures 2: 103). But, Harry learns, Garvey will lie to customers if it means extra profits for the firm (Adventures 2: 106-08). And ultimately Briggs reveals that Garvey is using the firm's credit to venture into private land speculations; when the bust hits, he brings the firm to ruin. Thus his parasitical nature is revealed, and Briggs makes another contribution to the literary catalogue of religious hypocrites who ultimately love mammon more than God.

From this point, Harry continues his Franklinesque rise, while the novel follows some romantic conventions. Harry, having secured his employer's approbation, is even invited to move in as Mr. Marisett's private secretary. He falls in love with another resident of the house, the beautiful and compassionate Georgiana De Lancey, Mr. Marisett's heir, whom he had earlier seen ministering to the poor family. But there are still complications, most of which occasioned by the economic disaster that engenders the novel's denouement. Briggs successfully recreates the panic and despair associated with a market crash through a series of crises. For example, Harry is stabbed by an unknown assailant (his once-snooty and now insanelly jealous cousin, now falling into financial ruin), and Mr. Marisett's firm goes bankrupt (when they fail to corner the cotton market and Mr. Garvey is revealed as having embezzled most of the firm's assets). When Harry, in the midst of the panic, seeks advice from a friend of Mr. Marisett, he encounters "wailing and wo" at the house; the friend had, "but a few minutes before, nearly severed his head from his body with a razor, and his gory corpse lay stretched upon the floor, with his distracted children weeping over him" (Adventures 2: 293).

Harry has hesitated to woo Georgiana De Lancey because of the obvious social gap between them. However, the collapse of Marisett's business levels their social

condition, and Harry's religious conversion completes his suitability as a match for Georgiana. Toward the novel's conclusion, despite the reverses, romantic improbabilities snowball in Harry's favor. For example, he learns that his father has become rich when his garden is laid out for building plots, while his snooty cousin has completely failed and committed suicide. And finally, searching for Georgiana, Harry is shipwrecked, but he manages to make it to shore, where he is revived by Georgiana herself.

The Adventures of Harry Franco, then, despite some biting social criticism, turns out to be another affirmation of the American economic dream, with the intelligent, hard-working hero ultimately proving his worth and productivity and finding commensurate reward. Most of the criticism is directed at conventional targets, especially the ostentatious, dishonest, nonproductive rich (in this novel, land speculators) who ignore the plight of the poor. Only in the shipboard scenes does Briggs present a society where the truly productive men are given little chance to rise and the men on top tend to be brutal and incompetent, and only in the encounter with the poverty-stricken family does Briggs show the monstrous possibilities of capitalism unchecked by any higher impulses.

Briggs's Working a Passage (1846) is another exploration of the theme of the destitute young man struggling to survive in a harsh economic world. In the

novel, Briggs seems to have picked up on and expanded the radical shipboard scenes in The Adventures of Harry Franco. In both works, Briggs's shipboard societies are basically aristocracies rather than democracies or meritocracies, with the competent, productive sailors occupying the lowest position and callous, unproductive passengers and officers occupying the highest positions. If the shipboard societies are intended to reflect conditions on land in America, Briggs is saying that the American economic dream has been basically lost and that perhaps a reordering of society should be considered. However, despite the radical critique of society implied in the novel, Briggs's most fundamental concern is still a traditional one, championing the able individual and attacking nonproductive elements that, like parasites, feed off the productivity of others.

Briggs begins the novel with an overt defense of individualism and self-sufficiency. The book is intended to instruct young men

who sometimes find themselves suddenly deprived of their accustomed support, and before they become used to standing alone, fall so heavily to the ground, as to be unable ever to rise again. I can conceive of nothing more melancholy, than to see one human being dependent upon another for support, when nature has not deprived him of the lawful means of supporting himself. In one sense, men are all dependent upon each other; and, therefore, whosoever receives anything from his fellow creatures should return an equivalent, or he is not worthy to remain among them. . . .
(Working 1)

Briggs also touts a rather conservative concept of self-interest as leading to a growing economic community with higher standards of living for all:

No man should ever hesitate, either to ask, or receive aid from others, who is conscious of a desire to aid himself. In working for himself, he has worked for others. The most selfish people do a vast deal of good to their neighbors without knowing it. The farmer, who from motives of intense selfishness, tills his ground so that it produces a double crop, lightens the burden of his poorer neighbor, who is in consequence able to buy cheaper bread. (Working 5-6)

In Briggs's view, people who are able to work should be working; the essential problem with society is not capitalism: "Society has nothing to ask of its members, but that each one should be intensely selfish and provide for his own necessities" (Working 6). The true problem with society is the existence of people who are capable of working but instead are dependent upon others, such as the "many young men, both in town and country, [who] have disgracefully resorted to fraud and meanness to save themselves from what they have falsely considered the degradation of labour" (Working 6). With these sentiments Briggs sounds extremely conservative, right in line with writers from Franklin to Cooper.

Briggs then begins his story proper, in which the narrator, a young man from a relatively wealthy family, is sent on a tour of Europe in order to escape an outbreak of cholera. On the voyage he gets sea-sick, his narrow state-room is woefully small, and the meals with stale water and

no fresh vegetables are "a great hardship" (Working 8-10). The ship contains its own social stratifications, with the steerage passengers occupying a much lower position than the cabin passengers. The steerage passengers were packed in "a little hole between decks," and they

doubtless looked upon the passengers in the cabin as enjoying quite a Heaven afloat. But, never having suffered any discomforts myself, I could not feel for those who did, and therefore it never occurred to me that I was enjoying privileges which were denied to others, who were quite as worthy as myself. I have since looked back with amazement when I have thought of the apathy of feeling with which I regarded delicate looking women enduring hardships that I should have considered unbearable in my own case, and wondered that I could not perceive what a favored creature I was. (Working 10)

The narrator's retrospective vision effectively creates a sense that this member of the "aristocracy" is callously indifferent but due for a painful lesson in sensitivity and compassion.

