

Literacies of Membership: The Nineteenth-Century Politics of Access

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This project responds to the discourse of crisis in literacy and large-scale literacy assessment by demonstrating how unexamined deployments of literacy erase the complexity of literate acts. Utilizing archives of nineteenth-century student writing as well as disciplinary and institutional histories, this study recovers student writing as material social practice, foregrounding, rather than effacing, cultural contradictions at three institutional sites.

Drawing on scholarship in literary, cultural, and New Literacy Studies, this project returns to the literacy crisis at nineteenth-century Harvard and asks the critical question: what were Harvard examiners reading when they were reading illiteracy? Harvard scholars A. S. Hill, Barrett Wendell, and LeBaron Russell Briggs evaluated student writing according to its literary value, identifying two key elements of style—commonplaceness and sentimentality—as indicators of subliteracy that signified dependence. The exclusionary effects of these unexamined assumptions are brought into relief by then examining, as primary texts, student compositions at Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College. My reading of the coursework done by two populations previously excluded from higher education, farmers and women, indicates that they appropriated local discourses and negotiated the contradictions of their own institutional sites in order to enact independent subjectivities.

While literary appreciation does not currently carry the same kind of weight in assessing literacy, I find that the conflation of literacy and republican independence functions to efface the complexity of literacy and disguises what Brian Street calls ideological models of literacy as autonomous. As deeply political decisions regarding access and placement constitute so much of our work, this project suggests that all of us in English studies reevaluate how our own construction of value and our large-scale assessment practices may function to reinforce, rather than complicate, autonomous models of literacy.

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PREFACE

I wish to first acknowledge the students in my “Literature and the Contemporary” course at the University of Pittsburgh during fall of 2001. Their critical engagement highlighted for me the conflict between what students do in classrooms and how that learning is reduced by the discourse of crisis in literacy. Their work helped me formulate the initial research questions for this project.

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Research of course requires immense material support, and for this I must thank my parents, Shirley Ann Garrett and Don and Susan Middleton, who helped me get through my undergraduate education debt-free when the parents of first-generation college students could still do such a thing. And finally, I'm grateful every day that I met Dawn Schmitz under that streetlight seven years ago. She spirited me away to Illinois and supported me financially while I wrote these pages, making this dissertation, and all good things, possible.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In February 1869, one week before the passage of the fifteenth amendment, Charles Francis Adams, Jr. warned a convention of social scientists that “Universal Suffrage can only mean in plain English the government of ignorance and vice:--it means a European, and especially Celtic, proletariat on the Atlantic coast; an African proletariat on the shores of the Gulf, and a Chinese proletariat on the Pacific.” The descendant of two US presidents, Adams warned that the Anglo-Saxon race’s proven disposition to “strengthen free institutions” was no longer sufficient in the face of increased immigration and the shift in former slaves’ legal status from property to citizen. As the debate raged that week in congress, proponents of universal suffrage gained support for a bill making suffrage a constitutional right, but that version of the bill did not become law. Congress ultimately capitulated to opponents of universal suffrage, passing an amendment so narrowly construed that it only prohibited the abridgment of voting rights based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”¹

As one opponent of universal suffrage put it, at stake was the authority to “create the voter” and the concomitant freedom to disenfranchise local manifestations of the proletariat that Adams alludes to above. As a historian of voting rights observes, “What opponents of a broad amendment rejected in the end was the abolition of discrimination based on nativity, religion,

¹ “The Protection of the Ballot in National Elections,” Proceedings of the American Association of Social Scientists, *Journal of Social Science*, June (1869): 108-09, 106.

property and education,” allowing states to “retain the power to limit the political participation of the Irish and Chinese, Native Americans, and the increasingly visible clusters of illiterate and semiliterate workers massing in the nation’s cities.”² In 1869 Adams’ skepticism about the workings of democracy would have been an anomaly among the electorate and in the press. But his position gained adherents in the ensuing three decades amidst the failures of reconstruction, conflict between capital and labor, government corruption, and new waves of immigration as many elites and native-born Americans began to debate the consequences of an uninformed electorate, and in the 1890s literacy became the new ground on which to “create the voter” and rerestrict the vote. The ideal of creating an informed citizenry therefore justified excluding illiterates, as dependents, from political participation.

This study is a cultural history of how entrance examinations in composition participated in consolidating the link between literacy and independence that shapes American beliefs about citizenship and continues to undergird education and public policy. The contours of composition’s origins are by now familiar: in 1874, Harvard implemented the first entrance examination in composition and half the students taking it failed. They continued to fail over the next two decades, as what constituted academic literacy and who was responsible for teaching it was continually debated. What began as Harvard’s remedial composition course, “English A,” was made the only first-year course requirement in 1884. In the 1890s Charles Francis Adams, Jr., as chair of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, released the four notorious Harvard reports, excoriating preparatory training in English and recommending that elementary composition be moved out of the college entirely and into the secondary schools. By that time,

² Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 99, 102. For an account of the congressional debate over the fifteenth amendment, see Keyssar, 93-103.

the terms were set for a literacy crisis that drew its salience from illiteracy's new implications for national and public health. Considering the meanings of literacy for both universities and for political reformers, the uses of literacy in creating a student body and a body politic, I aim to recover literacy as material social practice and to offer an elaboration how literacy functioned (as it continues to function) as a tool of exclusion.

During this period, faculty at Harvard University produced what I call a discourse of evaluation that constructed literary appreciation, a demonstration of *taste*, as the fullest expression of individuality. While privileged and institutionalized theories of taste give shape to their construction of academic literacy, however, my focus is on the qualities they recognized as violations of taste and therefore “subliterate” and requiring remediation. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the practice of “distinguishing from” in fact produces taste as a positive natural quality because “in matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others.”³ In my reading of the articles, lectures, and textbooks in which they recognized and named what was wrong with student writing, two persistent patterns emerged: the problem of *commonplaceness* in student writing and the problem of *sentimentality*. In Chapters 1 and 3 I elaborate what these qualities signified for Harvard examiners in their institutional and historical situation. In Chapters 2 and 4 I bring the denigration of commonplaceness and sentimentality as exclusionary practice into relief by turning to students writing in two very different institutions—Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College—who are positioned to oppose or negotiate that discourse of evaluation.

³ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56.

Activists, administrators, and faculty at Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College were then working out how to serve student populations, laborers and women, respectively, whose exclusion from higher education was justified through their perceived or legal dependence. It may therefore be helpful to consider the Harvard entrance examination in composition a form of the literacy tests designed to selectively exclude from the polls local undesirable populations like the ones Adams names above (a “Celtic, proletariat on the Atlantic coast; an African proletariat on the shores of the Gulf, and a Chinese proletariat on the Pacific”) and that southern election boards used to exclude newly enfranchised Black men. Catherine Prendergast points out that literacy tests were especially useful tools of exclusion because “their outcomes could be easily manipulated and standards arbitrarily enforced to maintain racial distinctions.”⁴

While literacy tests usually invoke southern legislators’ attempts to disenfranchise freedmen, however, it is important to note that Massachusetts was a leader in establishing literacy requirements. The state persistently beat back efforts to repeal its 1857 literacy requirement to disenfranchise Irish immigrants and reinforced its provisions in 1889.⁵ These legislative efforts were gaining steam in the 1890s as literary magazines and newspapers circulated reports of “the illiteracy of American boys” at Harvard. As chair of the visiting Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, Charles Francis Adams Jr. recommended not only that secondary schools take on the teaching of composition but also that passing the entrance examination in composition be made a condition of access to Harvard College. The

⁴ Catherine Prendergast, *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 6.

⁵ Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 86, 145. The 1889 provision required anyone who had not voted in four years to take a literacy test.

fitness of the American voter, and the literacy requirements that would adequately prepare him (and increasingly, her) to participate in democracy, were topics of ongoing debate in the post-bellum US, and I argue that these debates inflect, are indeed inseparable from, the history of composition.

The analogy between voting requirements and college admissions requirements makes visible the ways in which, during this period of social upheaval, examiners read for republican virtue at both sites. Catherine Prendergast has argued that after the Civil War, literacy became the new means of making racial distinctions formerly made by property requirements: “In the area of voter enfranchisement, literacy functioned as a replacement for property, as a means to preserve certain privileges of citizenship for Whites.”⁶ By reading for literary appreciation, the mark of privilege and leisure time, the Harvard examiners were reading to make class distinctions among the nameless, faceless entrance examinations in composition and sort them accordingly, marking the majority who failed to perform this rarified reading practice *subliterate*. I suggest throughout this study that the efficacy of literacy as an instrument of selection and exclusion at both of these sites—the university and the voting booth—derives from a collective belief in independence as a civic virtue. In Jeffersonian republicanism, the yeoman farmer represented the citizen ideal for this reason, as property ownership and economic autonomy made the farmer independent and therefore capable of acting disinterestedly for the common good. But as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, because independence justified political power, and because groups successfully marked dependent were considered undeserving or incapable of self-government, independence was itself a concept that groups struggled to define and enact through literacy. As suffrage was opened to propertyless and non-

⁶ Prendergast, *Literacy*, 6.

English speaking men and as “half-taught” capitalists wielded undue influence on the affairs of government, literacy functioned as an indicator of independence and the capacity to both govern the self and act in the public interest. The converse of that formulation—that illiteracy signified dependence--thereby also justified exclusion from access to membership of all kinds.

1.1 A REVISIONIST HISTORY OF HARVARD

A knowledge of the language of our laws and the faculty of informing oneself without aid of their provisions, would in itself constitute a test, if rigorously enforced, incompatible with the existence of a proletariat.

– Charles Francis Adams, Jr.⁷

If the American student—not to say the American teacher—were sure to have a background of culture, all special instruction in composition might be dispensed with

– Le Baron Russell Briggs⁸

One significant contribution this study makes to an impressive body of work on Harvard’s role in composition history is to consider each actor’s institutional position vis a vis Harvard.⁹ The

⁷ Adams, “The Protection of the Ballot in National Elections,” 20-21.

⁸ Briggs, *To College Teachers of English Composition*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1928), 12.

⁹ Robert Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*; John C. Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies*; Dorothy Broaddus, *Genteel Rhetoric*; Miriam Brody, *Manly Writing*; Paul E. Cohen, “Barrett Wendell: A Study in Harvard Culture” and “Barrett Wendell and the Harvard Literary Revival”; Wallace Douglas, “Rhetoric for the Meritocracy”; Joan Hedrick, “Harvard Indifference”; David A. Jolliffe, “The Moral Subject in Composition”; Susan Miller, *Textual Carnivals*; Charles Paine, “The Composition Course” and

scholarly emphasis on Harvard's individual faculty members and Harvard as an agent of hegemony has obscured the considerable conflict and contradictions between how literacy was assessed and even conceived at the university itself, evident in the passages above. Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, E. L. Godkin, and Adams were interested in what the examination in composition could accomplish externally; as many scholars have noted, they viewed the examination as leverage to reform secondary school curricula and composition was considered a vehicle to communicate learning in all subjects. Their instrumental view of literacy is expressed in the epigraph wherein Adams suggests that restricting the franchise to those who pass a literacy test is a method of selecting for those who can independently navigate the US political and legal system by demonstrating "the faculty of informing oneself without aid of their provisions"; again deploying an instrumental conception of literacy, as Chair of the Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric he recommended restricting access to Harvard to those who pass the entrance examination in composition. However, from their institutional position within the department of English and as gatekeepers to Harvard College, the Harvard faculty members who administered, evaluated, and revised the examination elaborated it as an instrument by which to identify students with culture. These agents in composition history at Harvard therefore presume different definitions and uses of literacy: in the Harvard reports, Adams presumes literacy is an instrumental skill to be mastered before embarking on higher learning; Briggs and the other faculty in English presume literacy demonstrates the faculty of taste, signifying a coherent, individualized self. Authoritative documents generated at Harvard therefore routinely deployed conflicting assumptions and recommendations.

The Resistant Writer; Mariolina Salvatori, *Pedagogy*; and Donald Stewart, "Harvard's Influence on English Studies."

Adams and Godkin are what Magali Sarfotti Larson calls “sponsors” of English studies. Larson observes that a profession’s narrative of origins tends to reinforce historical continuity and inevitability, suggesting that the profession emerged in response to a social need; Larson argues instead that an emerging profession creates a need for its expertise, and the profession’s narrative of origins erases the social relations supporting its emergence, thus eliding both the constructive function of crisis in creating a need for professional expertise, and the fact that it is initially sponsored and protected by elites.¹⁰ For instance, Godkin and Adams were public intellectuals who published widely and agitated for education and civil service reform. Their position on the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric in the 1890s is not significant simply because they wrote the Harvard reports. A visiting committee reported on composition teaching at Harvard in the 1880s and elicited a letter of protest from the English faculty, but this conflict did not become news. And English was not singled out, for every department at Harvard regularly received visiting committees and by the 1890s the university was awash in administrative detail. But Adams and Godkin relentlessly and successfully publicized their findings at a time when literacy was emerging as a defining property of citizenship. Adams, the primary author, wrote an article on the sad state of literacy at Harvard for the first issue of *Harvard Graduates Magazine* and Godkin, as editor of the *Nation* and *Saturday Evening Post*, published his findings and correspondence in their pages. Both men addressed professional associations on the need to raise standards and reform the teaching of composition, joining Charles W. Eliot in his demand that secondary schools take over the “remedial” teaching of composition. Donna Strickland has observed that the scale and scope of composition teaching at

¹⁰ Magali Sarfotti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America*, (New York: Norton, 1976), xii.

Harvard and the “mental drudgery” associated with it drove the Harvard Committee’s recommendations for an efficient division of labor that was economically and ideologically palatable: “the ideology of what constituted appropriate masculine activities and the economics of employing a large number of instructors worked together to convince the committee that ‘[t]he work of theme writing ought to be pronounced a part of the elementary training, and as such relegated to the preparatory schools’ (96).”¹¹

Harvard faculty members such as Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, and Le Baron Russell Briggs, however, evaluated student writing by reading for literary appreciation, which they equated with individuality. A. S. Hill, the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric appointed in 1872, not only wrote one of the most widely distributed rhetoric textbooks of the period (his *Principles of Rhetoric* and Wendell’s *English Composition* were two of what Kitzhaber calls the “Big Four”) but was also a well-known cultural authority on language use. In *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America*, Kenneth Cmiel identifies Hill as an important figure on the critical side of the “Scholars Versus Critics” debate over language use. The debate was recorded in journals, magazines, and newspapers and reached a feverish pitch in the 1880s and 1890s: “The verbal critics, in sympathy with Matthew Arnold, looked for broad, humane, critical Hellenists to leaven the unrelenting philistinism of American life. The philologists grew from the concurrent movement for higher professional standards and more precise specialization.”¹²

As a verbal critic, Hill advocated recognizing only socially acceptable uses of language rather than actual usage, a literary rather than linguistic/philological orientation, and believed

¹¹ “Taking Dictation: The Emergence of Writing Programs and the Cultural Contradictions of Composition Teaching,” *College English* 63 (Mar. 2001), 463.

¹² Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, 149.

that implementing literature into the entrance examination in composition would help achieve it. Writing in 1879, Hill lays out the rationale for introducing literature as the subject (content) of the 1874 composition exam: “It was hoped that this requirement would effect several desirable objects,—that the student, by becoming familiar with a few works holding a high place in English literature, would acquire a taste for good reading, and would insensibly adopt better methods of thought and better forms of expression.”¹³ That familiarity with esteemed literary works would unconsciously train a writer in methods and forms in fact presumes an already privileged reading practice, what Pierre Bourdieu has called the “pure gaze,” “capable of apprehending the work of art as it demands to be apprehended (i.e., in itself and for itself, as form and not as function).”¹⁴ Far from being a basic skill, the pure gaze is the product of a highly schooled and privileged social process:

From the side of ontogenesis, the pure gaze is associated with very specific conditions of acquisition, such as the early frequenting of museums and the prolonged exposure to schooling, and to the *skhole* that it implies. All of this means that the analysis of essence which overlooks these conditions (thus universalizing the specific case) implicitly establishes as universal to all aesthetic practices the rather particular properties of an experience which is the product of privilege, that is, of exceptional conditions of acquisition.¹⁵

¹³ “An Answer to the Cry for More English,” in John C. Brereton, ed., *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*, (Pittsburgh series in composition, literacy, and culture. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 48.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 256.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Bourdieu's conception of the pure gaze as a product of privilege counters the dominant conception of aesthetic appreciation as a gift from nature or an expression of individuality, that which considers the ability to recognize aesthetic properties an essential rather than socialized capacity.

Membership in this study's title is intended to index the paradox of literacy and signal an approach informed by literacy studies and sociolinguistics, which presuppose that literacies are multiple, social, and interactional. To ground this study's commitment to literacy as a social practice, I offer James Paul Gee's definition of literacy as "*mastery of, or fluent control over, a secondary Discourse.*" All students, including the students writing in the chapters that follow, have mastered (are literate) in secondary discourses, but Gee's formulation highlights the paradox of the literacy crisis under study here: the Harvard faculty is reading for mastery of a secondary discourse that had previously only been acquired through membership at Harvard.¹⁶ Students who do not perform a discourse as members, paradoxically as members of the institution they are trying to gain access to, require remediation. Yet Deborah Brandt argues that membership is in fact crucial to acquiring the tacit knowledge any literacy requires:

But what I have been arguing—and the message that comes over and over again from literacy research—is that *you have to be a member first to acquire insider knowledge.* 'Tacit' knowledge must accumulate tacitly--as an outgrowth of routine participation. What separates the 'outlander' basic writers that [Patricia] Bizzell writes about is not their ignorance of academic codes but their long-standing exclusion from academic membership. Membership must be

¹⁶ *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education series, (London, New York, Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1990), 153.

granted—in fact, taken for granted—for literacy learning to proceed . . . The political power latent in genuine literacy begins not with its acquisition but with the social relationships that are necessary for genuine acquisition to take place.¹⁷ (Brandt’s italics).

Just as literacies are situated and multiple, so are discourses, another slippery term I define through Gee: “A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’, or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’.”¹⁸ What the Harvard faculty in English demonstrate in their discourse of evaluation is a concern for discursive, not grammatical, distinctions that signify ways of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing—what Bourdieu calls *habitus*—compatible with their own, and those writers who do not are simply not individuals.

Insofar as the Harvard faculty read and evaluated entrance examinations in composition for literary appreciation, they were selecting for what they considered members of the natural aristocracy and, they asserted, raising literacy standards nationwide in the process. In her study on the ideology of style, Kathryn Flannery observes:

In addition to establishing norms for good taste and proper expression, such examinations in Europe and America came to be used more and more to classify and categorize the learner in relation to himself (often tied to expectations based on family background and “potential”) and to a conception of a group, a

¹⁷ Deborah Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 120.

¹⁸ Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, 143.

measuring based on what one historian of testing calls “an almost fanatical belief that minute distinctions can be made”(Smallwood 104-110).¹⁹

In this way, the functions of literacy testing and college recruiting converge. The Harvard entrance examination was continually retooled according to what Jerome Karabel calls the “iron law of admissions,” that “an institution will abandon a particular process of selection once it no longer produces the desired result.”²⁰ Dissatisfied with the kind of performance they were reading on the examinations, Harvard examiners continually refined the entrance examination in composition and disclosed their evaluative criteria in order to influence composition teaching in preparatory schools and align it with college standards. In doing so they incrementally brought what they considered the supposed transparency of literature into relief, a function acknowledged by Kathryn Flannery: “Certainly, examinations today drive curriculum just as they drove curriculum in the nineteenth century.” But “[a]s one nineteenth-century apologist for the examination put it, ‘English literature is, above all, the subject in which Examinations have called a particular kind of study into existence’(Latham 264).”²¹

Requiring a demonstration of literary appreciation as they recognized and defined it and refining their evaluative criteria over time, Harvard examiners rationalized literacy as a tool of exclusion while Eliot’s policies promoting institutional growth (the elective system and increased options on the entrance examinations) were increasing the applicant pool. Just as they had conflicting assumptions about the uses and meanings of literacy, however, the Harvard faculty influential in composition opposed Eliot’s elective system, believing that rendering

¹⁹ Kathryn Flannery, *The Emperor’s New Clothes: Literature, Literacy, and the Ideology of Style*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 70.

²⁰ Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen*, 131.

²¹ Henry Latham, *On the Action of Examinations: Considered As a Means of Selection* (Boston: Willard Small, 1886); qtd. in Flannery, 78-79.

Harvard College unrecognizable by an influx of first-generation college students, many from the south and west, was not worth the dubious goal of “growth.” They also considered the literary appreciation they demanded in composition to be a defense against the enormous growth of philology at Harvard as George Lyman Kittredge and his colleagues reaped professional prestige with what Wendell called the “benumbingly pedantic” PhDs they produced.²²

In foregrounding Harvard College as a site of intra-institutional struggle of competing interests and literacies, reading its discourse of evaluation against the literacy practices of students at Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College, I suggest throughout these chapters that concerns at one site vanish at another, manifest in different ways at another, or are impossible to implement at another, because literacies are always multiple and deeply situated. In this complexity lies both the promise of learning and the difficulty of articulating a response to a crisis in literacy.

1.2 CONSTRUCTING THE ILLITERATE SUBJECT

Because changing nineteenth-century conceptions of “literacy” and “literature” make room for and produce each other, it is important to consider the emerging fields of composition *and* literature, rather than studying them separately. Susan Miller has argued that “By making writing invisible in our histories, and equally be displaying it as a remnant of a continuous rhetorical tradition, we have participated in an almost absolute separation of high from low that the pair ‘literature’ and ‘composition’ so easily implies,” and that disciplinary histories “have in varying

²² Qtd. In Cohen, “Barrett Wendell: A Study in Harvard Culture.”

degrees overlooked the connection between a cultural history of composition and a cultural history of literary studies.”²³ Literary studies is essential to my interpretation of the literacy crisis because the definitions of literacy and literature were then intertwined. What the Harvard examiners were reading when they read illiteracy was an insufficient literariness that manifested as both consumption and production: students did not demonstrate literary appreciation as the Harvard examiners narrowly defined it, and their own writing did not demonstrate literary style. For instance, the contempt for sentimental literature—its emotional appeal, its didacticism, its focus on relationships, and the fact that it was predominantly written by and for women—appears in the Harvard examiners’ evaluations of student writing, which they criticize for being sentimental, moralistic, didactic, and effeminate.

That Harvard expertise is required to recognize illiteracy, however, points to the cultural contradictions of the term. Literacy has historically been valued for facilitating civic participation, piety, and culture, but as Constance Kendall and David Barton have pointed out, illiteracy is the unmarked term, for literate formerly connoted “learned,” and “having literature,” the result of a privileged, rather than a mass, compulsory education. The twentieth-century semantic shift that rendered illiteracy the marked term--signifying deviation from the literate norm-- has reinforced, Kendall argues, the conception of literacy as “autonomous” and made critiques of literacy testing difficult for those in literacy studies to make: “For if we view literacy as “separate from any context,” we can treat it as the universal condition toward which all individuals can/should/must strive, and thereby reify its meaning as the neutral, the normal, the unquestionably *unmarked*.” Even those of us deeply invested in the power of literacy and

²³ Susan Miller, *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 45.

education to improve the lives of people may turn our attention to refining our testing strategies rather than to interrogating the consequences of constructing illiteracy. “The “real world” effect of this standpoint on literacy is,” Kendall reminds us, “well known; namely, that it turns our attention away from any sustained politicized interrogation of the meaning of literacy and toward an equally politicized interrogation of those individuals who do not possess it – the “illiterates,” a.k.a. the *abnormal*, the *unusual*, the ones *unable* to make the leap.”²⁴

Significantly, however, illiteracy can pass as literacy and therefore a trained eye is required to detect it. I propose a shift in perspective, then, from viewing the Harvard examiners as experts in the field of teaching writing to an elaboration of their expertise in detecting subliteracy, which they conceived as those writers not fully individualized, not fully independent, and therefore in need of remediation. Anxiety over literacy’s ability to sort the right people out of a pile of anonymous compositions registers anxieties over forms of contamination that at the time were thought to be invasive, dangerous, and invisible. In *The Resistant Writer*, Charles Paine persuasively argues that Adams Sherman Hill’s rhetoric was theorized to fortify the writer with an immunity to debased public discourse, a recurring articulation of how the discourses of disease and public health have historically functioned as metaphors for popular culture and the public sphere.²⁵ Paine rightly points out that those of us in composition studies today who wish to foster critical consciousness have more of an affinity with Hill than we care to realize, but I wish to extend Paine’s analysis. Few of the candidates who sat for the Harvard examinations, after all, demonstrated the kind of resistance that Hill privileged.

²⁴ “The Worlds We Deliver: Confronting the Consequences of Believing in Literacy” (PhD diss., Miami University), 30.

²⁵ *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

What undergirded the circulation of the crisis was the cultural authority that Harvard embodied: they knew illiteracy when they saw it, of course, so illiteracy it must be. And, something much more insidious: if the students of the nation's best schools were emerging as illiterates, what did that say about everyone else?

There are real consequences, however, for a conception of illiteracy as a threat to public health. Peter Mortensen's work is especially suggestive here. In "Figuring Illiteracy: Rustic Bodies and Unlettered Minds in Rural America," Mortensen traces the turn of the twentieth-century work of the Vineland Institute in New Jersey during a time when illiteracy was undergoing an interpretive shift, from its earlier connections to immorality to a symptom of cognitive deficiency.²⁶ The Vineland Institute was a site for research on eugenics and abnormal psychology founded in the Pine Barrens to study the inhabitants' century-long association with illiteracy. Mortensen notes that in *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences*, Vineland researcher Henry Herbert Goddard categorizes his Piney Woods research subjects through writing assessment, but Goddard's assessments are themselves quite telling:

Take the case of twenty-five-year-old Mary N., for example. Goddard reproduces in facsimile the fluent letter Mary wrote to Santa Claus in 1911. Her effort is judged appropriate to a ten-year-old, an assessment Goddard defends by stressing that she can do no better after sixteen years of instruction in letter-writing. Mary's obvious literacy, which Goddard casts as evidence of near-

²⁶ Peter Mortensen, "Figuring Illiteracy: Rustic Bodies and Unlettered Minds in Rural America," *Rhetorical Bodies*, eds. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 153.

illiteracy, is simply part of what enables her to deceive “the very elect as to her capacity.”²⁷

I propose this comparison between Harvard college candidates and Piney Woods residents, because they were both constructed as subliterate, literate enough to conceal the deficiencies that illiteracy supposedly embodies but not to endow the individuality that true literacy entails. Mortensen points out that the charge of entrenched Piney Woods illiteracy has been discredited, and the illiteracy recorded by Presbyterian missionaries was more likely a case of Methodist resistance.²⁸ But for the Vineland Institute, Piney Woods residents’ supposed incapacity for literacy signified a heritable cognitive deficiency that categorized them as “imbeciles,” “morons,” and “idiots,” and prompted proposals of containment to prevent transmitting heritable defects to surrounding healthy populations. The proposed consequences for those marked illiterate, then, are varied but always material.

In tracing the construction of academic literacy, my aim is similar to that of Mary Trachsel in *Institutionalizing Literacy*, wherein she brackets the late nineteenth-century institutionalization of literacy from “the academy’s appropriation of vernacular literacy through the development of English studies” to the field’s “eventual surrender, to external assessment agencies, of direct responsibility for defining literacy as ‘the center of the educational

²⁷ Henry H. Goddard, *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 93, qtd. In Mortensen, 156.

²⁸ Mortensen’s source for this argument is John W. Sinton and Geraldine Masino, “A Barren Landscape, A Stable Society: People and Resources of the Pine Barrens in the Nineteenth Century,” *Natural and Cultural Resources of the New Jersey Pine Barrens: Inputs and Research Needs for Planning*, ed. John W. Sinton (Pomona, NJ: Stockton State College, 1978) 168-91. See Mortensen, 160.

enterprise.’”²⁹ Although, like Trachsel, I consider entrance examinations in English to be central to this process, I am much more interested in how the examiners evaluated student writing and how that evaluative process created a professional discourse of its own through reports, articles, textbooks, and lectures that, because they were distributed by Harvard University, enjoyed a wide circulation and response. I also find it significant that Harvard’s entrance examination in composition distinguished itself from other universities through its literary, rather than rhetorical or grammatical, emphasis. University entrance requirements were widely disparate in 1874, yet it would be the Harvard literary model, revised over two decades, that the College Entrance Examinations Board would adopt when it standardized college entrance requirements in 1901.

Now familiar with the revised examinations and the discourse generated concerning their evaluation, I do take issue with Trachsel’s claim that Harvard and most other universities between 1874-1901 were primarily interested in formal, grammatical concerns. She concludes that “the applicant’s demonstrated understanding or appreciation of literature *did not appear among the published criteria* that would be used in evaluating the essay responses.”³⁰ (My emphasis.) Yet in tracing Harvard’s discourse of evaluation, I find that the students’ failure to appreciate literature was a significant evaluative criterion from the start. Literature was the basis of the 1874 composition examination, because it was considered “contentless,” its meaning obvious. It was intended to function merely as a stylistic influence on the student, because *as content* it would not be in the way. Only when readings of those works were evaluated as

²⁹ Trachsel, *Institutionalizing Literacy: The Historical Role of College Entrance Examinations in English*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), vii, ix.

³⁰ Trachsel, *Institutionalizing*, 59.

incorrect, when readers were designated as amateurs, could those texts move from a primarily social domain and take on the status of an object worthy of expert study.

Although today the literary and the literate are largely separate concepts, one of my central arguments is that in Harvard's evaluative discourse these concepts are frequently conflated. In Chapter One I argue that commonplaceness signified subliteracy in Harvard's discourse of evaluation, an effect of an institutionalized literary rhetorical training which emphasized relations between property, leisure time, taste, and judgment. Commonplaceness signified the very absence of taste and the capacities it implied: judgment, rationality, individuality. As the examiners opposed Eliot's elective system and the uncultured students and climate it fostered at Harvard College, however, they only refined rather than abandoned this evaluative criterion, and I discuss the implications for literacy and pedagogy.

In Chapter Two I hope to further defamiliarize Harvard's discourse of evaluation and offer an example of how opposition to that discourse manifested at one land-grant university, bringing the previous chapter into relief. My materials are student compositions preserved as part of Illinois Industrial University's exhibit at the Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876. As the faculty, administrators and members of the board of trustees were negotiating over how to best serve the class interests of its students, Illinois Industrial offers a case study of what a deeply interested commonplace literacy practice would look like. The students there are invited to rehearse commonplaces about farmers and farming in an "English Literature and Composition Course" through the discourse of the farmers' movement. The Illinois materials not only offer an example of an alternative literacy, but of a conception of reality that conceives of democracy as immanent—not actual—and therefore emphasizes a collective rather than individual literacy practice.

In Chapter Three I return to the Harvard materials and argue that sentimentality also signified subliteracy in their discourse of evaluation. What is today a widespread distaste for sentimentality had to be constructed, and in Harvard's discourse of evaluation this was achieved by yoking sentimentality to dependence, reform, women, and gender ambiguity at a time when women were struggling for access to Harvard College. Drawing on work in literary and cultural studies on the construction of nineteenth-century sentimentalism and literary value, I trace how Harvard examiners' reading of characteristics such as moralism and didacticism were feminine-coded conventions and associated with the activist politics of abolition and social reform. Barrett Wendell, in particular, instructs readers to monitor and distrust their own emotional responses in their search for truth, and all draw on scientific findings that question the humanity of women and people of color.

In Chapter four I read writers at Harvard's women's institutions—in the annual Harvard annex reports, the work of one Harvard Annex student, and Radcliffe student compositions in the 1897 Harvard report by the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric—negotiate how to demonstrate individuality when their sex, and their institutional situation, proscribes it. In their struggle for access, the women students and administrators adhere to the gender norms of their privileged class and eradicate sentiment (as feeling, as agitation, as anger) from their writing and conduct. Yet when the permanent segregation of women is achieved through the founding of Radcliffe College in 1893, this negotiated subjectivity continues, for the terms of its founding institutionalize Radcliffe students as dependents.

There are several fruitful lines of inquiry began in the course of this study but ultimately lay outside its purview. Religious enthusiasm, for instance, is a cultural factor inflecting readings of sentimentality, and its significance at a time when Harvard and the other emerging

research universities were secularizing their institutional practices is a possible avenue for further research. Literature is not inherently exclusionary, and Vida Scudder, a nineteenth-century Professor of English Literature at Wellesley, articulated a literary theory and pedagogy that would counter the deeply reactionary practices at Harvard. This study assumes that students bring their own literacies to the classroom and addresses implications for pedagogy, but that line of inquiry could be richer.

I began this research out of a literacy teacher's frustration working in the discourse of crisis in literacy, experiencing the disjunction between the individual literacies of students and the education reformers deploying an autonomous model of literacy that strips language and learning of all context. I end here describing the dialectical relationship between local assessments of what constitutes literacy--which I hope I show in the following pages are always historical, situational, social practices-- and cultural beliefs about literacy and its relation to independence and citizenship. In writing this, I came to believe that Harvard's discourse of evaluation has not yet received scholarly attention, because the features of writing they designated subliterate are still debased for those of us in English studies. I recognized my own contempt for sentimentality in theirs, and my own fatigue when encountering the commonplace in their dismissals. Those responses are themselves historical. What is important to recover is that both commonplaceness and sentimentality demonstrated alternative discourses, in other words, alternatives ways "of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting" that signified membership or sympathy with disenfranchised groups. I am not arguing here that every instance of commonplaceness or sentimentality in a Harvard entrance examination was a sign of resistance. But I do argue that it is their potential for embodying and

legitimizing those alternatives, and not any inherent “subliteracy” to the discourse itself, that produced such vitriolic and prolific interest in their eradication, and that deserves our attention..

2.0 “A RATHER VULGAR YOUTH WITH HIS LIGHT GONE OUT”

In this chapter I elaborate how the Harvard faculty constructed *commonplaceness* as subliterate and instructed their readers to recognize it as a lack of individuality. As a quality of writing, this criterion was also called “mediocrity” or “dullness,” but I choose *commonplaceness* to signify a situatedness that the other terms lack: “commonplace” also denotes circulation (what is commonly believed, said, or heard) and specific literacy practices, thereby helping to define Harvard’s privileged criterion, individuality, against what it is not. For instance, Susan Miller argues that commonplaces functioned as “the places where common ideas useful in argumentation visually ‘appear’ hung on well-stocked, familiar mental images”—often in commonplace books, which “stimulated participation in a collective identity and the forms by which it was regulated.” As *topoi*, or topics for invention, commonplaces in classical rhetorical education functioned as the places to begin, the well of common knowledge from which to draw.¹ In Harvard’s evaluative discourse, the positive valence of “commonplace” as “shared” remains unacknowledged and is instead only invoked in the pejorative senses of “common” identified by Raymond Williams as “*vulgar, unrefined* and eventually *low-class*”(Keywords 71). Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the emergence of *commonplace* as a “lack of distinction” only to the mid-nineteenth century. In the act of reading for individuality, the

¹ Susan Miller, *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 22-23.

examiners' abhorrence of commonplaceness circulates an evaluative criterion that reinforces class privilege by classifying forms of group identification as remedial, deploying only in pejorative terms literacy practices that privileged shared knowledge and collective identities.²

Commonplaceness is articulated as a sign of subliteracy, because it marked the lack of literary appreciation, the absence of taste, the inability to make distinctions. Yet the refined literary appreciation they were reading for marked a relation to culture acquired through privileged material conditions yet naturalized in their discourse of evaluation as individuality. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu explains how material differences are ideologically converted into natural differences through the ideology of taste: "The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it naturalizes real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature."³ The demonstration of taste that Harvard examiners privileged was a social and historical process that the examination functions to mystify even as it instrumentally excludes students without such class-based dispositions. It is this social and historical process to which I now turn my attention.