The painful lesson begins when the narrator reaches Paris and learns that his father has died--insolvent. The proposed business partnership he was to take up remains open, but the narrator feels extreme bitterness at suddenly becoming "an object of compassion" (Working 13). He makes it back to Liverpool before his funds are exhausted, and there he is faced with the choice of pawning his watch and returning home as a steerage passenger or working his passage as a raw seaman. He chooses the latter, asking himself, "why should not I work as well as another? was I

composed of more precious material than other men? If not, why should I be exempt from their toils and hardships?"

(Working 14). Thus the narrator's lessons in humility and the value of common labor begin.

The narrator actually makes two attempts to voyage home, the first on the ill-fated Scattergood. On this ship the officers are both selfish and incompetent; the sailors, on the other hand, are generous and good at their work. The ship is literally rotting apart, the incompetent captain had been a tailor six months before, and the mates "were in the habit of indulging in too strong potations of Brandy" (Working 27). When the captain locks himself in his cabin and the mates pass out drunk, the narrator proves his worth by plotting the ship's location and saving it from running aground. In this first voyage, Briggs is perhaps suggesting a worst-case scenario for the American socioeconomic system, where the ruling elite are so dangerously unfit and the productive class so repressed that the ship of state is destined to founder.

At this point there is an interlude in Liverpool while the narrator awaits the departure of another ship. As he did in The Adventures of Harry Franco, Briggs creates realistic and disturbing portraits of the modern city. Liverpool, for all its industry and commerce, is a hideous place:

a suffocating stench of coal smoke pervaded the atmosphere, and everything dripped, dripped,

dripped dismally with rain; the gutters poured out never-failing streams of muddy water, too thick and slow to make a bubble; most of the shops had gas lights burning; and the fish-women, with baskets of herrings upon their heads, as they waded their miserable rounds, seemed too disheartened to cry their scaly commodities. (Working 15)

While in Liverpool he boards with the Petersons, a family so poor that they can only afford to buy a bit of beef for Sunday dinner, and the purchasing and cooking of that luxury is a matter of intense concern. The narrator comments that "It is necessary to eat baked beef and potatoes under such circumstances, to comprehend their merits; and so eaten, they are finer, more digestible and healthier, than any fricandeau that ever came from the hands of a Parisian cook" (Working 36). In a later sequence, he goes to a sailor's dance and meets the innocent, beautiful Bridget Donovan:

And I felt very happy. I knew that I ought not to be,--that I had more cause for grief than merriment,--that I was out of my proper sphere, in a low situation, herding with people in whose company I should not be seen; but could not help it: I never enjoyed myself better. (Working 47)

The narrator has obviously already come a long way in seeing life from the common person's point of view.

Finally the narrator secures a position as seaman on another ship, a luxurious liner bound for New York. If there are any doubts that the first ship was intended as a vehicle for social criticism, there should be none here. Much of the ironic humor is based on establishing links between the shipboard situation and situations on land

involving class distinctions. Take, for example, this description of the hot meals the sailors occasionally received; these meals consisted of

hot mush and molasses . . . very nearly, but not quite so good as that which is given to criminals in our city prison system. I do not mean, by this comparison, to intimate that we were entitled to as good as fare as prisoners, because they are frequently gentlemen, who have been used to better times, and are of course entitled to more consideration than mere sailors, who are generally treated as though they were entitled to nothing but hard work and hard words. (Working 40)

The narrator makes the disturbing discovery that on this ship, too, the "officers, though old sailors, were entirely deficient of judgement" (Working 41). The captain, too, seems ill-suited for his position:

Our captain was a rash, petulant man, without any of the generous roughness of a sailor, but with all his domineering and unfeeling vices. He prided himself on his gentlemanly qualities, having been well educated, and being the son of a rich merchant; he had no sympathy with his crew, and neither appreciated their efforts in times of difficulty, nor understood or cared to alleviate their hardships. (Working 50)

Although they have to return to port for repairs after the foolishness of the mate causes them to have a collision, the captain puts in no extra provisions for the sailors, but "neglected nothing for his own comfort or that of his passengers" (Working 51). Yet the narrator argues that the captain "was as regardless of his own interests as of the welfare of the men under his command, in neglecting to furnish food enough to last the passage" (Working 51-52).

The catalog of mismanagement continues, as the ship makes its slow way across the Atlantic. Soon meat and bread are no longer available for the sailors; they have to subsist on potatoes and salt. Meanwhile, the captain and passengers continue feasting on mutton chops, ham, breads, and omelettes. From circumstances like these, the narrator draws these biting conclusions in the climax of the novel:

The inequalities of civilized life, where one portion of the people are privileged to live without work, and the other portion are doomed to work without living, are more perceptible on ship-board than in any other condition of life. Here are twenty or thirty men, afloat upon the ocean, confined to a space so small they cannot get out of each others' hearing, yet dwelling apart from each other as though they belonged to different worlds, and had no wants in common. At one end of the vessel which contains them live ten men, who are carefully screened from the cold and wet; their hands are soft, their sleep undisturbed, and every good thing which the earth, air or ocean produces is procured for their appetites; they are the superfine of the earth,--gods that have neither care nor duties,--birds in gilt cages, that are not required even to sing in return for the lumps of white sugar that are thrust between the wires. At the other end of the vessel are ten other men, upon whose exertions the lives and fortunes of the other ten depend; these are exposed to every danger; they brave the lightning, their faces are pelted by hail, they are soaked in spray, they toil unceasingly, their food is coarse and scant, their hours of rest uncertain; no kind words are spoken to them; their wishes are never consulted, and they are beaten if they think or dare to act contrary to the will of those whose lives depend upon their exertions. Idlers should be content to be idlers; they should at least allow those who labour to enjoy an equal portion of the fruits of their own industry. (Working 58)

This is radical criticism, striking at the heart of the American economic dream, since it seems to place all men of

wealth in the category of parasites and presents the working classes as truly productive but deprived of commensurate reward for their labors.