² An example of what an activist commonplace literacy practice would look like is treated in the following chapter.

³ Perre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 68.

2.1 COMPOSITION AS CULTURE

Harvard examiners privileged a literacy of distinction by reading to recognize privileged forms of cultural consumption. The 1874 prompt for the entrance examination in composition read as follows:

English Composition. Each candidate will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression, the subject to be taken from such standard authors as shall be announced from time to time. The subject for 1874 will be taken from one of the following works: Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Merchant of Venice*; Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*; Scott's *Ivanhoe* and *Lay of the Last Minstrel*.⁴

I want to focus on the phrase “correct in ...expression” in the examination prompt. In their studies of language arts and composition books, Lucille Schultz and Robert J. Connors have noted that it was only in the late nineteenth century that *correctness* shifts from meaning “socially acceptable” to “formally acceptable.”⁵ Rather than simply a request for acontextual grammatical correctness, then, correctness signified reputable expression, or a demonstration of taste.

Literature's function on the examination was to train the candidate's literary sensibility and to shape his writing style. For example, Hill wrote that the reading of literature was a way to

⁴ John Brereton, ed., *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 47.

⁵ Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille M. Schultz, *Archives of Instruction: Nineteenth-Century Rhetorics, Readers, and Composition Books in the United States*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 128; Robert J. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 128.

“effect several desirable objects,” predominantly “that the student, by becoming familiar with a few works holding a high place in English literature, would acquire a taste for good reading, and would insensibly adopt better methods of thought and better forms of expression.”⁶ Hugh Blair offers the same advice in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a required text at Harvard throughout the nineteenth century, in the chapter “Directions for Forming a Style”: “with respect to the assistance that is to be gained from the writings of others, it is obvious, that we ought to render ourselves well acquainted with the style of the best authors. This is requisite both in order to form a just taste in style, and to supply us with a full stock of words on every subject.”⁷

What is notable about this conception of the relationship between composition and literature is that literature teaches itself, and what makes writing literary is obvious to the reader. Rather than formal correctness, then, it is this very inability to recognize the literary and demonstrate that appreciation in writing that faculty return to in their critiques of student writing on the entrance examination. Note Hill’s aside in this exasperated synopsis of the candidates’ performance:

They were all boys with blood in their veins, and brains in their heads, and tongues that could talk fast enough and to the purpose when they felt at ease. Many of them came from the best families in point of culture and breeding, and from the best schools we have. Many of them had enjoyed “The Tempest” (who

⁶ Brereton, *Origins*, 48.

⁷ Hugh Blair, *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately*, eds. James L. Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 85. Broadus notes that Kitzhaber found twenty-six separate pre-1832 printings of Blair in Harvard’s library, 50. See *Genteel Rhetoric*, 28. In his own classes in the 1870s, Hill assigned Blair and Campbell’s chapters on taste and style but not their philosophies of rhetoric.

that can understand it does not?), but somehow the touch of pen or pencil paralyzed their powers.⁸

Hill equates the comprehension of literature with pleasure (“who that can understand it does not?”) but laments the student’s failure to appreciate *The Tempest* or express that appreciation appropriately in writing. Between 1874 and 1896, Harvard faculty write that grammar and spelling are consistently improving, but they are demoralized by the candidates’ failure to properly respond to a literary text. Hill argued in 1890 that despite general improvement, the dullness of the average composition persists: “In 1884, Mr. (now Professor) Briggs, who then took charge of the examination, wrote to me as follows: ‘Few were remarkably good, and few extraordinarily bad; a tedious mediocrity was everywhere.’” The problem, for Hill, is the “dead level, rarely varied by a fresh thought or an individual expression. Almost all the writers use the same commonplace vocabulary—a very small one—in the same unintelligent way.”⁹ Briggs, too, finds mediocrity to be the most demoralizing and difficult to read of all the examinations’ qualities, for more than simply a matter of style, it signifies a disturbing lack of individuality: “The average theme,” Briggs contends, “seems the work of a rather vulgar youth with his light gone out; and this unilluminated incompetency takes the place of characteristics in about three quarters of the books.” These vulgar youths reveal themselves for what they are when they do not recognize literature as literary: “The boy does not dream that the story is full of life,” Briggs writes in 1890, for “to him it is something to go through—like statistics.”¹⁰

⁸ Hill, “English in Schools,” *Our English*, (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1890), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ Brereton, *Origins of Composition*, 71.

2.2 CULTURE AND CLASS CONSOLIDATION AT HARVARD

In “Rhetoric for the Meritocracy,” Wallace Douglas traces transformations in how Harvard composition was conceived, beginning with the Boylston statutes formalized in 1803 and ending with Charles W. Eliot’s 1869 inaugural address. Douglas argues that the schoolmasters who wrote the Boylston statute “proposed to construct a university subject (and did!), conceived their ‘objective’ to be that of establishing in their pupils a style and lexicon more or less specific to oratory, or—I really think this is more accurate—to public conversation in polite society.” The framers of the statute drew on what Douglas calls “the sociology of usage” wherein good use was determined by the class position of the rhetor: words considered elegant are rendered trite or common when sordid or middle-class speakers adopt them, and for Douglas, “it is hard not to conclude that the purposes of composition, as it came to be conceived in the latter days of rhetoric, was the acquisition of certain linguistic forms of relatively narrow currency, which today would be said to represent good or appropriate English, but which in more candid times could be described, simply and without apology, as signs of social rank.”¹¹ Rather than signifying class membership, taste signifies individuality, a state that ostensibly anyone, regardless of class position, can achieve. I want to consider now the literary emphasis in rhetorical training at Harvard widely credited to Channing, and how the criteria of taste and culture functioned to rationalize the privatization of antebellum Harvard.

As editor of *North American Review* Channing marked a controversial shift from the rhetor as speaker to the rhetor as writer and from debate to engagement with a text. While opinions differ on whether Channing’s pedagogy signaled an engagement with or a retreat from

¹¹ “Rhetoric for the Meritocracy” in Ohmann, *English in America*, 109-10.

public life, his materials demonstrate a classical rhetoric adapted to print.¹² This engagement with a text rather than audience trained the faculty of taste which, in her study of his *Lectures*, Dorothy Broaddus argues Channing taught as self-discipline and judgment, as “that ‘great moderating or tempering power, that wars against excess, against false associations of images and the unbecoming intrusion of startling but disturbing ideas’ (*Lectures* 31). Taste restrains emotions and provides the writer with the ‘serenity of self-possession’ (*Lectures* 59).”¹³

Paradoxically, while taste was a faculty that could be trained it was also explicitly a product of class privilege, a position reinforced by the rhetoric textbooks taught at Harvard until A. S. Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* was published in 1878.¹⁴ Blair defines taste as “a sort of compound power, in which the light of the understanding always mingles, more or less, with the feelings of sentiment . . . The foundation upon which they rest, is what has been found from experience to please mankind universally.” What pleases mankind universally, then, is determined by longevity, but “mankind” is an exclusive group determined by class position:

¹² For discussions of Channing in composition studies, see Charles Paine, *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 62; Wallace Douglas, “Rhetoric for the Meritocracy,” in Ohmann, *English in America*, 112-25; Myron Tuman, “From Astor Place to Kenyon Road: The NCTE and the Origins of English Studies,” 344; Miriam Brody, *Manly Writing*. Scholars in speech communication have also documented the shift. Ronald R. Reid notes that “Channing’s criticism . . . was mostly literary” and that Channing’s lectures and his students’ notes refer to the “writer” rather than the “speaker,” a slight but significant shift in emphasis. “The Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, 1806-1904: A Case Study in Changing Concepts of Rhetoric and Pedagogy,” 247.

¹³ Dorothy Broaddus, *Genteel Rhetoric: Writing High Culture in Nineteenth-Century Boston*, (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 32-33.

¹⁴ The prevalence of Blair’s *Lectures* and George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* in formal and informal North American education is well documented; Stephen L. Carr has traced over two hundred fifty translations and British and American editions. “The Circulation of Blair’s Lectures,” 75-104.

When we refer to the concurring sentiments of men as the ultimate taste of what is to be accounted beautiful in the arts, this is to be always understood of men placed in such situations as are favourable to the proper exertions of taste. Every one must perceive, that among rude and uncivilized nations, and during the ages of ignorance and darkness, any loose notions that are entertained concerning such subjects, carry no authority.¹⁵

Only men placed in favorable positions, then, participate in defining what universally constitutes the beautiful. Blair is explicitly acknowledging the social construction of aesthetic taste, what Pierre Bourdieu will later describe as “the product of privilege, that is, of exceptional conditions of acquisition.”¹⁶ In Blair, privilege precedes and is a precondition for taste. Similarly, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) George Campbell mandates that what defines “good use” (and as Wallace Douglas points out, was codified in the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory statute) is the consensus of those with the leisure time to cultivate themselves:

The far greater part of mankind, perhaps ninety-nine of a hundred, are, by reason of poverty and other circumstances, deprived of the advantages of education, and condemned to toil for bread, almost incessantly, in some narrow occupation. They have neither the leisure nor the means of attaining any knowledge, except what lies within the contracted circle of their several professions. As the ideas which occupy their minds are few, the portion of the language known to them must be very scanty.¹⁷

¹⁵ Blair in Golden and Corbett, 45.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 256.

¹⁷ Campbell, Golden and Corbett, 178.

In the most widely circulated rhetorics, then, what constituted taste in composition and literature was not an inherent quality of the text but a consensus of the most privileged readers.

In his lectures, Channing taught that most men do not participate in constructing universal value, because they cannot recognize the literary. According to Broaddus, “Mens’ common nature, however, enables them only to perceive ‘unquestionable genius’ from a distance. The literary works themselves may be beyond common comprehension; thus, according to Channing, common men’s opinions do not ‘constitute truth.’ (*Lectures* 161).” As Campbell writes that the leisure class that has taste “will be found to have the approbation of those who have not themselves attained it,” Broaddus argues that Channing “naturalizes ordinary people’s submission to the ‘judgments of the more competent,’” with his own similar conclusion: “common men are ‘pleased with the impulse and guidance that direct them to hidden truth and beauty, and they cannot with so much propriety be said to obey the decree of a master as the decision of their own instructed minds and natural feelings’ (*Lectures* 161).”¹⁸ Broaddus deems Channing’s characterization of a “happy, obedient underclass” a form of cultural domination.

Channing served as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric for thirty years, and his successor Francis Child successfully extricated himself from composition and rhetoric teaching to pursue his literary interests when Eliot assumed the presidency at Harvard. I recount this institutionalized literary orientation and emphasis on taste, because at mid-century Harvard College acted to consolidate the relationship between class and culture in response to a legislative challenge to open Harvard to non-elite students. The fifteen-year conflict was a bitter one driven by class resentments and according to Ronald Story, a seminal event in the making of

¹⁸ Broaddus, *Genteel Rhetoric*, 37.

Brahmin class-consciousness. Yet when the Harvard Corporation won in 1865, it justified that achievement not through class but through culture.

Harvard's governing bodies were the seven-member Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers, a much larger body comprised of public figures that mirrored the Massachusetts legislature, designed to guarantee that as a recipient of state funds, the college serve a public function. In the 1850s representatives from the Democratic-Free Soil Coalition, the Know-Nothings, and the new Republican parties were elected to the Massachusetts legislature and began a tumultuous fifteen-year struggle to open Harvard to non-elite students, arguing that "Harvard should not be a 'select school for the education of classes or cliques . . . a sectarian, a narrow, or an exclusive institution with lavish endowments but few students and a Corporation dominated by 'one sect' and 'one party'.'"¹⁹ The members of this diverse new Massachusetts legislature united in their desire to open Harvard College to nonelite students by restructuring Harvard's two governing bodies. For the first time, members of insurgent parties organized to promote interests such as abolition, immigration restriction, and labor sat on a Harvard governing body.

From 1850 to 1865, the Harvard Board of Overseers functioned as a form of congressional oversight and produced a series of reports attempting to restructure Harvard governance.²⁰ The alumni responded by organizing and succeeded in removing Harvard from congressional oversight upon passage of the Act of 1865, which entirely severed the university's ties to the state. Harvard College became a private institution and Harvard Alumni were entrusted with the election of the Board of Overseers on Commencement Day. After 1866, the

¹⁹ Qtd. Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard and the Boston Upper Class, 1800-1870*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 143.

²⁰ Story, *Forging*, 140-42.

constitution of the Board of Overseers was purged of non-elite members and became a homogeneous group of Boston elites; the membership of the newly formed Harvard Club, the Harvard Corporation, and the Board of Overseers became a closed circle. Boston elites consolidated it and justified it through culture: the Harvard Corporations' aim was to keep Harvard in the hands of those "whose culture & professions give them most ability & most leisure."²¹ If culture was open to anyone regardless of class position, then class resentment could be deflected. This was a significant achievement of the elective system.

2.3 CULTURE AND LIBERTY

The elective system is, in the first place, an outcome of the Protestant Reformation. In the next place, it is an outcome of the spirit of political liberty.

- Charles Eliot²²

While the elective system did not originate at Harvard, Eliot was its most outspoken defender. He argued that the elective system was an exercise in liberty and therefore distinctly American, as the student, in making his own choices and pursuing his own interests, practiced republican self-government. Conflict over the elective system increased when Harvard's freshman year became partially elective in 1884. Other university presidents were appalled that students fresh out of preparatory school chose their own courses, without even the kind of institutional guidance offered by majors or course sequencing within departments. Eliot believed that by choosing their own courses, even the wrong ones, college students created their own educational

²¹ Story, *Forging*, 155.

²² Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America*, 94.

experience, and that the situation improved instruction as professors competed for student enrollments. Even attendance was optional.

Privately, Eliot saw the elective system as crucial to Harvard's institutional growth. Between 1871 and 1885 there was no consecutive-year increase in the freshman class at Harvard, and percentages of public school students in those classes steadily declined as the admission requirements Eliot had imposed for the past decade increased. Secondary school and college articulation subsequently became one of Eliot's goals, especially considering that what increases Harvard did see came from students in the south and west. In order for Harvard to expand, Eliot would have to cast a nationwide net. In the 1880s Eliot's interest in the admission requirements therefore changed: standards had successfully been raised, but now that fewer secondary schools were qualified to prepare students for the Harvard examinations, Eliot fought to liberalize subject requirements. Eliot believed subjects' disciplinary value was fairly equivalent, and a student of the sciences could be as cultured as a student of the classics. Expanding secondary and preparatory schools' options for examination subjects was a crucial factor in university recruiting and growth.²³

Barrett Wendell was a vocal member of the faculty contingent who blamed Eliot's elective system for lowering the tone at Harvard after the 1880s. W. E. B. DuBois noted the Harvard faculty's alarm over new students at Harvard in the 1890s: "I had unwittingly arrived at Harvard in the midst of a violent controversy about poor English among students. A number of fastidious scholars like Barrett Wendell, the great pundit of Harvard English, had come to the campus about this time; moreover, New England itself was getting sensitive over Western slang

²³ Arthur G. Powell, *The Uncertain Profession: Harvard and the Search for Educational Authority* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13-20, 19.

and Southern drawls and general ignorance of grammar.”²⁴ After 1884 when the last vestige of class cohesion was eliminated by making the freshman year elective, English A became the only required course and was moved to the freshman year. With A. S. Hill recovering from a long illness and oratory an elective and unpopular subject, Wendell and Briggs were charged with instilling culture in the students at Harvard College.

In his dissertation on Barrett Wendell, Paul E. Cohen notes that at antebellum Harvard the homogeneity of the student body made recognizing a Harvard Man a simple process and that “students all studied the same things and spoke the same New England dialect which was refined into Harvardese in required courses in oratory: ‘no boy went four years to Harvard,’ wrote Frederic J. Stimson, ‘without gaining at least that cultivated accent which is the greatest password to that ‘best’ society.’” With a new population of students bringing their far-flung home dialects with them, achieving Harvardese, and therefore recognizing a Harvard Man, became a problem. In a precursor to the later Harvard reports, a visiting committee reported to the Board of Overseers in 1885 that the English department “seems to secure the minimum of instruction to each student at the maximum of labor to the teacher,” and that it “is clear that instruction now offered is entirely inadequate and that steps should be taken to give the study of English a more dignified position in the college curriculum.”²⁵ English faculty members submitted a letter of protest, arguing that the conclusion was reached despite the fact that “neither Mr. Storey nor other members of the Board of Overseers ever attended any of the

²⁴ Du Bois, “A Negro Student at Harvard at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*, eds. Werner Sollors, Cladwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), 81.

²⁵ Cohen, “Barrett Wendell: A Study in Harvard Culture,” 68, 62.

lectures of any of the present instructors in written English.”²⁶ The following year the Board of Overseers tried another tactic, and recommended that as the embodiment of Brahmin culture, James Russell Lowell (whose speech was supposedly indistinguishable from Matthew Arnold’s) teach a course on speech and writing.

According to Cohen, Wendell was furious at the report’s reduction and simplification of Harvard instruction in English. However, he shared their concerns. When Eliot won a long battle to allow mathematics as a substitute for Greek on the entrance examination, he won the goodwill of secondary schools and the hostility of classics teachers; Wendell considered it a lowering of standards, and even Charles Francis Adams Jr., famous for his scorching indictment of the classics, “A College Fetich,” saw the elective system catering to the worst tendencies of the young. He wrote to Wendell that “the difficulty with Eliot has been fundamental,” because he is “possessed of the Stuart Mill theory that young men, if left alone, will as a rule do that which is most for their own good. Neither he, nor Stuart Mill, were ever real boys.” Wendell, for his part, wrote that Eliot was a “force almost purely destructive—of ideals, of standards, of achievements” who increasingly argued that the elective system only lowered standards for admission and the culture of Harvard undergraduates.²⁷ Liberty was not enough to cultivate civic virtue; it had to be refined through culture. In what they read as social chaos facilitated by the elective system, Wendell and Briggs participated in the counter-reformist effort against Eliot to restore liberal culture to the Harvard College curriculum by building support for his ideological opponent, Lawrence Lowell, to succeed him as Harvard president in 1909.