The narrator concludes his sermonizing by bringing his focus back to the sea, where the inequities and inegalitarianism are most obvious. He laments that "exclusive and autocratic regulations" are destroying the navy, since seamen are denied by law the opportunity for promotion:

The one ruling motive with Americans in adopting a profession, is the hope of preferment, and where that is denied to them, they cannot be enticed to enter. Our laws, therefore, by denying preferment to the seamen of our navy, let their merits be what they may, deprive Americans of every honorable inducement to serve their country as sailors The poorest boy in the nation may aspire to the highest office in the gift of his countrymen; but if he should enter the navy as a sailor, though he had the spirit of a Decatur, he could never rise a single step beyond the degraded position of a serving man. (Working 61)

As critic John Bryant points out,

Briggs's concern is that the Navy's preferential practices undermine the nation's republican spirit, for honestly ambitious Americans will not enlist because advancement in rank is based purely upon political connections. Moreover, the Navy's needlessly despotic code blatantly disregards democratic principles. (49)

Bryant, I believe, correctly links the specific criticism directed at the Navy with larger criticism involving an undermining of "the nation's republican spirit." The egalitarian ideas underlying Working a Passage could well involve some sort of redistribution of wealth, an idea

rejected by most other writers in this study with the possible exception of Brown. On the other hand, if Briggs is merely arguing for fair wages and fuller economic participation on behalf of sailors, then his ideas are basically in line with figures as conservative as Benjamin Franklin.

The novel's conclusion certainly affirms principles of individualism that are the cornerstone of American economic thought. After his voyage is completed, the narrator says,

I had learned how to rough it with the world, and with the elements,--a lesson that I sadly needed. I had preserved by independence and my integrity, and I had improved my health. . . . Bear in mind, young traveller, when you pine after luxuries that do not happen to be within your reach, that it is possible to endure hard labour and be happy with no other refreshments than potatoes and salt, provided they are honestly earned. (Working 80-81)

Thus, despite criticism of the indifference of the wealthy and their readiness to exploit the poor, Working a Passage ultimately affirms traditional ideas of hard work, individualism, and commensurate reward for the productive laborer.

The last of the Briggs novels I will examine is The Trippings of Tom Pepper (1847). Briggs does not attempt any radically new criticism in this novel, but a brief review of its major themes and plot devices shows a continuing concern about the moral bankruptcy of many wealthy people (and those who aspire to wealth) and the struggle of the poor to survive in harsh economic conditions.

Tom tells his own story in this ostensible autobiography. He is the grandson of a Revolutionary War hero and the apparent scion of an unknown British naval officer. After his mother dies, he is taken in by a Mr. Bassett, who becomes his long-time benefactor. Through Tom, who was raised in the country, Briggs creates a fresh, naive voice with plenty of opportunities for criticism of urban life. When, for example, Bassett asks Tom if he likes the city, Tom surprises him by saying it is dirty and unpleasant; he adds,

I have generally found that people who live in cities entertain extravagant ideas of the splendor and magnificence of their residences, which is owing partly to the common habit of judging the excellence of a thing from its cost, and partly from their ignorance of the beauty and attractions of a country life. (Trippings 1: 27-28)

When Bassett's wife (who suspects Tom is the bastard child of her husband) kicks him out of the house, Bassett arranges for him to live with his bookkeeper, Mr. Dribble. Tom describes Mr. Dribble and his house thusly:

His house was one of a long row, all of which were built precisely alike, in a very genteel street; indeed, the gentility of the neighborhood was so excessive as to be distressing, and the uniformity of the houses and the people that inhabited them, were more distressing than all. . . . Poor Mr. Dribble was probably keeping himself a miserably poor man by an insane attempt to appear more prosperous than he really was. (Trippings 1: 63-64)

A bit later, Tom listens to Mrs. Dribble explain the necessity of saying grace over every meal and then hears her direct her servant to turn away a little girl begging food

for her sick mother (Trippings 1: 65). Briggs obviously has in Tom an effective tool for exposing the hypocrisy of the bourgeois.

Later, due to a series of misunderstandings, Tom finds himself alone and penniless in the city, where he experiences life among the lowly. This leads to his most expanded sermonizing, and clearest articulation of needed social reforms in Briggs's novels:

The love of money is, unquestionably, the root of evil, but the want of it is evil itself. The law should make some distinction between the penniless wretch who robs to satisfy the demands of his appetite, and the wealthy rogue who wrongs his neighbor to satisfy the cravings of avarice. But as to that, the law does make a distinction, and visits the crime of the starving wretch with the hardest punishment. There are certain philanthropic fanatics in the world, who are trying to reorganize society, and so arrange human affairs, that no man shall suffer for the means of living, who may consider life worth preserving. Such a proposition is hooted at by the rich and well-to-do, who denounce it as atheistical and unchristian. (Trippings 1: 128)

Apparently, the "wealthy rogue who wrongs his neighbor to satisfy the cravings of avarice" could be guilty of no crime at all; the usurer, for example, fits neatly into Briggs's description and would rarely face criminal charges (and one figures largely in this novel). Long prison sentences for the theft of money or food, however, even if there were mitigating circumstances, would be so commonplace as to attract no attention whatsoever. Through his narrator, Briggs continues his sermon with a fuller description of the plight of the destitute poor and his proposed reforms:

Society, which has monopolized all the wealth, makes no provision for him [the destitute poor]; the law does not recognize a man in need. . . . A few starve, but a good many steal, and a tenth part of the cost of putting thieves into prison, and the dead into graves, would supply an asylum which would have kept these wretches alive and honest. (Trippings 1: 128-29)

Briggs goes on to propose work houses where anyone could apply for food and shelter, and pay for it with labor, "so that the city shall lose nothing, and the person relieved shall suffer no degradation from eating the bread of the pauper" (Trippings 1: 129).