²⁶ “Letter to the Honorable Board of Overseers of Harvard College signed by various members of the English department, May 29, 1885,” ms in Wendell papers, Houghton Library, qtd. in Cohen, 62.

²⁷ Cohen, “Barrett Wendell: A Study in Harvard Culture,” 74-75.

Wendell and Briggs nevertheless joined other reluctant faculty members in assisting Eliot's secondary education reform efforts of the 1880s and early 1890s. Eliot never ascribed to a science of education—hence his reliance on political philosophy rather than a philosophy of learning to make curricular decisions—and he only established a department of education at Harvard to forestall the spread of normal schools in Massachusetts. He hired Paul Hanus to teach the history and philosophy of pedagogy, and Hanus embarked on this thankless task with little faculty or institutional support. If the elective system signaled social chaos, for Briggs, Wendell, and a few passionate others, courses in pedagogy portended the transformation of Harvard into a vocational school. Hanus was routinely blocked at every turn. At one faculty meeting “when Hanus defended methods courses, Wendell rebuked him before the faculty with such vitriol that he found it necessary to apologize for his unforensic behavior. ‘The chief trouble,’ Wendell said after he had calmed down, was ‘old-fashioned ignorance, not neglect of ‘pedagogy.’”²⁸

While Briggs reluctantly agreed to teach methods courses in English, he did so despite his conviction that writing could not really be taught, and ways of addressing the needs and literacies of the new students entering Harvard were never addressed. In this way, Briggs and Wendell ironically undermined their own efforts to improve the teaching of literature and composition. As they addressed a readership beyond the gates of Harvard Yard and disseminated the “Harvard methods” in lectures, education journal articles, and literary magazines, Hill, Briggs, and Wendell dismissed method as pedantry. In ascribing the ability to write and the

²⁸ Barrett Wendell to Charles Eliot, February 1, 1899, and February 4, 1899, qtd. in Powell, *The Uncertain Profession*, 62.

ability to teach to *culture*, however, Briggs repeatedly recommended that schools establish the conditions that make culture possible: prestige, pay, and leisure time for teachers of English.

2.4 THE PEDAGOGY OF CULTURE

In his articles in *The Academy*, a journal for secondary school teachers and administrators, Briggs urges preparatory schools to improve the working conditions of teachers:

As a general thing the school gets out of the teacher all that it pays for: and until schools can afford to pay trained and polished men; to give those men such relief from routine and bread-winning as shall enable them to cultivate themselves; and to demand of them not the raw power of keeping fifty boys in order and hearing five recitations a day, but a spirit at once gentle and manly, and a culture that must reveal itself without pedantry in every recitation, whatever the subject---until this millennium arrives, we shall see in our English examination the results of weary or perfunctory or---worst of all---decorated teaching.²⁹

Powell argues that the emerging profession of teaching suffered under education reforms in Massachusetts, because more attention was paid to the methods training and credentialing of teachers than to their working conditions, the very terms under which practitioners do or do not experience their work as professional.³⁰ We can read in Briggs' attention to working conditions a hypercorrective to a reductive focus on technique and institutional interests. While Briggs'

²⁹ Briggs, "The Harvard Admission Examination in English," 73.

³⁰ Arthur Powell, *The Uncertain Profession: Harvard and the Search for Educational Authority* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 33.

attention to the material conditions of work is quite remarkable, his interest does not extend to the learner who, like the teacher, may not share these privileged conditions, or to philosophies of reading, teaching, and learning then in circulation.³¹ To acknowledge the multiple literacies that students bring to a classroom or that literature or writing could be taught would be to demystify and denaturalize taste, as well as to question its function as a criterion. Briggs instead deploys the language of mystery and endorses the teacher whose “culture reveal[s] itself without pedantry” and never descends to “decorated teaching.” In 1879, Hill urged schools to utilize those with natural talent to teach English: “The best talent in each school—it is not too much to say—cannot be better employed than in teaching the use of the great instrument of communication between man and man, between books and men, the possession without which learning is mere pedantry, and thought an aimless amusement”³²

The examiners’ disdain for pedantry deserves some notice. Salvatori has documented how American dictionaries have traditionally defined *pedagogy* and *pedantry* as synonymous, thereby recording and reproducing the devaluation of teaching and teacher education.³³ For instance, in the 1899 *Century Dictionary* the first entry for “pedant” is “1. A schoolmaster; a teacher; a pedagogue,” but the second definition expands to one with an inappropriate relationship to knowledge: “2. A person who overrates erudition, or lays undue stress on exact knowledge of detail or of trifles, as compared with larger matters or with general principles; also, one who makes an undue or inappropriate display of learning,” conveyed through language or

³¹ Mariolina Salvatori traces how pedagogy was frequently reduced to an academic debate about whether teaching was a science or an art, terms which limited the ways in which teachers and learners were constructed, and which some universities—most notably Harvard—appropriated to further their own institutional interests. *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1819-1929*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

³² Hill, “An Answer to the Cry for More English,” in Brereton, *Origins*, 52.

³³ Salvatori, *Pedagogy*, 20.

style as “pedantic.”³⁴ Briggs’ remark that too many students treat literature as if it were statistics indexes this disdain for pedantry, as compiling knowledge about the text only gets in the way of acquiring the appropriate relation to it. In “English in Schools,” Hill also lays the blame for students’ apathetic response to literature at the feet of teachers, for both assigning too much reading at once and teaching the wrong selection of detail. Here he gives an example of the latter, describing the method of a teacher who assigned Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond*:

In another school the class went through the same book at a snail’s pace, the teacher doing his best to transform a lively narrative into a series of tedious exercises. Instead of calling attention to the main points of the story, to the characteristics of the principal personages, or to beauties of style, he spent his strength on unimportant details,—demanding, for example, all the particulars of the attack by the mob on the carriage of old Lady Castlewood, including an answer to the important question whether the first vegetable to hit Father Holt was a cabbage, a carrot, or a potato.³⁵

We cannot know this teacher’s goals from Hill’s characterization of the scene of instruction, only that the focus on a scene Hill deems unimportant violates the unity of the text. Consequently, the teacher responsible for the student composition on *Henry Esmond* is a pedant, “one who lays undue stress on exact knowledge of detail or of trifles,” and Hill instructs his own reader to know that the “attack by the mob on the carriage of old Lady Castlewood” is simply an unimportant detail unworthy of notice. How is it that an attack by a mob is a narrative event to be read but to remain unnoticed, unselected, and therefore insignificant? By delegitimizing an account of this

³⁴ Salvatori, *Pedagogy*, 27-28.

³⁵ Hill, “English in Schools,” *Our English*, 11.

reading, Hill proscribes the possibility that this selection of detail is a viable place to begin and that the selection itself requires remediation.

This sustained dismissal of pedagogy and pedantry (and their very conflation) constructs taste as a natural faculty, as judgment, by bringing into contempt a teaching or writing practice learned through overt instruction rather than long familiarity. Bourdieu locates the very contempt for pedagogy in its inclusive potential: “But above all—and this is why aesthetes so abhor pedagogues and pedagogy—the rational teaching of art provides substitutes for direct experience, it offers short cuts on the long path of familiarization, it makes possible practices which are the product of concepts and rules instead of springing from the supposed spontaneity of taste.” Pedagogy offers an alternative mode of acquisition, “thereby offering a solution to those who hope to make up for lost time.”³⁶ In their rejection of pedagogy, then, we read the Harvard examiners’ fullest rejection of those students who do not demonstrate taste by precluding the possibility of alternative readings and evaluative criteria.

The student failures in the entrance examinations made visible the presumed transparency of the literary text, helping to construct literature as an object of study and the students themselves as amateurs. When the MLA adopted literature as an object of study in 1884, the vote was controversial precisely because literature was considered by many to be simply a pedagogical tool to be utilized across the humanities. Michael A. Warner points out, however, that proponents were able to argue that literature could repay critical labor, a premise I suggest made more plausible by the well-known and widespread failure of Harvard freshmen to correctly

³⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 68.

respond to literature in the composition examination.³⁷ The emerging field of English subsequently divided into specialists who would bring scientific methods to the study of literature and generalists, or defenders of liberal culture, who promoted the natural talent of the teacher. Neither position considers the learner or questions the presumption that knowledge confers the ability to teach. As Salvatori and Donahue point out, “despite obvious differences, specialists and generalists share the assumption—still very much in vogue more than a hundred years later—that to know a subject well, through research or love, provides adequate preparation to teach it.”³⁸

The failure of teachers was also a focus for Briggs, who called attention to the importance of cultivated teachers in his defenses of the Harvard examination. Here he describes the ways that teachers interfere with the learning process by getting in the way of students cultivating a “straightforward” style:

Some masters push English composition into a corner, and a dark corner at that; others are guilty of sentences like “When *will we* be able to *really commence* work?” others, not so inaccurate, prefer oratorical or dressy English to the style of a straightforward gentleman, and vitiate a boy’s writing with a vulgarity that it takes years to counteract; others still—to borrow Professor Hill’s expression—praise the English that is “free from all faults except that of having no merits.”³⁹

³⁷ Warner, “Professionalization and the Rewards of Literature: 1875-1900,” *Criticism* 27 (1985): 1-28.

³⁸ Salvatori and Donahue, “English Studies in the Scholarship of Teaching,” 73.

³⁹ Brereton, *Origins*, 61-62.

Harvard's zeal for secondary school reform and teacher education abated after 1893 with the release of the Report of the Committee of Ten. Chaired by Eliot, the committee of ten university and normal school presidents and high school principals recommended modern subjects and elective study for high schools, aligning them with universities and the requirements of the Harvard entrance examinations. The unanimity of the committee's decisions carried great weight, but despite their institutional and geographic diversity, there were no critics of school-college articulation on the committee, so certain questions were entirely proscribed.⁴⁰ For example, subject sub-committees reflected modern university subjects, and professors of pedagogy or education were not represented at all, leaving it up to subject committees to propose the teaching methods suited to their field. Thanks to healthy and prestigious representation on the English committee, both the teaching of composition and the teaching of literature were recommended for all four years of high school. The committees delegated applied, standardized work to subordinates (elementary and secondary school teachers) and preserved the university as the province of theoretical knowledge.

As Donna Strickland has argued, the Harvard reports recommendations were based on an efficient division of labor, because the teaching of writing is deemed simultaneously elementary and experienced as repetitive, standardized, and detailed, resembling assembly line more than professional work.⁴¹ The description is a familiar one: "In quantity this work is calculated to

⁴⁰ Critics of school-college articulation were conspicuously absent, most notably Yale University. Whether Yale was not approached or, as Eliot maintained, they declined his invitation, the absence of any scholar who would have advocated adherence to a classical curriculum or local control of that curriculum—and there were many—attests to the kind of conclusions the committee was structured to avoid.

⁴¹ See TheodoreSizer, *Secondary Schools at the Turn of the Century*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 100; Powell, *Uncertain Profession*, 25; Report of the Committee of Ten, 11-13, 169.

excite dismay; while the performance of it involves not only unremitted industry, but mental drudgery of the most exhausting nature.”⁴² But an effect of the determination to push composition teaching to the secondary schools is that whatever writing ability the students demonstrate does not count because it is the result of an inappropriate division of labor. Take, for instance, how the 1892 report frames its evidence as it instructs its audience (the Harvard Board of Overseers) to discount what may look like competent writing:

It must, of course, be borne in mind that where a paper of this sort is called for in a class the instruction of which takes place by divisions, those in the later divisions of the class will have knowledge of what is expected of them, and the papers handed in will to a certain extent have been prepared outside the recitation-room. When, therefore, these papers, 450 in number, were sent to the Visiting Committee, Professor Hill, in forwarding them, notified the members of the Committee that, in the opinion of the instructors, the papers in question were calculated to give a more favorable view of the quality of the work done than was warranted by the facts.⁴³

One has to wonder how the students’ own writing does not qualify as one of the “facts” of their competence in composition. Adams attributes it to the “knowledge of what is expected of them” an admission that demonstrating a command of the readers’ expectation and the rhetorical situation—a context that admissions examinations do not provide—are a determining factor in a writer’s effectiveness. Adams adds that the students also had the opportunity to revise:

⁴² Charles F. Adams, E. L. Godkin, and Josiah Quincy, “Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric.” 1892. *Reports of the Visiting Committees of the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, from February 6, 1890, to January 8, 1902, Inclusive.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1902), 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 120.

Three-fifths of those attending the course had already written about their preparation in English, their exercises had been criticized, and each of them had thus been shown how to make his production better in form and more interesting in substance. Accordingly, such of the papers as the instructors examined before sending them to the Committee, were found to be in their judgment decidedly above the general average of work done by those whose names were signed to them.⁴⁴

In its very framing, then, the report acknowledges that revision and awareness of the rhetorical situation helps produce good writing, so the quality of the student writing must be disregarded.

The Harvard reports' recommendations conflict in fundamental ways with the discourse of evaluation that Harvard examiners had been producing for the previous two decades. In the last report released in 1897, the committee recommends the "incidental method" for teaching composition in the preparatory schools: "The written exercise in the Classics of one day, could the next be followed by one in mathematics, or history, or French, or German, or geography. But every day some recitation, [sic] now conducted orally, should be conducted in writing. In this way the scholars would be accustomed before entering college to use written English as a means, and not merely as an end."⁴⁵ Instead, the committee contends, too much preparatory work in writing sets out on the inappropriate errand of preparing men of letters, for,

⁴⁴ Charles F. Adams, E. L. Godkin, and Josiah Quincy, "Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric." 1892. *Reports of the Visiting Committees of the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, from February 6, 1890, to January 8, 1902, Inclusive*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1902), 120.

⁴⁵ Charles Francis Adams, E. L. Godkin, and George R. Nutter, "Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric." 1897. *Reports of the Visiting Committees*, 414.

it seems altogether too frequently assumed that the institutions of secondary education are expected annually to send up for admission to college solid phalanxes of potential authors, essayists, and litterateurs. The evidence of this delusion is to be found almost everywhere in the nine volumes of papers under consideration,—evidence incontrovertible, because wholly unconscious, and some of it comical, did it not, from its revelation of misdirected effort and unintelligent zeal, verge on the pathetic.⁴⁶

What the committee reports as “misdirected effort” verging “on the pathetic” is an effect of the examination—whose abolition Adams recommended, inside and outside of the reports—Harvard’s discourse of evaluation, and a Harvard pedagogy that privileged originality, individuality, the *literary*, as skill in composition.

While the Harvard examiners read for literary appreciation, originality, and individuality, the Harvard reports relegate those concerns, too, to the university: “Indeed, as a whole, these 1300 papers may be said to be full of loose, meaningless talk,—perhaps cant would not be too strong a descriptive word,—about ‘style,’ ‘mass,’ ‘individuality,’ ‘rhetoric,’ ‘originality,’ ‘expression,’ . . . etc., etc., indicating an utter lack on the part of those who had instructed the writers of the proper limits of the work assigned to them to do,” that is, teach writing appropriate to the secondary school: “it demands steady, daily drill, and drudgery of a kind most wearisome.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Charles Francis Adams, E. L. Godkin, and George R. Nutter, “Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric.” 1897. *Reports of the Visiting Committees*, 418.

⁴⁷ Charles Francis Adams, E. L. Godkin, and George R. Nutter, “Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric.” 1897. *Reports of the Visiting Committees*, 421.

The incidental method recommended by the committee recalls Briggs' regret at the ideal yet impracticable method of evaluating a candidate's composition skill across subjects. But the committee identifies the main hurdle as a confusion of appropriate work, as the preparatory schools teach originality and the college teaches grammatical correctness. By this time, however, the examination in composition has been divided into two parts: one that tests composition and one that tests literary appreciation, and that organization ensures that the two will be taught, and evaluated, together.

2.5 ELIZABETH ABORN WITHEY

Fueling the literacy crisis of the 1890s was a two-part report on students' performance in the 1895-1896 Harvard entrance examinations published in the December 1897 and January 1898 issues of *Educational Review*. Harvard's involvement in school reform largely ended with the Committee of Ten and the founding of Radcliffe College in 1893, which supplied teachers who could implement the "Harvard methods" in Massachusetts schools. "Sub-Freshman English" is a testament to how the conversation about written examinations in English changed since the first Harvard examination in composition in 1874. In the 1870s and 1880s, Hill and his colleagues Barrett Wendell and Le Baron Russell Briggs were writing articles for education journals, publishing composition textbooks, and lecturing on "good English." By the 1890's, the crisis of student writing established, they moved on from grading "under the lash": due to poor health, Hill taught a limited schedule of literature and advanced composition classes; Wendell was publishing biography, literary history, and criticism; Briggs in 1892 became dean of Harvard College. That the responsibility of reading, cataloguing, and reporting on Harvard written

entrance examinations has been delegated to a woman—a woman who of course is not a student or faculty member of Harvard University, because the institution did not admit them—is a division of labor I will take up in a later chapter.⁴⁸ For now, I would like to address how the examination and its evaluation criteria had formalized.

That, as a woman, Withey's judgment could of course be questioned is addressed at the beginning of "Sub-Freshman English." A. S. Hill introduces her to the reader as a person of "accuracy, thoroughness, intelligence, and fairness of mind" and describes Withey's method of preparation: she has read the body of almost two thousand examination books for 1895-96, "making full notes" which were then "classified under appropriate heads" and are "now published as a body of evidence tending to show the quality of work in English which the secondary schools were doing a year or two ago, so far as that work can be judged by the test of a two-hours examination." Hill authorizes Withey to report the examination data, but not to perform any intellectual or conceptual work, for "those who take an interest in the teaching of English will prefer to interpret for themselves the facts here spread before them."⁴⁹

The Harvard University Catalogue for 1895-96 describes the English examination as a two-part requirement: to prepare for Part I, the candidate should read "*all* the books prescribed," but "should read them as he reads other books; he is expected, not to know them minutely, but to have freshly in mind their most important parts." The books of Part II are reserved for "careful study," and designed to assess the candidate's knowledge of "subject-matter, literary form, and logical structure, and will also test the candidate's ability to express his knowledge with

⁴⁸ Withey's invisibility in composition history is so complete that in *The Resistant Writer*, Charles Paine attributes the authorship of "Sub-Freshman English" to Adams Sherman Hill.