After these ruminations, Tom attempts to secure a job, which is difficult "not being bred to a trade." He finally secures a position with Mr. Gilson, a "note shaver," whose customers

were obliged to pay whatever interest he had the conscience to charge them; and his conscience being regulated altogether by their supposed necessities and abilities to pay, he used to deduct a rather heavier rate of interest than the law authorized" (Trippings 1: 141-42)

It turns out that Mr. Gilson has a silent partner, a bank president, who provides him the capital with which to carry on the usurious trade. The situation gives Briggs an opportunity to skewer two "parasitical" institutions powerful enough to protect themselves from reform, banking and slavery:

it fortunately happens that every institution which enables people to live out of the labors of others, can always afford to pay for its defense, and therefore there is no danger that any will be abolished while they yield a fair profit to those belonging to them. (Trippings 1: 153)

Gilson has another mark against him--he is a hypocrite, a professedly pious man who shows no real compassion for the poor. "The interest which this gentleman expressed in the welfare of the heathen, considering the slight degree of interest which he took in the welfare of anybody else, was really surprising," Tom notes (Trippings 1: 254).

Later in the novel, Tom confronts Gilson once again, in a final attack upon usury specifically and the parasitical monied class in general, saying,

I look upon usury as one of the greatest curses to society, growing out of our modern institutions; it makes two thirds of the community slaves to the other third; it creates an aristocracy of the most odious character, exempting men from all the responsibilities of labor, and giving them a claim upon the earnings of the poor and needy, more exacting and pitiless than any ever exercised by a despotic monarch. (Trippings 2: 176)

Gilson's response relies on traditional values he twists to his own defense, saying he never takes

anything more in an operation than my customers are willing to pay. . . . It is my business to negotiate notes, and help merchants out of their difficulties when they get in a tight place. It will never do to be too particular in these things; the law, Pepper, is the safest guide to follow; and the law protects me and my calling, which, as St. Paul advises, I endeavor to make sure. This is no more than the christian duty of every good citizen, and as the Lord has blessed me with a large family I must not seem ungrateful for the blessing by neglecting to provide for them. (Trippings 2: 176-77)

Certainly maintaining one's family and contributing to the conversion of the heathen are admirable pursuits, and there is nothing wrong in making a legitimate profit from a

productive business enterprise, but Briggs condemns Gilson because his love for money never translates into real charity for the people of his own city, and because Gilson's "business" is not inherently productive; in fact, it tends to drive desperate people into further ruin.

Gilson's moral malaise seems to be pandemic; almost every member of society Tom encounters, in every station, seems obsessed with money. Even so minor a character as a clergyman about to perform a wedding is seen pulling out an eyeglass to examine the bill the groom has given him to see if it is genuine (Trippings 1: 260). When Tom is taken in by the editor of the Morning Luminary, he is shocked to find that the editor himself fabricates the pieces from his "European correspondents" to save money. The editor explains, "The object of publishing a newspaper, sir, is to make money, and as in all other trades, that course which is the most profitable is the most honorable" (Trippings 2: 35).

Certainly the slimiest of the characters Tom encounters, even lower than Gilson, is the aptly-named Mr. Slopperton, an opulent man currently using his wealth to get himself elected to Congress--to appease his vanity and gain the adulation of the masses. Mr. Slopperton, Tom relates,

had made the very common mistake of thinking that everything could be procured for money, but was wofully disappointed when he attempted to purchase that which he most needed, which was self respect. . . . He would have been perfectly willing to exchange all his wealth for the honest feeling of

self-sufficiency which many a hod-carrier possessed. (Trippings 2: 86)

Mr. Bassett, Tom's mentor, is the obvious exception to the duplicity and ostentatiousness which permeate the society. He espouses Franklinesque values of integrity and hard work. Knowing that "the city is full of . . . fellows, who live on the earnings of honest people," Bassett gives the following advice to Tom: "Do not indulge in schemes, and nurse wild hopes of growing suddenly rich, but make up your mind at once that there is no fortune in store for you but such as you can gain by your own industry and integrity" (Trippings 1: 283; 280). Tom gives this glowing description of Bassett:

He was a man of such upright principles that duty was to him a matter of affection, and he seemed, even in his mere business transactions, to be influenced as much by a feeling of love towards those whom he dealt with, as a desire for gain, and I have heard it said that his customers all regarded him as a personal friend rather than as a jobber with whom they dealt from motives of interest. (Trippings 2: 7)

Bassett is certainly one of Briggs's normative characters. Like the early Puritans, he seems able to walk the razor's edge between being successful in the world and still retaining a genuinely honest and charitable heart.

Tom's education in the proper attitude towards riches is completed just before the novel's conclusion, when he meets a schoolmaster who gives him a vivid lesson in the dangers of being preoccupied with ostentatious wealth. The schoolmaster recounts his life's story, telling how, when he

was a boy, his father had squandered a considerable fortune on a lavish house and then was imprisoned for debt. The father was later released,

but as his debts hung over him like the sword of Damocles, he was prevented from engaging in any business, and having never learned a trade he soon sunk into the despised condition of a broken-down gentleman, and scarcely subsisted by contracting small debts, under false pretenses of one kind or another. . . . (Trippings 2: 223)

The schoolmaster's mother subsequently died a drunk, and the father abandoned his children, never to be seen again. The schoolmaster's well-constructed sub-narrative reinforces Briggs's theme of society's preoccupation with pretentiousness.

The destitute Tom, in the novel's final sequence, falls gravely ill. He is nursed back to health by Sylvia Swayne, a member of the lower classes but beautiful and gentle-hearted; Tom falls in love with her. Also nursing him is his father, a member of the British aristocracy, who turns out to have been a secret benefactor all along, having supplied Bassett at times with money for Tom. Captain St. Hugh, Tom's aristocratic father, acquiesces when Tom decides to wed the working-class Sylvia; St. Hugh says,

I would prefer that you should marry a woman in a different sphere of life; but as the chief end of marriage is happiness, I would have you to marry a woman you can love, and, in the end, it will matter little who her connexions are. (Trippings 2: 287)

It turns out that Tom, not being a legitimate heir to the Captain, cannot inherit his English estate, but the Captain

does have enough American money for them to live comfortably. The Captain, member of the aristocracy though he is, ends the book with this bit of egalitarian advice for Tom: "Honors will come upon you thick enough, and time enough, if you deserve them, and if you should get them without deserving, you could not enjoy them" (Trippings 2: 290).

Briggs stands squarely in the tradition of American thinkers and writers for whom issues of economic opportunity and social justice were primary. His particular contributions to the continuing dialectic on whether America was a place where the productive individual could find commensurate reward can be summarized as follows.

First, Briggs affirms and expands the traditional catalog of "parasites" that have plagued American society. Like various other writers before him, Briggs holds up slaveowners, land speculators, and usurers as vivid examples of people who can abuse the free market system to appropriate the labor and wealth of others for themselves. To this catalog Briggs suggests the addition of crooked bankers (the bank president in collusion with the usurer Gilson in The Trippings of Tom Pepper) and naval officers (arrogant and counter-productive naval officers actually occur in all three of the novels in this chapter, but only in Working a Passage are the parasitical officers central characters).

A second contribution would be Briggs's biting portrayal of the barrenness of middle-class values in his society. Especially in the scenes with the Dribbles in Trippings, Briggs shows the bourgeois as being preoccupied with maintaining the appearance of wealth, even though their habitations and tastes are really of the shabbiest sort, and with this preoccupation there is no room for charity in their hearts.

A third contribution would be Briggs's extension of the dispossessed groups to basically all the poor. Previous writers had shown how women, blacks, and native Americans tended to be excluded from opportunities for productive labor and legitimate recompense while others were prospering around them (and from them). Briggs, writing in an age which saw the first real labor surpluses in America's eastern cities, portrays even able-bodied white males as having a difficult time finding meaningful employment in periods of economic downturn. Briggs adds emotional impact to his depictions of economic distress with realistic descriptions of people making do on scant portions in urban slums that are too often dreary and dangerous places.

Finally, Briggs is a first in being a mainstream writer who advocates what are, for his time, some radical but practical reforms. The kindred spirit Charles Brockden Brown had certainly presented many of the same themes on the plight of the poor; Briggs goes beyond him in suggesting

some practical remedies, particularly the workfare-type program described in The Trippings of Tom Pepper which are designed to give the idle poor an alternative to starvation, crime, or the poorhouses. (One could legitimately argue, of course, that Franklin's hospitals and educational institutions anticipate Briggs's direction.) Briggs also tends to condemn the monied class in general and hints that some kind of reorganization of society is in order so that the working poor truly receive commensurate reward for their labors, although he never openly advocates such radical reforms as the redistribution of wealth or the abolition of private property.

Frederic Douglass's Struggle for Free Market Participation

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), the initial autobiography of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), is the definitive work in the "genre" of slave narratives, and its effectiveness as a piece of propaganda within its historic context has been examined in various studies. Other criticism has tended to focus on the piece as autobiography, looking at how Douglass develops his identity--especially at those moments involving his learning to read ("mastering" the language of his masters). These are certainly fruitful approaches to the work. But the Narrative is also a document that strongly affirms the traditional American values of hard work and

commensurate rewards leading to general prosperity in a free society, and a case can be made that one of the primary sequences in Douglass's struggle to achieve an individual identity occurs as he attempts to secure a position in which he can receive all the wages due for his productivity. Certainly, through much of the work, the emphasis is on slavery's brutalizing effects on both the slave and the slave-owner, as Douglass attacks slavery from a moral standpoint. Towards the end of the Narrative, however, Douglass turns specifically towards the micro-economic and macro-economic implications of slavery as he discusses his capabilities, his disincentives to work, and his vision of New Bedford as a relative utopia based on free market prosperity. The end result is a two-pronged argument against slavery: it is barbaric, and ultimately it is unprofitable for the economy as a whole.

In the opening section of the narrative Douglass establishes the link between the brutal system of slavery and the powerful incentive for profit. Recounting that he is in all probability the son of his white master, he relates,

slaveholders have ordained, and by law established that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable. (3)

By gratifying his lusts, the slaveowner can produce a profitable commodity, although "cruel . . . the deed may

strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers" (3). Douglass never glosses over the fact that slavery, brutalizing as it is, is profitable for the individual slave-owner--which, obviously, is the reason most slaveowners continue to participate in the practice.

In fact, at first, the profits derived from slaveowning appear to be immense; his master, Colonel Lloyd, has a magnificent garden that is the wonder of the neighborhood, a huge carriage-house with fine horses and three coaches, etc. "To describe the wealth of Colonel Lloyd would be almost equal to describing the riches of Job," Douglass writes (17-19). But juxtaposed with the opulence of the master is the absolute indigence of his slaves:

The men and women slaves received, as their allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two course linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of course negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance day.
(10)

The slaves are given no beds, just a blanket apiece. They work all day in the field, come home late and cook, mend, and wash, and then drop to the floor and sleep (11).

The case against slavery made by such general descriptions is sharpened when Douglass introduces specific incidents involving individuals, incidents that,

cumulatively, educate Douglass about the various evils of slavery and inflame his desire for freedom. One of the most affecting scenes showing the brutality of the slaveowner and the pitifully dehumanized state of the slave is the description of how a Baltimore resident, Mrs. Thomas Hamilton, treats her slave girls, Henrietta and Mary:

Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying, "move faster, you black gip!" at the same time giving them a blow with the cowskin over the head or shoulders, often drawing blood. She would then say, "Take that, you black gip!"--continuing, "If you don't move faster, I'll move you!" Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. (38)

These slave girls, so battered and cut as to be a neighborhood joke, are not atypical, as Douglass is careful to point out; one of his key arguments against slavery is the idea that ownership of slaves invariably engenders an attitude of callousness and brutality, no matter how magnanimous the white owner was to begin with. But in the Narrative the brutal treatment the slaves receive is a necessary component of retaining them as laboring automatons--the state to which Henrietta and Mary obviously have been reduced.

Another episode where brutality and profits are even more clearly linked is the disposal of his grandmother at the slave auction. Douglass writes, "If any one thing in my

experience, more than any other, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother" (49). This woman had served the old master "faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves"--yet despite her service and contributions to the plantation, when she is too old to do any productive work, she is banished, alone, to a small hut in the middle of the woods, the owners "thus virtually turning her out to die!" (50). One of the lessons of this episode is that the system of slavery, built upon the wholesale, unjust appropriation of others' labor, violates a basic premise of what life should be like in America. Douglass rightly comes to regard the slaveowners as nothing but "a band of successful robbers" (42).