⁴⁹ Adams Sherman Hill, Introduction to "Sub-Freshman English, (I)" *Educational Review* December 1897, 468.

clearness and accuracy.” In Part I of the actual examination administered in June 1896, candidates were instructed to “attend to form as well as to substance” and “write a paragraph or two” on five of fifteen prescribed literary works. Part II asked candidates to perform one of a variety of reading and writing tasks regarding the *Merchant of Venice*: summarize the story and subplots, state the argument of the trial scene, quote ten lines from memory, discuss Shylock’s treatment, or contextualize the “Music of the Spheres.” Of the 794 candidates who took the 1896 entrance examination in English, one hundred fifty-one (19%) received a C+ or above. The only two As received those marks because they demonstrated individuality, one through literary appreciation and one through imagination.⁵⁰

In line with Hill and Briggs, Withey finds that the “quality of language which pervades the mass of the examination-books is commonplaceness.”⁵¹ Withey cites Briggs and Hill as authorities: “The apostrophe is still, perhaps, as Professor Briggs said in 1888, ‘nearly as often a sign of the plural as of the possessive’” and she incorporates two references to Hill in the following: “Much of the writing is characterized by what I have termed in my notes ‘a mixture of boy and book.’ I mean that the writers do not ‘put their real selves behind the pen and keep them there’.”⁵² The “mixture of boy and book” that circulates from Hill’s criticism to Withey’s is evidently the writer’s failure to distinguish his own personality from the personality of the literary text. Withey gives an example of the kind of distinction expected in a candidate: “The following answer to the fourth question in the second part of the examination-paper is a case in point: the first sentence represents the boy; the second, the book: ‘In my opinion Shylock is shabbily treated all through the play. He is spurned and spat upon, his daughter is enticed from

⁵⁰ Withey, “Sub-Freshman English, (I)”, 469-70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 479.

⁵² Ibid.

him, and his property is taken from him.”⁵³ The individuality that literature was thought to foster instead induces the student to imitate the style and diction of the original text. The “boy and book” effect that Hill and Withey decry signifies an unacceptable permeability in the writer, for he fails to maintain his own individuality and lets the text master him.⁵⁴

And yet a digression signifying a literary quality is fine. Withey notes that misreadings do not count against candidates, and a glancing demonstration that the book was read, if mostly forgotten, is sufficient. Her introduction to one passage reads, “This theme has faults of execution, but it has life. The fact that it strays from the original story did not, I am sure, affect the mark given by the examiners.”

“The Coming of Eppie.”

“On a cold night in mid winter Silas sat before the fire, dreaming of his lost gold, when suddenly he heard a cry, he thought at first that it was wind, but it was soon repeated. He went to the door and the cry was repeated louder this time, Silas thought it was a child’s voice, so, buttoning up his coat he went out into the snow, and guided by the sounds he discovered a little bundle of rugs almost covered with snow from which issued pitiful cries. Silas went home with his burden and on opening it found a little rosey faced girl.”⁵⁵

This student passed the examination because his composition has “life,” despite his acknowledged “faults of execution,” which, I assume, is the propensity for the run-on sentence.

⁵³ Withey, “Sub-Freshman English, (I),” 479.

⁵⁴ Withey and Hill’s denunciations of the “boy and book” effect read like precursors to the criminalization of modern plagiarism. See Rebecca Moore Howard, *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators* (Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999).

⁵⁵ “Sub-Freshman English, (II),” 56.

A high school English teacher might rightfully expect the blunder to disqualify him, but the quality of “life” here compensates for it.

Withey addresses stylistic failures by categorizing them as forms of dullness. She introduces style as the experience of reading: “*Style*—I have already spoken of the dullness which characterizes the mass of the examination books. As I turn over my notes on individual books, I find frequent comments like the following: ‘Dull, like the last;’ ‘Little to be said of this book except that there is no point to anything;’ ‘Absolutely without freshness;’ ‘Not a single live thought or expression in the book.’” The conflation of style and literacy is not examined as Withey does not elaborate on how a reader recognizes qualities such as “freshness.” She does offer examples of “C” and “D” papers called “the pointless class” and sorts them into subcategories of dullness; Withey quotes one of these writers in the pointless class guilty of “an attempt to be very methodical”: “In comparing ‘L’ Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso,’ I shall speak of them respectively. First in importance is, that they represent Joy and melancholy. Secondly, both poems open with a prologue, almost identical in verse and meter.” This student writer demonstrates a formal method of reading rather than literary appreciation.

Withey offers the following writer as another kind of “dullness,” an example of “many themes which I have classified under the term ‘ambitious.’ One of this class is enough”:

“Silas Marner’s Gold.”

The gold of Silas Marner, the keynote of so much that is pathetic, touches all, comes home to every-one, bringing with it a doubting and troubled air. It is powerful, the note that the author struck, and leaves one’s mind unsatisfied, like all problems, too deep for settlement, which are presented to one. What effect this problem has had upon the world: is it the gold, or is it that which gold brings,

that we love—is it the God, or is it the symbol of the divinity, that we idolize?

Does the image often crowd out the reality?⁵⁶

There are many possible readings this student’s composition might generate for those of us in English studies today—on the dialogic nature of reading, as the sketch of a critique of commodity fetishism, on the gap between signifier and signified—as there must have been many possibilities for readers in 1896. But they are closed down as Withey reads this composition as the work of an “ambitious” and therefore “mediocre” writer.

Part One of “Sub-Freshman English” is a catalogue of grammatical mistakes and syntactic errors. Withey invokes Hill when she claims that the significance of misspelling is what it implies for the student’s speech: “Among the most deplorable mistakes with regard to vowels, in my opinion, are those which seem to indicate a vicious pronunciation: *terrible*, *tangeable*, *intelligable*, *insensable*, *visable*”⁵⁷ However, Withey detracts from Hill and Briggs in her account of illiteracy. Hill and Briggs had routinely referenced it as a state of innocence rather than an effect of bad training or weak character. Withey instead offers a litany of ways that students deploy “illiterate expressions”:

“Dunstan Cass *was wanting to go some place.*”

“He knew that Godfrey was afraid, that he would *tell on him.*”

“Their mother died when they were young; and for that reason they were not brought up very *good.*”

“One of Sila’s best friends, as he supposed, stole some of the church money and *blamed the theft on Silas.*”

⁵⁶ Withey, “Sub-Freshman English, (II),” 68-69.

⁵⁷ Withey, “Sub-Freshman English, (I),” 472.

“He did not notice that a, golden haired, little child crept quietly in the house and *laid* down in front of the fire place.”⁵⁸

These examples depart from how illiteracy was deployed in Harvard’s early discourse of evaluation. For instance, Briggs characterized illiteracy as a lesser evil than the pedantry he despised and “no drawback to touchdowns and homeruns,” but as Withey is writing, the ways of naming and defining illiteracy are expanding even as the tolerance for illiteracy is shrinking.

2.6 RECONSIDERING “THE ILLITERACY OF AMERICAN BOYS”

In his work on literacy crises, John Trimbur observes that the “Johnny Can’t Write” panic of the 1970s was

only a continuation of an ongoing discourse that has repeatedly put literacy in crisis since the mid-nineteenth century. This discourse is not concerned primarily with student performances, declining standards, or increased social demand for reading and writing. Rather, the discourse of literacy crises engages deep-seated cultural anxieties and attempts to resolve them magically, by regulating the production and use of literacy and by drawing lines between standard English and popular vernaculars, “masters” and “servants” . . . literacy appears to go into crisis precisely because of the faith [the middle classes] have invested in schooled literacy as the surest means of upward mobility and individual success, a form of

⁵⁸ Withey, “Sub-Freshman English, (I),” 479-80.

cultural capital that separates their children from those of the working class and the poor.⁵⁹

Discursants in literacy crises struggle to achieve recognition for the literacy practices of elites as standard and legitimate, for such recognition functions to maintain elites in positions of power through perceived merit rather than simply class privilege. A review of the publicity accompanying the Harvard reports, especially E. L. Godkin's articles on the "illiteracy of American boys" demonstrates Trimbur's observation that literacy crises express anxieties over the collapse in class distinctions.

Godkin and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., were the two permanent members of the visiting Committee on Composition and Rhetoric at Harvard. Upon the release of their last report, Boston schoolmasters were appalled to hear that the Committee proposed to print and make public the examination papers of all students applying to Harvard for the academic year 1897-98, and they filed a letter of protest with the Harvard Board of Overseers seeking to prevent their publication. The schoolmasters protested on two grounds: publishing students' writing would make unfair distinctions between preparatory schools; and a timed examination could not demonstrate a candidate's ability to write good English. They added that "While we regret the growing illiteracy of American boys as much as your committee does, we cannot feel that the schools should be held solely responsible for evils which are chiefly due to the absence of literary interest and of literary standards in the community."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Trimbur, "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis," *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, eds. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991), 279-80.

⁶⁰ "The Growing Illiteracy of American Boys," *The Nation* 1896 Vol. 63, No. 1633, 284.

Godkin first reprinted the schoolmasters' letter in the *Nation* and countered that teachers, like all professionals, were accountable to the public for the results of their work, but he does not accept illiteracy as an excuse, for the "way of accounting for evils, and relieving individuals from blame for them, by ascribing them to general causes, is a very old one." Moreover, "[i]f it be true that 'illiteracy is growing among American boys,' and there is 'an absence of literary standards and interests in the community,' the remedy would seem to lie in greater efficiency and energy on the part of the institutions which are specially charged with the duty of combating illiteracy among youth."⁶¹ Publishing the students' work was the best method of reform, Godkin argued, because "publicity is the great modern remedy and stimulant."

One month after publishing this debate in the *Nation*, Godkin addressed the Schoolmaster's Association of New York and Vicinity on the same topic, and this speech was published in the January 1897 *Educational Review* as "The Illiteracy of American Boys." Godkin acknowledges that the typical 1896 Harvard student writes better than he did in 1874, when the first entrance examinations in composition were given: "That he has improved is shown by the fact that his entrance themes are now better than they used to be."⁶² This improvement in the examinations is irrelevant, however, because "I meet every day with men whom we call educated, who do not seem to care how they speak or how they write. Their speech is full of solecisms, and their letters and notes are unpunctuated scrawls, and in their pronunciation the vowel sounds are summarily got rid of."⁶³ That educated men in Godkin's social circle do not seem to care about good English—and more importantly, that this disinterest does not prohibit their advancement—is the problem:

⁶¹ "The Growing Illiteracy of American Boys," *The Nation* 1896 Vol. 63, No. 1633, 285.

⁶² E. L. Godkin, "The Illiteracy of American Boys," *Educational Review* 13 (1897): 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

I say so much about speech because of, in my opinion, its very close connection with writing. Teachers in America are deprived of one important aid in regard to it, of which I have seen no notice taken, which teachers in European countries enjoy, and that is the fact that, in all the leading countries in Europe, language is connected with social station . . . Riches of course have their effect there as here, but I may assert positively that a man who drops his *h*'s, or speaks slovenly, slangy, ungrammatical English, as rule, never gets a place of respect or equality in the upper circles.⁶⁴

Americans' alarming mobility signifies a leveling of cultural value, that the symbolic practices of the best classes are no longer recognized as necessary to move into and maintain positions of power. What Godkin considers bad speech and writing, then, is no barrier to advancement in the United States. It could be *made* a condition of advancement, however, and given the growing importance of college admission, he sees here an opportunity for the schoolmasters:

Of this desire to enter college much use may be made, as it seems to me. You have it in your power, with the aid of the colleges, to make good English speech and writing seem throughout the country a necessary part of the equipment of a young man who wishes to graduate somewhere, and thus convert the rapidly increasing class of graduates into real guardians of correct speech. You have the scale of importance of studies in your hands . . . It ought to be made absurd and ridiculous for a boy who cannot speak and write his own mother tongue to want to

⁶⁴ E. L. Godkin, "The Illiteracy of American Boys," *Educational Review* 13 (1897): 3.

go to college at all . . . If college education be a prize, therefore, good English should be a condition of the prize.⁶⁵

I belabor Godkin's position on this point not because his utterance made it so, but because he expresses the anxiety that Trimbur argues is the underlying concern of literacy crises. This article entitled "The Illiteracy of American Boys" is about neither illiteracy nor a decline in standards. Instead it outlines the schools' potential for making privileged reading and writing practices a condition of access to college, and of institutionalizing the enviable European social hierarchy in the United States.

The Harvard literacy crisis was news. Withey's articles were picked up as reports on illiteracy at Harvard by *The Dial*, *The Independent*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the *New York Times*, as part of a larger story of moral panic about illiteracy in the 1890s. Coverage of the literacy crisis in the *New York Times* perpetuated the notion that language differences were viable markers of character at a time when its new editor, Adolph Ochs, was reinventing it as the "Business Bible" to target wealthy and aspiring readers. Ochs introduced finance and stock market coverage and actively recruited new readers in schools and colleges, targeting them with the slogan, "To be seen reading *The New York Times* is a stamp of respectability."⁶⁶ In its coverage of Withey's articles on Harvard English, the *Times* concluded "it is a fair statement that the errors of which we have cited only a few are distinct and conclusive evidence of illiteracy, which ought to be very rare in the graduates of 'fitting schools,' as the body of these candidates for admission to college must have been." Echoing Godkin's argument in the *Nation* that "Schools should be made ashamed of their boys, and boys made ashamed of their English," the

⁶⁵ E. L. Godkin, "The Illiteracy of American Boys," *Educational Review* 13 (1897): 6-7.

⁶⁶ Michael Schudson. *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 108, 112.

Times folded the story into its own construction of respectability: “There are newspapers made by educated men that can be read without breeding the habit of vulgar or lax speech, and there are—others.”⁶⁷

This crisis is circulating at a time when literacy was becoming a requirement for political participation. The secret ballot, which unlike party-issued ballots required an act of reading, was introduced in 1888. A flurry of state-level legislation required literacy tests of potential voters, a total that would include thirteen northern and western states by the 1920s. In 1895, members of the Immigration Restriction League founded at Harvard administered literacy tests to one thousand immigrants at Ellis Island and reported “a close connection between illiteracy and general undesirability,” and its concerns were articulated at the national level when Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts proposed an educational test for immigrants on the senate floor.⁶⁸ These changes represented a gradual shift in how Americans would think of themselves and, more significantly, how they would think of others. The literacy tests of the late nineteenth century produced, expressed, and validated fears of a contaminated body politic that legitimated literacy as a tool of exclusion.

Soltow and Stevens have documented that illiteracy was not considered a barrier to political participation in the antebellum US and that illiterates were legally protected from fraud; fifty years later illiteracy, or the charge of illiteracy, was sufficient to question one’s fitness for political participation. To garner support for McKinley and the gold standard in the crucial 1896 election, *The New York Times* ran a series of articles comparing states’ positions on the silver

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, December 12, 1897; *New York Times*, November 16, 1896.

⁶⁸ Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 143; Barbara Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants*, 110; George H. Haynes, “Educational Qualifications for the Suffrage in the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly* 13 (1898): 5.

plank with their rates of illiteracy: “The statistics of education bear out the statistics of frugality. It is from the parts of our country where unthrift and ignorance prevail that the party of free silver finds its strength. It is the men who know nothing and have nothing to lose who make that strength. The showing is calculated to show reflection and to darken an outlook extending far beyond this Presidential campaign.”⁶⁹ Although the *Times* is relying on new methodology they are making an old argument: property cultivates disinterestedness, the civic virtue necessary to act in the public interest.

How Harvard faculty defined individuality in their discourse of evaluation refers to their anxiety about a mass public and mass culture. For others occupying less privileged positions, the difference between whether a mass public is conceived as a mob or the fulfillment of the promise of democracy lies in the tension of “mass” that Raymond Williams describes: “(i) something amorphous and indistinguishable; (ii) a dense aggregate.” In the 1890s, diverse organizations of agrarians of laborers put aside their differences long enough to unite behind the Populist party on the issue of free silver, organizing on the active connotation of mass: “It was when the people acted together, ‘as one man,’ that they could effectively change their condition. Here what had been in sense (i) a lack of necessary distinction or discrimination became, from sense (ii), an avoidance of unnecessary division or fragmentation and thus an achievement of unity.”⁷⁰ In this chapter I have attended to the first sense of “mass” as a lack of distinction; in the following chapter I turn my attention to a land-grant university where farmers, long excluded from higher

⁶⁹ Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States*, 150; “Ignorance and Silver,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1896; see also “Silver and the Creditor Class,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1896.

⁷⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 193, 194.

education, were driven by the latter sense as “unnecessary division” as they fought for an education that would serve their interests.

3.0 “A MOST DIGNIFIED AND INDEPENDENT LIFE”

I knew very well that my appeal could not lay to the New York *Nation*, or any of the hereditary and scholastic ideas which it represents. My only hope was the unsophisticated common sense and common justice of the people, that very people from whom all reforms, civil and religious, that are good for any thing, not excepting Christianity itself, have sprung up for the past two thousand years, in spite of all classes above and over them. I knew if I approached them in the language of the schools, the courts and the parlors, my words would fall listlessly on their ears. I chose, therefore, their own rougher language, if you please, of the fields and the shops. They may not read my words, but whenever they do read them, they will understand them, and that is the trouble

All men in position and power naturally hate agitators, if they agitate with any effect.