The image of the slaveowner as robber recurs towards the end of the Narrative, when Douglass discusses the period in his life just before his escape. In Baltimore, now a young man, he is taught the trade of caulking ships, and soon he "was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced calkers." Earning between six and seven dollars a week, he "was now of some importance to my master" (97). At this point, he even seeks his own employment, makes his own contracts, and collects the money he earned; in other words, he is functioning as a productive individual

in the American marketplace--but he is still a slave who must surrender his earnings to his master, who has done absolutely nothing:

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents a day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it, --not because he had any hand in earning it,--not because I owed it to him,--nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. The right of the grim-visaged pirate upon the high seas is exactly the same. (98)

After he has seen all the brutality, after he has taught himself to read, after he has stood up to the slave-breaker Covey, the final piece in the puzzle of identity is achieving a position in society where he can keep the rewards for his productive labor. Douglass says as much in this passage:

In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master. When I carried to him my weekly wages, he would, after counting the money, look me in the face with a robber-like fierceness, and ask, "Is this all?" He was satisfied with nothing less than the last cent. He would, however, when I made him six dollars, sometimes give me six cents, to encourage me. It had the opposite effect. I regarded it as a sort of admission of my right to the whole. (101)

Douglass now sees himself as an individual with the right to retain property--a fundamental American definition of what it means to be a person. Denied this right, Douglass says "My discontent grew upon me. I was ever on the look-out for

means of escape" (101). The desire for property rights, which would confirm his identity in the American system, is, in the end, the motive which drives him to escape his position as slave.

Eventually Douglass convinces his master to allow him to hire his time, that is, to pay Master Hugh a set amount every week (three dollars), in exchange for which Douglass was to secure his own employment and pay all his expenses (room, board, tools, and clothing). Douglass comments,

This arrangement, it will be perceived, was decidedly in my master's favor. It relieved him of all need of looking after me. His money was sure. He received all the benefits of slaveholding without its evils; while I endured all the evils of a slave, and suffered all the care and anxiety of a freeman. I found it a hard bargain. But, hard as it was, I thought it better than the old mode of getting along. It was a step towards freedom to be allowed to bear the responsibility of a freeman, and I was determined to hold on upon it. I was ready to work at night as well as day, and by the most untiring perseverance and industry, I made enough to meet my expenses, and lay up a little money every week. (102-03)

Douglass here affirms the idea that the profit motive is the most powerful incentive to be productive; with the promise of keeping a mere fraction of his earnings, he works harder than he ever did under the threat of the whip.

When, however, Douglass loses the right to hire his time--after attending a camp meeting one day longer than he planned, and thereby being a day late with his payment to Master Hugh--he says he "spent the whole week without the performance of a single stroke of work . . . in retaliation"

(103-04). This one-man strike should have served Master Hugh as a warning sign that an intelligent, capable individual will never willingly participate in a system where productivity is not rewarded with commensurate profits, but when Douglass later seems to acquiesce, Master Hugh's suspicions are lulled.

Shortly afterward, Douglass makes his escape to New York, where he uses the robber\pirate image of his masters a fourth time: "I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate" (106). With the help of friends, Douglass and his newly-married wife retreat to New Bedford, a virtual utopia of free-market prosperity:

almost every body seemed to be at work, but noiselessly so, compared with what I had been accustomed to in Baltimore I heard no deep oaths or horrid curses on the laborer. I saw no whipping of men; but all seemed to go smoothly on. Every man appeared to understand his work, and went at it with a sober, yet cheerful earnestness, which betokened the deep interest which he felt in what he was doing, as well as a sense of his own dignity as a man. (111)

The free workers, in pursuit of their own property, feel a "deep interest" in their work--as opposed to the slave who must be forced against his will to do work from which he will receive no benefit. Also, Douglass perceives that productive work is essential to a sense of dignity as a man, a recurrent insight essential to American thought.

In New Bedford, the true market economy, built on the principles of self-interest and free participation, has created a general prosperity that is amazing to Douglass:

Every thing looked clean, new, and beautiful. I saw few or no dilapidated houses, with poverty-stricken inmates; no half-naked children and barefooted women, such as I had been accustomed to see in Hillsborough, Easton, St. Michael's, and Baltimore. The people looked more able, stronger, healthier, and happier, than those of Maryland. I was for once made glad by a view of extreme wealth, without being saddened by seeing extreme poverty. But the most astonishing as well as the most interesting thing to me was the condition of the colored people, a great many of whom, like myself, had escaped thither as a refuge from the hunters of men. I found many, who had not been seven years out of their chains, living in finer houses, and evidently enjoying more of the comforts of life, than the average of slaveholders in Maryland. (111-12)

One can hear echoes of Smith, Franklin, and Crèvecoeur in this description, an impression reinforced when Douglass shifts his point of view from the general condition of the people to a specific focus on himself in this new environment:

I found employment, the third day after my arrival, in stowing a sloop with a load of oil. It was new, dirty, and hard work for me; but I went at it with a glad heart and a willing hand. I was now my own master. It was a happy moment, the rapture of which can be understood only by those who have been slaves. It was the first work, the reward of which was to be entirely my own. There was no Master Hugh standing ready, the moment I earned the money, to rob me of it. I worked that day with a pleasure I had never before experienced. (113)

He is now free to work when and where he wants, free to keep all he earns, free to achieve prosperity--in other words,

free to be his "own master." This scene thus serves as the culmination of Douglass's struggle to achieve personhood and another confirmation of the traditional American emphasis on a free-market system to ensure commensurate reward for productive labor.

Douglass's skillfully constructed Narrative undermines the various arguments that could be made for slavery in a number of ways. He shows that the slave within the system will face physical and mental abuse, extreme poverty, and endless toil without hope of profit. Douglass also shows that the slaveowner may enhance his prosperity by robbing his slaves, but he (or she) will become calloused and uncharitable, and often downright brutal, as a necessary concomitant to holding human beings in bondage. Finally, he demonstrates that the institution of slavery is ultimately counter-productive to the general economy; in New Bedford, where blacks and whites alike are free to participate and motivated by self-interest, even the lowest members of society often achieve a higher level of prosperity than the "average" slaveowner in the south.

Frederic Douglass's Narrative, then, can be seen as the logical extension--or fruition--of works like Franklin's Autobiography or Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer, works that celebrate the potential of the American free market system while beginning to argue that disenfranchised peoples should be allowed to participate in

it. As in Cooper's works, of course, Douglass makes his case for the conservative ideal while consciously overlooking certain realities; his description of the prosperous blacks in New Bedford is hardly consonant with other assessments of the lot of free negroes in northern cities--for example, historian Edward Pessen's description of the northern free negroes' social and economic condition in the Jacksonian period as generally being "abysmal" due to severe discrimination (63-64). The conservative answer, posited by Cooper, Douglass, and others, would be that a more universal prosperity would reign were the free market system truly in place--where there were no groups with built-in institutional advantages, and where everyone was truly franchised, free to reap the rewards of productivity. Thus again the traditional dichotomy between conservative and liberal tends to evaporate when one looks at broad goals, as men like Adams and Jefferson had discovered some years before.

CHAPTER V

ROOTS AND FLOWERS: THE EARLY AMERICAN LEGACY
AND THE MODERN ECONOMIC NOVEL

This study of American attitudes towards work and wealth in our literature through the Jacksonian period should provide a foundation for understanding many later works of fiction by both major and minor writers. From our literature's beginning, writers struggled to articulate a vision of America as being the place where the individual can find commensurate reward for productive labor. Being familiar with this rich tradition, one can see fundamental connections between works as disparate in quality as The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells and Ragged Dick by Horatio Alger, between works as disparate in politics as The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck and Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand, and between works as disparate in time as A Description of New England by John Smith and God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., written three and a half centuries later. In this concluding chapter, I would like to focus on Vonnegut's work in an attempt to show how, in a modern American economic novel, the underlying values are really perennial ones, derived largely from Puritan ideals concerning work and wealth, and how this novel continues the debate about whether America is the place

where the truly productive find commensurate reward for their labor.

The Puritan ideals concerning work and wealth were discussed earlier, but since they are the crucial foundation for understanding the modern economic novel and much social criticism in general, let me again summarize them. Able-bodied people should work and to provide for their own families; only those unable to support themselves--such as the orphaned or incapacitated--should receive charity or public maintenance. People have the right to accrue private property, which others should not covet or steal. People should find work to which they are suited and which they find fulfilling; the concept of "work" does not by necessity mean monotonous drudgery. Taking legitimate profits from productive enterprises is encouraged, since capitalism is an efficient means of meeting one's own and one's neighbors' needs. However, accrued wealth can be a dangerous temptation. Consequently, wealthy people should not use their wealth frivolously, for ostentatious display or selfish indulgence; also, wealth should not be a tool for oppressing the poor or robbing them of their property (through usury, for example). Instead, accrued wealth should primarily be used for charitable endeavors and supporting ministries, or be reinvested into other enterprises.

The ideas of the Puritans helped shape a consensus which most Americans have agreed with ever since. Their synthesis affirms the basic principles of private property, a market economy, and accrual of wealth, while also providing standards by which inequities could be criticized. When later writers attack new American aristocracies, parasitical groups that do no productive labor but instead appropriate for themselves the rewards of others' labor, the writers are depending for support on the general consensus that able-bodied people should provide for themselves rather than stealing from others, and that productive people are entitled to keep the profits they make--ideas the Puritans, among others, helped promulgate. When later writers decry the uncompassionate use of accumulated wealth, drawing harsh pictures of people living in wasteful luxury while ignoring the plight of the starving wretches around them, they are drawing on ideas about the proper use of wealth squarely in the Puritan tradition. None of these ideas are, of course, exclusively Puritan; indeed, as noted, many of them are traditional Western precepts, and various other cultures and traditions share many analogous social conceptions. But the Puritan synthesis of ideas on work and wealth, more than any other source of ideas, shaped traditional American views to this day.

The Puritan ideas about money and wealth help provide a useful framework for examining the values underlying

Vonnegut's 1965 novel, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. In fact, several characters in the novel exemplify--practically personify--precepts concerning money lauded by the Puritans or moral deficiencies concerning money condemned by them.

A good example is the villain in the novel, the lawyer Norman Mushari. Just the fact that he is a lawyer places him in a suspect class, of course, since lawyers are often targeted as a parasitical group who make their living off of others' misfortunes. In case the reader misses this connection, Vonnegut tells us that Mushari's favorite professor in law school was named Leonard Leech, and Mushari's nickname is "weasel" among his office colleagues. Mushari, at the novel's beginning, concocts a plan to secure for Fred Rosewater the enormous fortune of his distant cousin Eliot Rosewater, with Mushari hoping to take "as much as half the bundle" for himself when Fred wins the case (9-10). To win the case, Mushari will have to treacherously use the files of his own firm, which represents Eliot Rosewater's interests. Mushari would be condemned by the Puritans for various reasons. The New England divine John Cotton warned that one's calling should tend to the public good; Mushari's obviously does not. Cotton also warned that no one should attain position through "deceit and undermining of others" ("Christian Calling" 174-75)--the very actions Mushari attempts. Mushari makes an idol of wealth, an idol to which he would sacrifice all ethical

values. He is likewise guilty of covetousness and avarice, traditional Christian sins.

A more vividly drawn and sympathetic character is Stewart Buntline, heir to the fourteen million dollar Buntline fortune. Stewart makes \$800,000 a year doing nothing but drinking, sleeping, and reading books about the Civil War. At one point, as a young man, he had flirted with the idea of giving all his money to the poor, but he had been talked out of it, and now, "drunk or sober, . . . Stewart was irrevocably committed to free enterprise" (118). However, despite his immense wealth, Stewart is unhappy with his pointless existence: "He was through with misguided pity. He was through with sex, too. And, if the truth be told, he was fed to the teeth with the Civil War" (119). The Puritans would argue that Stewart Buntline made a grave mistake in choosing to hoard all his wealth for his own uses; John Winthrop's injunction that "we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities" (83) typifies the Puritan attitude. And John Cotton, among others, pointed out that God calls even the independently wealthy to engage in some productive calling ("Christian Calling" 180-81). Stewart Buntline is a man without a purpose, and Vonnegut's characterization is an effective realization of Puritan precepts concerning the idle wealthy.