– Jonathan Baldwin Turner¹

When he spoke these words at the Farmers’ Legislative Club in 1874, Professor Jonathan Baldwin Turner had already been an industrial education activist for over two decades and was widely credited with organizing the political will to found a university for the industrial classes in Illinois. By the time Illinois Industrial University opened its doors in 1869 through funding allocated through the Morrill Act, Turner had shifted his attention from founding an institution to fighting a new enemy: the Eastern-based banks and railroads that he and others in the farmers’

¹ *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Illinois State Farmers Association* (Chicago: Southard, Book and Job Printer, 1874).

movement believed exploited the labor of western farmers. When his inflammatory remarks in “Railroad Corporations: The Natural vs. the Artificial Man” were circulated in the press, Illinois politicians and an anonymous writer in the *Nation* denounced him, and his allies invited Turner to publicly respond.² Under the unwieldy title “Address of Prof. J.B. Turner, delivered by invitation of the Farmers’ Legislative Club, in the Representatives’ Hall, Springfield, Ills., on February 5th, 1874, in reply to the assaults of the New-York *Nation* and Illinois Senate,” Turner’s defense was published and distributed to Farmers’ Clubs, Granges, and the agricultural press as one more volley in what was already an organized legislative and public relations battle between East and West, railroads and farmers, capital and labor.

In this chapter I elaborate how farmers’ movement strategies inflected the curriculum and objectives at Illinois Industrial University, and how the discourse of the farmers’ movement was enacted in a “Composition and English Literature” class at the university in 1876.³ The Morrill Act mandated that land-grant universities such as Illinois Industrial “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes”⁴ (“First” 47), but the local farmers and merchants on its Board of Trustees and the Illinois state legislature believed that to do so, the university would have to break completely with all known models in U.S. higher education. As Turner suggests in the epigraph, many Illinois farmers, especially activists, considered the “language of the schools, the courts and the parlors” the creation of the professional classes and one that could never serve their interests, so the language and literature courses particularly rankled them. This population had long been excluded from higher education, and the identity of “student” and “farmer” were

² The essay that caused such a ruckus was originally published by the Illinois State Agricultural Society.

³ Sixteen examinations from this first-year course were preserved as part of Illinois Industrial University’s exhibit at the Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876.

⁴ *First Report*, 47.

culturally antithetical, a contradiction that the university recognized and tried to help reconcile in its motto, “learning and labor.”

The 1870s marked a time of great agrarian unrest in Illinois, but activists faced rhetorical problems in their efforts to organize farmers and in representing farmers as a class. Property ownership invested the citizen ideal of the “yeoman farmer” with the republican virtue of independence, and the link between civic virtue and property propelled Jefferson’s policy of westward expansion and the Homestead Act of 1862. However, the citizen ideal of the farmer whose independence was achieved through property could no longer be sustained in the face of farmers’ well-known economic devastation. The student work at Illinois Industrial University demonstrates the material trace of a movement to create new commonplace ways of thinking about the farmer by reinvesting the figure of the farmer with republican independence--and therefore civic virtue—derived, rather than through property, through his labor.

In this chapter I draw on farmers’ movement strategies, course materials, and institutional history to construct a reading of student examinations that I argue enact an activist commonplace literacy. But I begin with antebellum farmers’ movement activities and discourse to note the shift in subject position to later activist discourse. My aim is to situate the curricular struggle as deeply as possible, as agents struggled to define the functions of literacy and education, conscious that this terrain was key to economic independence and political power.

3.1 FROM EDUCATION TO REGULATION

In the 1870s farmers directed their reform efforts to government regulation of banks and railroads, but this objective marked a departure from the earlier emphasis on education with

which Turner and many of his Illinois cohorts began. In antebellum Illinois, farmers organized to create their own educational institutions separate from the professional classes, but it is important to note that these classes were initially conceived as separate and distinct from each other; if little class mobility was imagined, at least the interests of those classes did not necessarily conflict.⁵ At the Farmers Convention at Granville in 1851, Turner proposed a plan for an industrial university in Illinois that would be qualitatively different in curriculum and pedagogy than the classical college. The distinction was crucial, Turner maintained, because classical education was created to sustain the professional classes: in the Granville Plan, an Agricultural University is proposed to “further the interests of the agricultural community” and a resolution proclaimed that

as the representatives of the industrial classes, including all cultivators of the soil, artisans, mechanics, and merchants, we desire the same privileges and advantages for ourselves, our fellows, and our posterity, in each of our several pursuits and callings, as our professional brethren enjoy in theirs; and we admit that it is our own fault that we do not also enjoy them.⁶

Here “industrial classes” is invoked to denote skilled laborers distinct from their “professional brethren” who have their own system of higher education. The convention’s resolutions urged farmers to raise their own status through education.

Editors of agricultural journals had been delicately stressing the importance of education for decades. In her study of agricultural journals of the 1830s and 1840s, Lynne Blanton argues

⁵ Thomas Woods also makes this observation in *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1991).

⁶ “A Plan for an Industrial University for the State of Illinois,” *Industrial Universities for the People*, (Jacksonville, Ill.: Morgan Journal Book and Job Office, 1853), 15.

that praise of the farmer's virtue is pervasive, yet this persistent flattery coexists uneasily with exhortations to the farmer to help himself, "For, despite his long, useful and distinguished history, so often touted in agricultural magazines, the farmer had never been as great as he surely deserved to be if all the old paeans were true. His economic and political status may have been good, but his social status had been uncertain at best."⁷ Agricultural magazines in this period simultaneously praised farming and urged farmers to act individually to elevate agriculture, as the foundation of national wealth, to the status it deserved: "Now education, scientific knowledge and mental improvement were judged to be vital, necessary acquisitions for the farmer, important weapons in his fight to hold on to his slipping rank and his thinning ranks."⁸

But the Civil War signaled a radical postwar shift in many farmers' actual economic conditions and therefore, their relation to their property.⁹ Farmers who invested heavily before the war when prices for their products were high were now drowning in debt. Currency and credit were scarce: the national banks created to finance the war issued currency still concentrated in the northeastern United States. Geographic distance was a factor in calculating interest and shipping rates, so southern and western farmers paid artificially high production and distribution costs at a time when prices for their own products were low. The situation made banks and railroads the targets of their reform efforts, and farmers' movement activities in the 1870s focused on electing anti-monopoly representatives at the local and state level who would

⁷ Blanton, "The Agrarian Myth in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century American Magazines," (PhD diss, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1979), 153.

⁸ Blanton, "The Agrarian Myth," 180.

⁹ Although the Panic of 1873 was a watershed event in mobilizing farmers, farmers articulated class-conscious concerns much earlier. For discussions of the shift from an individualist to collectivist strategy, see Carl C. Taylor, *The Farmers' Movement, 1620-1920* (New York: American Book Company, 1953) and Steven L. Piott, *The Anti-Monopoly Persuasion: Popular Resistance to the Rise of Big Business in the Midwest* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 11-13.

pass railroad and banking regulations.¹⁰ Farmers in Illinois organized so effectively that, through fusion, they elected enough candidates in the Reform, Anti-Monopoly, and Independent parties to form a swing bloc in the state legislature during this period.¹¹ The first “Grange Law,” *Munn v. Illinois*, was passed by the Illinois state legislature in 1876, and enjoys the distinction of being the first U.S. law regulating interstate commerce.¹²

Despite their electoral successes, organizing farmers was difficult precisely because of their ideological investment in Jeffersonian republicanism and independence; the difficulty was exacerbated by their geographic isolation. Farmers carried an actual disproportionate debt burden while other professions and classes benefited from a booming postwar economy, but representing that reality carried certain risks. Indeed, calling for government intervention to rectify the injustice of the farmer’s economic situation risked associating him with government relief and the taint of dependence that those on relief have historically assumed.

Institutions that received federal or state funding were subject to the same criticism. For example, when John W. Hoyt proposed to revive Washington’s plan for a national university and build a federally-funded graduate school in the capital, the ensuing controversy involved the

¹⁰ For several excellent discussions of agrarian resistance to monopolies, see Sanders, Woods, Taylor, and Piott.

¹¹ Fusion was a common campaign practice wherein parties formed coalitions; a candidate could run as both the Reform party candidate, for instance, as well as the candidate for a stronger establishment party, usually the Democratic. Fusion made third-party candidates viable in local and state elections until the early 1890s, when states passed anti-fusion laws that prohibited one candidate from being listed twice on a ballot. Peter Argersinger persuasively argues in “‘A Place on the Ballot’: Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws,” that in a historical period of intense party loyalties, requiring voters to cast a ballot outside of their party effectively ended the viability of third-party candidates in the United States. *The American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 287-306.

¹² In *Roots of Reform*, Elizabeth Sanders notes with irony that the early progenitors of the progressive movement were the agrarians, a group with a traditional antipathy for government intervention.

principle of republicanism. Although the proposal for a national university was unanimously supported by the National Educational Association, Harvard president Charles Eliot spoke to the NEA and Congress to oppose it, calling a national university an example of “abject dependence.” At the NEA meeting in 1873, Eliot equated publicly-funded institutions with charitable ones, arguing that “the habit of being helped by the government, even if it be to things good in themselves—to churches, universities and railroads—is a most insidious and irresistible enemy of republicanism; for the very essence of republicanism is self-reliance.”¹³ In a rebuttal to Eliot in 1874, national university supporter and Cornell University President Andrew White pointed out that until only recently Harvard itself received public funding, and its Museum of Natural Science was supported by the state of Massachusetts. Eliot defended Harvard’s acceptance of state funding because it did not constitute relief, for “Harvard students had always paid ‘a very fair tuition fee,’ he observed. ‘It was reserved for the present generation in our Western States to insidiously teach communism under the guise of free tuition in State colleges.’”¹⁴ Receiving government assistance could thereby undermine an individual or an institution’s perceived capacity for self-government, which complicated the position of students who received free tuition and farmers’ demands for government intervention.

The farmers’ movement attempted to untie this Gordian knot by constructing non-farmers as dependents and representing the farmer, the producer of every consumer’s basic needs, as the only independent citizen. For example, in the late 1860’s and 1870’s the Chicago agricultural

¹³ Charles W. Eliot, “National University,” *The Addresses and Journal of Proceedings of the National Educational Association, Session of the Year 1873* (Peoria, Illinois: N. C. Nason, 1873), 118.

¹⁴ For Andrew White’s rebuttal, see *The Addresses and Journal of the Proceedings of the National Educational Association, Session of the Year 1874* (Worcester, Mass: Charles Hamilton, 1874), 68; Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 153.

journal *Prairie Farmer* ran a series of lithographed posters promoting the Grangers, a social and educational organization for farmers. In these posters, a full-length portrait of a farmer typically dominated the center, and small vignettes of other, traditionally more prestigious professionals—lawyer, banker, statesman, cleric—arranged themselves on the periphery. One of these posters in particular depicts a farmer confidently resting his hands against his shovel, his shirtsleeves rolled up and a pipe clenched between his teeth, under the caption “I Pay For All.” (In contradistinction to the banker, whose caption reads “I Fleece You All.”) These posters visually represent the ideological and political work of the Grange, which was at the time the primary organization of the farmers’ movement. Situating the farmer at the center of the economy and the social fabric, the provider of every consumer need, was a move that the Grangers, and the farmers’ movement more broadly, held to be an accurate but unrecognized representation of reality. Positioning the farmer at the hub of a network of economic relationships, yoking the production of food to the production of currency, (“I Pay For All”), was not just a Grange recruiting strategy; it legitimated the farmers’ right to make political demands.

Although in its graphic design the abovementioned Granger poster was typical of the series, its title--“I Pay For All”—uniquely connotes the complexity of the farmer’s situation. If the farmer pays for all, we may be asked to consider him the ultimate provider, responsible for everyone yet beholden to none. In the republican conception of citizenship, such economic independence gave one a stake in society and the capacity to act disinterestedly for the common good, which is how property and tax requirements for voting in the U.S. have historically been justified. The caption may also be read as a characterization of the farmer’s disproportionate share of the economic burden as the producer of every consumer’s basic needs. In this case, it points to the gap between virtue and reward and invokes the moral authority that the farmer’s

labor, in a just society, should give him. The effacement of property and the representation of interdependence in the Granger posters, then, marks a historically situated revision of the figure of the farmer and the agrarian myth that Illinois Industrial University students inscribe in their “Composition and English Literature” course.

3.2 THE ASSIGNMENT: RECOGNIZING THE FARMER

The English Literature questions on this examination are similar to those common on early entrance examinations in English documented by Mary Trachsel in *Institutionalizing Literacy*. Instructed to first write the required essay, students could then turn to address any thirteen consecutive questions on literature.¹⁵ Included were options such as: “Name and define four of the most common figures of speech, and give an example of each;” and “Who belonged to the Lake School?” The questions require a demonstration of knowledge of literary biography, history, and criticism, and this kind of testing would become increasingly criticized by examiners for encouraging memorization about literature rather than the reading of literature itself. Indeed, the students’ answers to the literature questions demonstrate intensive test preparation and memorization, and they repeat their preparation almost verbatim.

Our interest here is the composition requirement: “Write an essay on agriculture, giving first the plan of the essay.” I’d like to pause for a moment and work backward to explain how students prepared for the exam. The university catalogs list as a recommended text for the

¹⁵ The examination instructions now available for research were evidently reproduced for the Philadelphia Centennial exhibit, for they are addressed to a viewing audience rather than the student: “Of the following questions the class had permission to select any thirteen consecutive ones, after writing the essay first called for.”

course William Swinton's *A School Manual of English Composition*, and one of Swinton's writing exercises provides the framework for the examination essay on Agriculture. According to Lucille Schulz, an "exercise" was defined against rule-based writing instruction, and "suggested a pedagogy based on practice, the use of performance-based (as opposed to recognition-based) activity to improve one's level of fitness in composing."¹⁶ Students probably practiced writing their compositions, then, rather than writing in response to a prompt for the examination. The exercise instructs the writer to trace agriculture's origins and its contributions to civilization, culminating in praise for the farmer's life:

Agriculture: The various sources of subsistence which God has put in man's power—agriculture—what is meant by it—its antiquity—Scripture proof—how it has been estimated by various nations—its progress not so rapid as that of some other arts—war its special enemy—its present advanced position—effects on the condition of man shown by considering his state without it—its connection with civilization—real dignity and independence of the farmer's life.¹⁷

This exercise functions as a series of commonplaces that students elaborate in their essays. I am especially interested in how students write their way to the conclusion: the "real dignity and independence of the farmer's life." In making the farmer's life—not the idyllic state of nature but the farmer's contribution to civilization—the content of this examination in composition, the assignment puts agricultural labor and literature as objects of study on equal footing. This move is significant, because farmers were materially excluded from the sectarian classical college through the privileged milieu it required: the correct religious denomination, property, leisure

¹⁶ Carr S., Carr J., and Schultz, *Archives of Instruction*, 164.

¹⁷ William Swinton, *A School Manual of English Composition* (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company, 1877), 78-79.

time, a personal letter attesting to the applicant's "character." Yet more than this, the supposedly degrading effects of manual labor had long disqualified one from participating in the formation of literary taste and skill, what "literature" and "composition" as college courses would soon promise to teach.

Courses from the classical college had a tradition of not only excluding laborers from the classroom but also of excluding the opinions of laborers as those that simply did not count, and reaction to this elitism had fueled the industrial education movement and guided the Illinois state legislature when drawing up the statutory guidelines for Illinois Industrial University. For instance, the conferral of degrees and diplomas was banned, and the university was required to issue certificates instead—written in English rather than Latin—to all students who completed at least one year of coursework. Matthias Dunlap, the most vocal farmers' advocate on the Board of Trustees, insisted that the university admit women, a position consistent with Grange policy and in opposition to the male-only classical college tradition.¹⁸ With the agricultural and popular press on board, the university opened its doors to women in its second year.

These institutional guidelines conflicted with the educational philosophy of John Milton Gregory, the university's first regent. A former president of Kalamazoo College and Baptist minister, Gregory was classically educated and believed that a liberal education was the foundation of all intellectual pursuit, including the sciences of agricultural and mechanic arts. When the predominantly Baptist Board of Trustees elected him regent in 1867, the agricultural press read it as a sectarian endorsement and a sign that Illinois Industrial would soon become a narrow religious institution. Jonathan Baldwin Turner, a longtime, prominent advocate of the Illinois land-grant university famously exclaimed: "An ex-superintendent of public instruction

¹⁸ Solberg, *The University of Illinois*, 81; Kersey, *John Milton Gregory*, 114.

and a Baptist preacher! Could anything be worse?”¹⁹ Gregory was committed to fashioning a new university, but he broadly interpreted the language of the Morrill Act as a mandate to thoroughly educate the few rather than implement the mass education that his political opponents envisioned. When he established a College of General Science and Literature that housed many of the subjects offered in the classical curriculum, even some on the Board of Trustees saw it as a betrayal of the university’s mission, as the classical college in a new guise. The curriculum debate raged in the pages of the *Chicago Tribune* as Matthias Dunlap tried to undermine public confidence in Gregory through a publicity campaign under the penname “Rural.” The debate spilled over into the agricultural journal *Prairie Farmer*, where one reader spoke for many when he wrote in that the prestigious language and literature courses would siphon students away from the agricultural college, and those who did enroll would find themselves at the bottom of a campus “caste system.”²⁰

The initial crisis of confidence in Gregory was resolved in his favor. I want to stress here that the curricular struggle at Illinois Industrial University was not over goals but over methods, a difference in the conviction of whether liberal education could be appropriated to serve the industrial classes, or as a creation of the professional classes, it would always by definition serve elites. Many in the farmers’ movement saw the barrier to farmers’ economic, social, and political progress as a corrupt economic and political system, whereas liberal educators like Gregory and Superintendent of Education Newton Bateman saw the aristocratic hoarding of culture as the barrier to the farmer’s progress. Gregory and Bateman were convinced that, as the currency of access, a liberal education was the path to full democratic and economic

¹⁹ Kersey, *John Milton Gregory*, 89.

²⁰ Anonymous, letter to the editor, *Prairie Farmer* 40, 1869.

participation. Gregory insisted upon the civic and communicative purpose of the language curriculum, which would produce a few organic intellectuals who could communicate their scientific findings to the press and attain leadership positions from which they could promote industrial class interests. At the university inaugural, Bateman argued that Illinois Industrial's commitment to the language courses portended "the surely coming American democracy" because "culture, as well as liberty, is the everlasting heritage of the race, and that whoso would restrict to the few what belongs to all, is a traitor to the people."²¹

Gregory was given license to design the university's curriculum, but his authority did not last long. The Panic of 1873 wreaked economic havoc on the nation, but farmers were especially devastated. That year, farmers' movement candidates were swept into the state legislature and onto the Illinois Supreme Court in a series of electoral and legislative victories. While Gregory was on sabbatical in Europe, they undermined the university's elective system by requiring agricultural and mechanic arts courses of all students and, in a special rebuke to Gregory's educational philosophy, offered tuition waivers to students who enrolled in those colleges. On this matter, Eliot and Gregory were of the same mind. Gregory feared free tuition violated the republican principle of self-government and turned recipients into dependents. Like Eliot's opponents, however, the farmers' movement representatives on the state legislature conceived of such objections as self-serving and sought to check Gregory's power and open Illinois Industrial to the classes it was founded to serve.²² They reduced the university Board of Trustees from a

²¹ Kersey, 25; Hatch, *Some Founding Papers*, 31.

²² In a rebuttal to Eliot in 1874, national university supporter and Cornell University President Andrew White pointed out that until only recently Harvard was itself publicly funded and its prestigious Museum of Natural Science was largely supported by the state of Massachusetts. *The Addresses and Journal of the Proceedings of the National Educational Association, Session of the Year 1874* (Worcester, Mass: Charles Hamilton, 1874), 68.

thirty-two to an eleven-member body, and most significantly, they eliminated Gregory from the board altogether. When Gregory returned from Europe, he found that the university had been regulated in his absence and his power and influence diminished.²³

University historians note that these changes were part of a national trend to shift authority from university presidents to governing boards. I outline them here to emphasize that although Gregory designed and organized the university curricula, he had cyclical and periodic opposition on the Board of Trustees and state legislature that came to a head in 1873. J. L. Picard was the instructor of the “Composition and English Literature” course, and although there are no records documenting his classroom practice, the examination assignment is aligned with institutional and legislative imperatives to emphasize the importance of the agricultural and mechanic arts. By requiring the student writers to elaborate on commonplaces celebrating the farmer’s contribution to civilization, the examination requirement privileges the rural student’s subject position and lends it academic legitimacy; in a university classroom the nontraditional student is addressed as an insider and granted what David Bartholomae calls a “special right to speak.”²⁴

In a course examination that primarily tests students’ knowledge of literary history, the required composition is an attempt to reconcile the culturally antithetical conceptions of “farmer” and “student,” of subject positions that presumed manual labor and leisure, respectively. As an invitation to praise farmers and agriculture, the assignment is a gesture to welcome the children of farmers into this privileged institutional space and write their way into university membership. However, although activist farmers wanted the university to serve farmers as a class, Illinois

²³ Kersey, *John Milton Gregory*, 130.

²⁴ Bartholomae, “The Study of Error,” *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 516.

Industrial University students comprised a range of conflicting class positions and desires.²⁵ Recruitment was slow, because many farmers resisted sending their sons and daughters to a university, even one ostensibly created for them. One reason is they simply needed their children's labor at home, and there was not yet a science of agriculture that substantially exceeded what one could learn through farming practice and reading agricultural journals. For example, the university's "farmer's institutes," practical farming classes, were well attended and the proceedings were published in *Prairie Farmer*, which distributed that knowledge statewide. Another reason is that the university's impetus to educate and improve farmers was felt by many as a reproach. With the mid-century population shift from a predominantly rural to urban orientation, many farmers feared that a college education would only further entice future generations to leave the farm forever; social mobility was thus bound to class betrayal.

Even the grounds on which to praise farmers were contested within the farmers' movement. The disconnect between the common farmer and the "book farmer" was a problem addressed by Jonathan Periam, the Superintendent of Agricultural Education, who resigned from the university in 1869 to dedicate himself to agrarian reform and become editor of *Prairie Farmer*. In *The Groundswell*, his 1874 history of the farmers' movement, Periam writes of the difficulty educating fellow farmers who view education itself with suspicion: "Experience, that

²⁵ The difficulty recruiting children of farmers and students for the agriculture courses recorded in the university reports is evident in this class sample. Lottie Lloyd, Laura Low, and Colin Tom did not graduate from Illinois Industrial University. According to the Alumni Record, Augusta Batchelder was president of the Athenai, the women's literary society at Illinois Industrial University. Lorado Taft was the son of a professor; he later studied art at the Beaux Arts in Paris and became a renowned sculptor. William P. Johnson worked for Dickinson Seed Co. Three of the male graduates became lawyers, including Henry Beardsley, who was also mayor of Kansas City, Missouri. The only graduate recorded in the Alumni Record as a "farmer" is George Savage, who is also listed as an author, lawyer, and teacher—a well-rounded gentleman farmer who wrote books on English grammar.

thorough but costly teacher, eventually shows them how little they know, and how much they have yet to learn. The theorizing of gentlemen ruralists and mere scholars has disgusted them with book-farming.”²⁶ This conflict over how to value agricultural labor is expressed by student writers: some characterize the value of labor as its productive capacity, while others extol the dignity of farmers who deploy labor-saving technologies, further distinguishing those farmers who value “book-farming” from those who do not. The class cohesion necessary for political change is fragmented by these distinctions, which bring into relief the limits of this assignment designed to accommodate the educational goals of liberal educators and activist farmers. Yet the student writers’ agency is consistently foregrounded as they not only rehearse and explore, but also parody and reject perceptions and representations of the agrarian myth.

3.3 NEGOTIATING INDEPENDENCE

Now turning to the student writers, I focus on the question of how the students write their way to the conclusion prescribed in Swinton’s exercise: that the farmer enjoyed “a most dignified and independent life.” The traditional source of agrarian independence—property ownership—is never invoked. Instead, the writers rely predominantly on two strategies. The first is the discourse of the farmers’ movement that, like the Granger posters, constructs non-farmers as dependents. The second is to emphasize the farmer’s use of laborsaving technologies and his increasing leisure time. These two conflicting strategies—one foregrounding labor, the other

²⁶ Periam, *The Groundswell*, 507.

effacing it—demonstrate the tension between the two dominant yet contradictory conceptual frameworks available to Illinois Industrial University student writers at their moment.

Blanton argues that the agrarian myth's definition and emphasis shifts with its historical specificity and that in American agricultural journals of the 1830's and 1840's, for instance, the agrarian myth constructed in their pages rested predominantly on three major themes: agriculture's role in creating peaceful and prosperous nations; the divine sanction agriculture enjoyed, evidenced by the creation of the Garden of Eden and the consistent location of Christian virtue in rural rather than urban contexts; and the farmer's status as the ideal independent citizen, hinging on his ownership of land. Swinton's exercise invokes these three precepts yet makes no mention of property ownership. I wish to reproduce one student's essay in its entirety for how she simultaneously rehearses the conventions of the antebellum agrarian myth and derives the farmer's independence from labor. Augusta Batchelder writes,

- I. There are many sources of subsistence, which God has placed in man's power, among the chief of which is agriculture.
- II. Agriculture may be defined as being the science, or art, of cultivating the ground, sowing the grain, raising stock, etc.
- III. The science of agriculture seems to have originated at the very first; for we read in the Bible of Abel's tilling the ground, Abraham having flocks, Elisha ploughing, Etc.
- IV. Agriculture, with every thing else, has been progressing with the years. New and improved implements to aid in agriculture, are being invented continually.
- V. The present condition of agriculture is very good. The work, can now be done in much less time, and easier than formerly, on account of the many machines.

- VI. The effects on man are very beneficial, as the great amount of employment which it gives, tends to civilize man. Persons living in the country and working on a farm, are less liable to be led astray, than those living in the city.
- VII. In conclusion; the farmer's life is to me the most independent of all; for all others look to him for food, and for a great deal for the material for their clothing.²⁷

Note that Batchelder's work is not recognizable as an essay. Like many of her classmates, she numbers her lines as they correspond to the plan they are instructed to outline before writing: introduction; definition; origin; progress; effects; present condition; conclusion. The stages of historical development are privileged in this writing assignment. Batchelder rehearses conventions of the antebellum agrarian myth as she traces agriculture's origin to scripture ("...for we read in the Bible . . ."), and claims that agriculture creates peace and prosperity ("The effects on man are very beneficial, as the great amount of employment which it gives").

But in the last line there is no link between independence and property: "the farmer's life is to me the most independent of all; for all others look to him for food." Like the Granger poster, this revision of the agrarian myth establishes the farmer at the center of a web of social relations rather than as an autonomous propertied individual, which was strategically important. Agricultural journals of the 1870's such as *Prairie Farmer* and *Western Rural* consistently urged farmers to organize for their own protection, but the farmer's social and geographic isolation hindered activists' efforts to organize them, a group of individuals unused to imagining itself as a collective.²⁸ The road to change was no longer individual self-culture but collective involvement. The image of the self-sufficient subsistence farmer, independent of all economic

²⁷ For all Illinois student writing, see "Examination Papers, 1875-1876," Ms. 41/30/20, Box 2. University Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

²⁸ Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, 112 and 120.

and social systems, was recast with the farmer positioned at the center of society and a complex, differentiated industrial economy whom all others—including capitalists—were dependent on for their survival.

Batchelder's classmate Henry Beardsley more explicitly deploys farmers' movement discourse: "The progress of agriculture has been slow: war has been its special enemy. War destroys the products, and lays waste the land, carrying famine with it. War costs money, and the farmer is eventually the one who must pay it, for he makes the money. Thus the products after a war are used in paying debts." "War has been its special enemy" is a commonplace from Swinton's textbook exercise. In Beardsley's elaboration the farmer's burden is exponential: the farmer finances the war, which destroys his means of production, leaving him in more debt. Here Beardsley performs discursively what the Granger poster "I Pay for All" represents visually, linking the farmer's production of food to the production of currency ("for he makes the money"). Beardsley is constructing the farmer's independence through a movement discourse that had circulated widely by 1876. Just as the Granger poster sustains a tension between responsibility and exploitation, so too these student writers demonstrate the ideological conflict in asserting republican independence from a position of dependence.

As early as the 1858 Illinois State Fair in Centralia, farmers issued an articulation of movement principles in the "Farmers' Platform," which opens with the imperative to reverse the social and political positions of producers and non-producers: "We believe that the time has come when the producing classes should assert, not only their independence, but their supremacy; that nonproducers cannot be relied upon as guarantees of fairness." They asserted the need to restore the interaction between producers and consumers, an expression of alarm at the control of railroads over their relationship to consumers in distant markets: "the producer of

a commodity and the purchaser of it should, together, have more voice in fixing its price than he who simply carries it from one to the other,” and the goal is “to bring the producer and consumer as near together as possible.”²⁹

This assertion of independence became a collective declaration after the Panic of 1873, because the conditions that made Republican independence possible were thought to have been completely subverted. As the primary organizing vehicle for farmers, the number of Granges skyrocketed to over 10,000, ten times the number of the previous year. On July 4, 1873, thousands of farm families gathered nationwide in picnics to wave Grange banners and listen to speakers lambaste railroads and monopolies. They created and recited their own “Declaration of Independence,” mapping their own interests and aims onto the revolutionary sentiment of 1776:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for a class of people, suffering from long continued systems of oppression and abuse . . . a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the cause that impel them to a course so necessary to their own protection...

We, therefore, the producers of this state in our several counties assembled . . . do solemnly declare that we will use all lawful and peaceable means to free ourselves from the tyranny of monopoly, and that we will never cease our efforts for reform until every department of our government gives token that the reign of licentious extravagance is over, and something of the purity, honesty and frugality with which our fathers inaugurated it has taken its place.³⁰

²⁹ Taylor, *The Farmer's Movement*, 84-85.

³⁰ Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, 154-55.

Their declaration stops short of revolution through their adherence to “lawful and peaceable means” but, attributing their oppression to the tyranny of monopoly, they call for government reform in the spirit of the founding fathers, a restoration of the conditions that make individual self-government possible.

Beardsley is the writer who most fully elaborates the farmer’s independence through farmers’ movement discourse. He concludes his essay with, “The farmer’s is the most independent life; for all others depend on him for their food.” And Augusta Batchelder ends the same way: “In conclusion; the farmer’s life is to me the most independent of all; for all others look to him for food, and for a great deal for the material for their clothing.” Lorado Taft also invokes a variation of farmers’ movement discourse, concluding that “we must add that we consider the labor of the farmer as among the most honorable and independent of occupations. All strength is derived from his productions, nations look to him for life. ‘All wealth comes from the soil.’” Like Beardsley, Taft credits the farmer’s labor with creating national wealth, and all three of these writers discursively construct non-farmers as dependents through the farmer’s crucial position at the center. That all of these students establish the farmer’s independence through such similar phrasing—“all others depend on him,” “all others look to him,” and “nations look to him for life”—suggests a test prep that endorsed the discourse of the farmers’ movement in the classroom.

Laura Low praises the farmer’s production of material necessities: “Without agriculture we should be without many of the comforts which we now enjoy. It furnishes food and, in a great measure, clothing for the use of mankind. The farmer is, therefore, more independent than any other class of people, for he could, if necessity compelled him, live upon his own products.” As in the 1873 declaration, Low distinguishes the farmer as the most independent

“class of people” and reorders social rankings, establishing him as the superior of the non-farmer. Lottie E. Lloyd also emphasizes the farmer’s reliance on his own labor: “The farmer’s life is the only one that is really independent. Of all classes of trades or professions, the farmer is the only one that can depend on his own exertions for the maintenance of life. He also provides sustenance for the nation; and as he prospers or fails the nation is in a state of prosperity or adversity.” In its stress on interdependency, Lloyd’s conclusion establishes the farmer as the metonymic symbol of the nation.

C. Bayard Taylor also derives the farmer’s independence from others’ dependence on his labor, but he brings into relief how that relationship is obscured: “Mercantile business is largely dependant upon agriculture for its success, and in fact every kind of business is: for when the crops fail we can hear the merchants or anyone directly interested (and there are but few who are not interested) remark, while his countenance seems to picture the fearful reality, that it will be a hard winter.” This representation of a merchant who, when the crops fail, will admit that his own success is contingent on the success of farmers, is an example of the complex work that the composition sets out to accomplish. For many consumers, especially in the cities, the relationship between producer and consumer has become obscured; Taylor attempts to represent the interdependency that is only made visible in times of crisis.

However, Taylor ultimately turns the assignment against itself:

We should not do our duty toward the farmer, if, in our elaborate discourse upon his occupation, we did not say a few words in regard o is life.
[sic] None to please but himself, and all dependant upon him for their support.
Happy life! The slave of none, the master of all. We are almost persuaded to “go west” and join a “grange.”

Like Beardsley, Batchelder, and Taft, Taylor obliquely acknowledges what the prompt requires of him: “We should not do our duty toward the farmer, if, in our elaborate discourse upon his occupation, we did not say a few words in regard o his life.” But his exaggeration only illuminates the disconnect between the farmer’s celebrated autonomy and tenuous socio-economic status: “None to please but himself, and all dependant upon him for their support.” Constructing non-farmers as dependents was a strategy, after all, designed to invest value and status on agricultural labor when it had so little of either. “Happy life! The slave of none, the master of all,” Taylor continues, deploying an expression that takes the strategy to its logical extreme. In doing so, Taylor removes any impetus to action: the farmer’s life becomes the idyllic stasis of a Currier and Ives print, rather than sustaining the tension necessary to index the gap between the farmer’s material situation and just reward. In Taylor’s concluding sentence, the “we” has shifted from an alignment with the speaker to one with an audience not quite taken in by the praise: “We are almost persuaded to ‘go west’ and join a ‘grange.’” Taylor’s essay reads like a parody, a demonstration of his skepticism that such a strategy will work.³¹

There was more than one way to write farmers into the university. By focusing on technological innovation and praising the farmer’s use of labor-saving technologies, William P. Johnson is one of several students who effaces the farmer’s labor entirely, and discursively transforms it to leisure: “[Agriculture’s] progress has been upward and onward,” he writes, “until physical labor has been in a great measure dispensed with by the invention of labor saving machines.” While Johnson attributes the farmers’ leisure to progress, Colin Tim recalls the state-

³¹ I make the claim tentatively, mindful of the conventional similarities between “affectedness” and “parody”: how a writer’s apparent attention to the act of writing is read depends largely on the rhetorical situation. For instance, Taylor’s passage could also be read as a student writer’s approximation of pastoral, a conception of the appropriate literary convention for writing about farmers in a literature course.

of-nature theme of pastoral literature: “The pleasures and independence of a farmer’s life must not be overlooked. We all know that the ease and freedom of the farmers life has furnished themes for the poets since Cain first turned granger.” Manford Savage addresses the farmer’s rising status in his conclusion: “That agriculture will ever remain a useful and an honorable calling, is, we think, proven by the increased attention it is receiving in the last few years. The farmer is being raised from the low rank into which he has fallen from force of circumstances and his own negligence.” In his conclusion, Manford Savage echoes how obstacles to the farmers’ social and economic progress were articulated: agricultural journals and industrial education supporters appealed to farmers to take responsibility for raising their status through education but also urged them to organize and change an economic system that worked against them.

George Savage is the one student who overtly resists the examination requirement: he won’t acknowledge either the civilizing effects of agriculture or the dignity of farmers. I quote him at length:

Two hundred years ago, a lawyer was as far below the farmer, in social standing as he is now above him. The change is the effect of the triumph of intellectual power over mere physical life. And “as the ages shall roll away” the independent farmer will sink lower and lower in the social scale.

I am aware that I differ from the learned theorists of the age; but they have seen the few, have visited the ideal agriculturist, I have been among the many, have made my home with the actual farmer and can say, without fear of refutation, that but one occupation, hunting, so utterly unfits its followers for the blessings of higher life.