Standing in opposition to these predatory and parasitical figures, Vonnegut creates at least two more normative characters, characters who embody values about "callings" and wealth the Puritans lauded. The first of these is the earthy and vital Harry Pena. Unlike almost every other character in the novel, Harry and his two sons are shown doing truly productive work, being fishermen (a profession smacking of Biblical overtones). Harry and his two sons may be lewd and rough-talking, but they are "deeply affectionate" for one another (122). With their robust health, family intimacy, and productive labor, "all three were as satisfied with life as man can ever be" (130). They have "gifts of body and mind suitable" to their "calling," the Puritan divine John Cotton would say ("Christian Calling" 174-75).

The title character, Eliot Rosewater, more specifically embodies Puritan attitudes towards people of wealth. Instead of leading a life of self-indulgence far distant from the poor from whom his wealth is derived, Eliot chooses to try to help people in need in his home town of Rosewater, Indiana. Eliot's motto is "Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor" (15), a virtual paraphrase of John Winthrop's 1630 advice (from the sermon "A Model of Christian Charity") "that every man afford his help to another in every want or distress" (80). Eliot's charitable endeavor is summarized at the end of novel (by Kilgore Trout) in this way:

It's news that a man was able to give that kind of [uncritical] love over a long period of time. If one man can do it, perhaps others can do it, too. It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature. Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see. (186-87)

Thus Eliot Rosewater himself is a secularized "model of Christian charity," and his link with divine precepts is finalized when he acknowledges all the unworthy children of Rosewater County to be his own and bestows on them full rights of inheritance to his fortunes, telling them "to be fruitful and multiply" (190).

Vonnegut was obviously drawing on traditional Christian attitudes towards work and wealth as he wrote his novel, even if he did not have in mind specific Puritan sources. But the novel goes beyond exemplifying traditional Puritan/American attitudes through its characters; it also examines the larger question of whether America is still the place where the individual finds commensurate reward for productive labor.

The answer, according to Vonnegut, is no--America is no longer the place where the individual necessarily finds commensurate reward for productive labor. The sequence that illustrates this most vividly occurs when the gay proprietor of a restaurant that caters to the rich explains the financial plight of Harry Pena to a couple of shallow, affluent women:

"That's all over," he said, meaning Harry and his sons. . . . "Real people don't make their livings that way any more. Those three romantics out there make as much sense as Marie Antoinette and her milkmaids. When the bankruptcy proceedings begin--in a week, a month, a year--they'll find out that their only economic value was as animated wallpaper for my restaurant here." Bunny, to his credit, was not happy about this. "That's all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not needed."

"Men like Harry will always win, won't they?" said Caroline.

"They're losing everywhere." Bunny let go of Amanita. He looked around his restaurant, invited Amanita to do so, too, to help him count the house. He invited them, moreover, to despise his customers as much as he did. Almost all were inheritors. Almost all were beneficiaries of boodles and laws that had nothing to do with wisdom or work.

Four stupid, fat widows in furs laughed over a bathroom joke on a paper cocktail napkin.

"And look who's winning. And look who's won." (131)

When productive men like Harry Pena can no longer make a living at their "calling," then the traditional American promise of a chance at prosperity is over.

The book poses that Harry Pena ultimately is the victim of a system that allowed a few people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and then pass it on intact to their posterity, thus locking it away forever from the truly productive people. Eliot Rosewater puts it this way:

When the United States of America, which was meant to be a Utopia for all, was less than a century old, Noah Rosewater and a few men like him demonstrated the folly of the Founding Fathers in one respect: those sadly recent ancestors had not made it the law of the Utopia that the wealth of each citizen should be limited. This oversight was engendered by a weak-kneed sympathy for those who loved expensive things, and by the feeling that the continent was so vast and valuable, and

the population so thin and enterprising, that no thief, no matter how fast he stole, could more than mildly inconvenience anyone. Noah and a few men like him perceived that the continent was in fact finite, and that venal office-holders, legislators in particular, could be persuaded to toss up great hunks of it for grabs, and to toss them in such a way as to have them land where Noah and his kind were standing.

Thus did a handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed. Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, and went bang in the noonday sun.

E pluribus unum is surely an ironic motto to inscribe on the currency of this Utopia gone bust, for every grotesquely rich American represents property, privileges, and pleasures that have been denied the many. (12-13)

Eliot Rosewater does not represent an entirely credible voice, of course, but Vonnegut certainly intends for us to consider his criticisms seriously.

How innovative are the socioeconomic criticisms posed in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater? Vonnegut pictures hard-working poor who are denied real opportunities for advancement--but Briggs had done the same with white sailors in the 1840's, Brown had done the same with women in 1799, and Crèvecoeur had done the same with black slaves in the 1770's. Vonnegut attacks the American system of allowing fortunes to remain intact in the same family from generation to generation--the same phenomenon Jefferson had introduced

legislation to counterbalance in the 1770's. Vonnegut condemns the idle rich for their lack of compassion, extols the man who works hard with his family for their mutual support, and shows that people need higher values than money or pleasure in their lives--sentiments common among American Puritan preachers as early as the 1630's.

Vonnegut is a good example of a modern writer still struggling with the perennial problem of whether America is fulfilling its promise as the place where the individual can find commensurate reward for productive labor, and his unique contribution to the continuing debate is the idea that modern industrial techniques may make the very possibility of fulfilling, productive labor obsolete for all but a minuscule number of people. The nearly three decades that have passed since God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater was written are perhaps not yet time enough to prove that Vonnegut was wrong. In any case, American writers will, no doubt, continue to examine the problem of work and wealth in America, with the pendulum continuing to swing between those who would condemn rich people as being virtual parasites (the side Vonnegut is definitely on) and those who hold that the opportunity to become wealthy is an essential spur to productivity.

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