Savage's writing is especially interesting because he is the only student writer who overtly rejects the ostensible aim of the assignment, which is to elicit praise for agriculture and agricultural workers, yet he does so by invoking the authority of membership: "I have been among the many, have made my home with the actual farmer." We might assume that because Savage "made his home" with the farmer that they are family, but he imposes such a distance that it is not clear. He is unimpressed by the independence that the exercise is designed to prove and deems it irrelevant to the farmer's situation or status: "'as the ages shall roll away' the independent farmer will sink lower and lower in the social scale." He claims the authority of the insider and maintains the distance of the objective observer. Savage is the only writer who acknowledges the assignment's recognition of him as a member, recognition of him as a member, but he rejects its invitation to extol any of the virtues of that collective.

The contradictory ways that students characterize farmers and agricultural labor index the tenuous status of both in 1876. The students who discursively transform non-farmers into dependents were deploying a farmers' movement strategy to achieve recognition and legal protection for the value of their labor. Other students invoked the farmer's use of efficient laborsaving technologies, ironically undermining the inherent dignity of labor by conflating its elimination with progress. The technological determinism in the assignment itself reinforced Regent John Milton Gregory's own theory of history as *telos*, evident in his extant course lectures for the "History of Civilization" capstone course. Industrial education supporters who wanted to shape university curriculum, he believed, demonstrated a naïve and disruptive conception of history and how the world worked, which he countered directly in his inaugural address: "The great movements of the world are not the results of agitation; the agitation is, rather, the effect and evidence of the rising movement. Not the invention of any reformer, but

the logical outcome of the progress of science and art, is this new demand for a higher and better education of the industrial classes.”³²

Although they were clear about their aversion to the classical curriculum and their desire for the university to privilege agricultural and mechanical courses, farmers’ movement activists in Illinois did not articulate a class-conscious educational philosophy that could guide curricular development at Illinois Industrial University. The examination assignment bears the trace of this ambiguity. They were nonetheless part of a movement that would achieve its fullest expression at the national level when the farmers’ groups formed alliances to form the People’s and Populist parties. A comprehensive political education for farmers would eventually be circulated in the 1890s by the Southern Farmer’s Alliance, whose education programs in literacy and numeracy look toward Paolo Freire’s liberation pedagogy; the Alliance’s publication, the *National Economist*, instructed its readers on democracy and political economy, and by telling stories of workers’ struggles in other times and places, produced the first revisionist histories in the United States.³³

3.4 DEMOCRATIC LITERACIES

In a university welcoming students previously excluded from higher education, this composition assignment seems oddly undemocratic, especially in opposition to what Lucille Schulz has called the “democratization of writing.” Histories of composition have tended to date the shift to

³² Hatch, *Some Founding Papers*, 100-01.

³³ See Theodore R. Mitchell, *Political Education in the Southern Farmers’ Alliance, 1887-1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

personal experience and observation in late nineteenth-century college rhetorics, but Schulz argues that this emphasis originated in elementary and secondary school books of the 1830's and 1840's, and that by valuing individual experience, their lessons and pedagogies privileged democratic participation.³⁴ The increasing value placed on individual experience, Schulz argues, was an expression of Jacksonian democracy. However, what reads to us as formulaic and prescriptive was a strategy for creating "commonsense" notions about the independence of a population traditionally excluded from universities, and before modern conceptions of individual authorship became dominant.

In his address to the Farmers' Legislative Club with which I began this chapter, Jonathan B. Turner posed another rhetorical dilemma facing farmers' movement activists: "while all the advocates of our fixed conservatism are allowed everywhere 'to roar like bulls of Bashan,' in exciting popular feeling and passion in defense of their interests, if we attempt to stir the same passions against hereditary and hoary wrongs, we at once become the chief of sinners." As an example, Turner cites one editor in Illinois who suggested that "these ultra agitators of farmers' rights are the abettors of agrarianism, communism, freelovism, and Mrs. Woodhullism, and 'ought to dangle at the end of a rope.' This is all right and proper enough on their side; how would it do on ours?"³⁵ This rhetorical question is a fitting starting point for the next chapter.

³⁴ Lucille Schulz, *The Young Composers: Compositions Beginnings in Nineteenth-Century Schools*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 52-53.

³⁵ *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting*, 164.

4.0 “VICIOUS MORALITY AND FATAL FACILITY”

sentimentalism: Tending to be swayed by sentiment: affected sensibility or sentiment; mawkish susceptibility; specifically, the philosophy of Rousseau and others, which gave great weight to the impulses of a susceptible heart. The French Revolution, with its terror, was regarded in some measure the consequence of this philosophy, which thenceforward fell more and more into contempt. At present, the fact that it was a deliberately defended attitude of mind is almost forgotten, the current sentiment running strongly the other way.

– *The Century Dictionary*, 1899

The sentimentality which marks very many of the themes . . . is something I was wholly unprepared for in the work of healthy boys.

– Elizabeth Aborn Withey, “Sub-Freshman English (II),” 1898

In “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” Joanne Dobson proposes a poetics for sentimental literature, a genre usually considered so outside of the literary that it is studied as a cultural artifact. But sentimental literature, Dobson argues, constructs the literary by taking affectional loss as a catastrophic human event: “Literary sentimentalism, I suggest, is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss.”¹

¹ Dobson, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” *American Literature* 69 (1997), 266.

With Dobson's formulation in mind, I would like to turn to an entry in a Harvard student's freshman diary, written in 1849, wherein the writer recounts (or invents) a scene depicting the moment an intimate relation with a beloved teacher is severed:

Long did I live on the remembrance of that night of bliss when I really felt my love for her appreciated and returned, when those speaking beautiful eyes expressed, in addition to words, hope that I would bear the sorrow of parting with her, which then seemed too painful to bear, that I would be cheerful and resigned, then seeming to feel regret as well as I, and what was more precious, for my sake, then, too, as I went, at the door throwing her arm around my neck kissing me; thus by those endearing words, looks & expressions softening my grief & affording comfort.²

In the heightened emotional language characteristic of sentimental literature, the writer represents this parting as a romantic rupture, ("that I would bear the sorrow of parting with her, which then seemed too painful to bear") and his teacher's concern heightens the moment into one of bliss ("when I really felt my love for her appreciated and returned"). While there is more of an expectation of privacy for journals than other forms of writing, it is notable that this nineteen year-old selects such a scene and describes it in the language of sentiment; by concluding the scene with "thus by those endearing words, looks & expressions softening my grief & affording comfort," he credits his grief and her attending consolation as the experiences that saturate this scene with meaning. The passage demonstrates what Dobson calls the "crisis of sentimental consciousness," that anxiety occasioning the "certain knowledge of inevitable

² Adams Sherman Hill, freshman journal, 4 January 1849, Harvard University Archives, HUG 1451.502, Harvard University, Boston.

separation—whether temporal or eternal—from the others who constitute the meaning of one’s life.”

This journal entry is that of Adams Sherman Hill, who would in 1872 become Harvard’s Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and decry writing that resembles the passage above for its tendency “to sacrifice vigor and compactness to the sentimental or the fanciful.”³ Hill’s freshman journal entry draws on what was in the antebellum U.S. a dominant discourse in both literature and culture. The best-selling novels of the 1850s, works of literary sentimentalism such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, commercially eclipsed Hawthorne and Melville’s now-canonized work of that decade and, like Hill’s journal entry, constructed worlds in the language and conventions of sentiment. Hill’s later disavowal of sentimentality is not simply an indicator of individual maturation, but an example of the shifting definitions of literacy and literary value. By the time Harvard English Professor Arlo Bates published his Lowell Institute lectures as *Talks on the Study of Literature* in 1897, he defines sentimentality in particularly hostile terms as artificial, feminine, and delusional:

Sentiment is what a man really feels; sentimentality is what he persuades himself that he feels . . . It is no more difficult for persons of a certain quality of mind to persuade themselves that they thrill with what they conceive to be the proper

³ Dobson, 267; Hill, *Our English*, 117. In *The Resistant Writer*, Charles Paine describes his own sense of Hill’s freshman journal as “what was probably a typical middle- to upper-class sixteen-year-old who had literary aspirations and was prone to purple passages on almost any subject,” yet Hill himself would later characterize such writing as remedial, urging secondary school teachers to eradicate the style before a student sat for college examinations. The comparison suggests that there are radical differences between how Paine and Hill as composition teachers evaluate student writing, even if some of the ways they assign literary value or recognize elements of style remain consistent. Paine, *Resistant Writer*, 90.

emotion than it is for a woman to convince herself of the especial fitness to her face of the latest device in utterly unbecoming headgear.⁴

Bates describes male sentimentality here as a violation of gender norms. It is a radical instantiation of the *Century* dictionary definition in the epigraph, not only “tending to be swayed by sentiment,” but tending to be swayed by what one only *thinks* is sentiment (“mawkish susceptibility”) when in reality, the emotion itself is as meaningless as the latest hideous fashion for women.

In her study of advice to writers, Miriam Brody observes that gender works as a persistent metaphor to conflate manly rhetoric and composition with virtue, and “People who offer advice about writing have long construed the virtues and vices of prose in the gendered language of male and female, representing good writing as masculine virtue and weak writing as a feminine subversion that undermines a manly enterprise.”⁵ Brody argues that exhorting writers to express the manly virtues of clarity, vigor, and sincerity in writing is a transhistorical phenomenon; but it is important to remember that while the valuation of manliness is consistent, its definition is always historically contingent. As twenty-first century readers, our recognition of and response to sentimentality is likely tinged with the contempt expressed by Bates above. Yet that contempt had to be culturally constructed, and how Harvard participated in constructing that contempt is the project of this chapter. In Chapter One I devoted my attention to the class-consolidating practices assisted by the delegitimation of the commonplace. In this parallel chapter I wish to tease out how as women struggled for access to Harvard College, shifting late

⁴ Arlo Bates, *Talks on the Study of Literature* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1897), 15.

⁵ *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 3.

nineteenth-century conceptions of gender and human and racial progress worked through Harvard's discourse of evaluation to justify their exclusion.

4.1 SENTIMENTAL TERRAIN AND THE DISCOURSE OF CIVILIZATION

I argue in this chapter that Harvard's discourse of evaluation constructed sentimentality as the sign of an incoherent self—that signaled effeminacy in men and hysteria in women—at a time when the fully individualized self was for the middle and upper middle classes increasingly differentiated by gender. Deviations from those norms were read as vulgar at best and pathological at worst. Like the commonplace, sentimentality had been a dominant antebellum US discourse, a language held-in-common, which toward the turn of the century came to signify a lack of necessary distinction. The *Century's* note in the second epigraph above that by 1899 sentimentalism's history as a “deliberately defended attitude of mind” had been forgotten indexes the effectiveness of this shift over a half century.

The social disease of unwomanly women and unmanly men was a late nineteenth-century scientific preoccupation that undermined women's demands for equality and was effectively deployed to forestall women's struggle for access to Harvard. In her survey of the scientific arguments against women's higher education, Janice Law Trecker observes that these arguments emerged after women had already proven themselves as scholars. What scientists consistently cast doubt on was its social good: “The ‘scientific’ arguments took account of women's new intellectual achievements—sometimes even conceded her intellectual equality—but they cautioned that these achievements were dangerous: for the woman's health, for the survival of

the race, for the continued progress of the species.”⁶ For instance, to counter the women then lobbying for access to the Harvard Medical School, retired Harvard Medical School professor Edward Clarke argued in *Sex in Education* (1873) that higher education could damage a woman’s nervous system and reproductive capacity, so that “[t]he question of woman’s sphere, to use the modern phrase, is not to be solved by applying to it abstract principles of right and wrong. Its solution must be obtained from physiology, not from ethics and metaphysics. . . .”⁷ Physicians like Clarke identified a portending social crisis that women could prevent simply by restricting their behavior to the home. Solomon notes that “[w]hat made Clarke’s arguments most compelling was his separation of women’s education from women’s rights. It was not a matter of what was right or wrong for the individual, he maintained, but what was good for society that mattered.” And significantly, neurasthenia (a nervous disease epidemic in the Harvard faculty) presented and was treated differently in men and women. The cure required men to embrace their savage sides and women to take to their beds for the “rest cure,” a treatment immortalized by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Gender deviations had public health consequences, and ways of performing gender correctly were narrowing.⁸

These scientific theories were expressions of the discourse of civilization dominant in the Gilded Age United States and challenged the identification and human connection that the competing discourse of sentimentalism traditionally tried to achieve. Indeed, the sentimentality marking roughly half of the Harvard candidates’ compositions in 1896 was read by Elizabeth

⁶ “Sex, Science, and Education,” *American Quarterly* 26 (Oct. 1974), 355.

⁷ Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education* (Boston: Osgood, 1874), 12. qtd in Trecker, 352.

⁸ Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 56; Jay Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*, 77.

Aborn Withey in the above epigraph as an anomaly in “healthy boys.” After homosexuality was first identified as a disorder of gender-inversion in the 1880s, a man speaking like a woman indicated symptoms of a potential health crisis as “[a]fter the 1880s, medical experts ceased to see homosexuality as a punishable act, and began to see it as an aberrant and deficient male identity, a case of the male body gone wrong through disease or congenital deformity.”⁹ The dialectical relationship between everyday prejudices and scientific claims and the authority with which scientific claims then shaped everyday beliefs, constructed new truths about race and gender that questioned the possibility or desirability of human equality.

A significant problem in any discussion of sentimentality is that multiple sentimental meanings and modes were available to nineteenth-century readers, writers, and consumers. Jackson Lears has persuasively argued in *Fables of Abundance* that sentimentality was a major discursive mode in advertising long before the Civil War, and its widespread marketing function certainly helped construct it as artificial and manipulative, associations compounded by its appeal to women consumers. Jane Tompkins and Philip Fisher have worked to recuperate sentimental literature’s activist and evangelical functions for nineteenth-century readers; Dobson observes that like any literary genre, it can be reactionary or radical, well or badly conceived, and its uses impossible to determine. While Michael Denning sees sentimentalism at work in the factory girl heroines of Gilded Age fiction, in *The Social Revolt*, (1933), the self-described first anthology of Gilded Age literature, Oscar Cargill limits his treatment of sentimental literature to the “Sentimental Reactionaries” who stressed identification with individual suffering but rejected

⁹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 15.

social reform in any guise.¹⁰ Phillida Bunkle critiques sentimentalism as a mid-nineteenth-century ideology that simultaneously authorized women to act as agents of God and thinned alternative possibilities out of existence: “The formula of woman-as-spirit and finally woman-as-God-Herself was not, of course, a satisfactory basis for widespread feminism. It was, however, extremely powerful in conditioning female aspiration . . . woman’s sphere was authorized by revelation in the nineteenth century, just as it was based on the ‘facts’ of science and sociology at the turn of the century.”¹¹ The trajectory through which Harvard constructed sentimentality as subliteracy was not a simple matter of feminization: they yoked sentimentalism to radicalism, reformers, ministers, social disease and dependence, meanings that are inseparable from the late nineteenth-century backlash against abolition, reconstruction efforts and the expansion of rights that scientific discourses helped to discredit.

My attention in this chapter is specifically on how Harvard faculty drew on available understandings of sentimentality to construct it as a violation of literary appreciation, the kind of literate performance they argued was the highest expression of individuality. Dobson notes that in “many of the classic men’s texts of the era, the ultimate threat to individual existence is contamination of the self by social bonds; in the sentimental vision, the greatest threat is the tragedy of separation, of severed human ties.”¹² The written performance privileged at Harvard was, as Charles Paine contends, the demonstration of a coherent self that resists contamination

¹⁰ Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction: 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Dobson, 268; Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, Haymarket series (London and New York: Verso, 1998); Oscar Cargill, ed., *The Social Revolt: American Literature from 1888 to 1914*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933).

¹¹ Bunkle, “Sentimental Womanhood and Domestic Education,” 27.

¹² Dobson, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” 267.

from outside influence and I suggest sentimentality threatened that coherence. But as Catherine Lutz observes, “threats to a dominant social order are sometimes articulated in a concern with diverse kinds of boundaries,” and emphasizing the boundary between self and non-self is the foundation of individualism. In her research on talk about emotional control, Lutz finds that such talk “can be seen as a discourse on the crossing back and forth of that boundary between inside and outside,” and historically, it is “a discourse we can expect to see in more elaborate form in periods and places where social relations appear to be imminently overturned.”¹³

Cultivating contempt for sentimentality functioned to undermine a rhetoric/politics, a style/subject that tried to elicit empathy or moral action, that attempted to *move*. Synonyms for sentimentality in Harvard’s discourse of evaluation include “moralism” and “oratory” for these historically specific reasons. As a few African American and significant numbers of White students from the south and west entered Harvard College for the first time, as women struggled for admission and for the right to receive the Harvard degree, the distance closed by the sentimental writer was an abrasive reminder to examiners that the boundaries of individuals and of institutions could be crossed. In an examination that assessed literacy through a response to literature, however, the subliteracy that sentimentality came to signify also had to be constructed as subliterary, a move to which I now turn my attention.

¹³ “Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power, and the Rhetoric of Emotion in American Discourse” in Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 73.

4.2 MORAL AND ORATORICAL GUSH

Particularly helpful here is Nancy Glazener's study on the Gilded Age construction of literary value, wherein she argues that Atlantic Group magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, the *Nation*, *Scribner's*, and *North American Review* shaped literary reputations and tastes during the last third of the nineteenth century before the work of canonization moved to universities.

Glazener suggests that the Atlantic Group is as much a cultural institution as Harvard University itself, for the periodicals' editors and staff comprised a class of Harvard-educated Boston elites which "sought to compel recognition and admiration for high culture while minimizing the possibilities for audiences to forge unauthorized relationships with its products."¹⁴ (Hill's essays compiled in *Our English* were originally published in the Atlantic Group magazines *Scribner's* and *Harper's*.) Glazener's term "connoisseur" describes the ideal Atlantic Group writer who, through his discerning eye, selects the right detail and puts the stamp of his individuality on everything he writes; like Paine's resistant writer, the connoisseur maintains a respectable distance from both his subject matter and his reader, and closing that distance was construed as a mark of weak excess. Glazener argues that a taste for realism became the mark of disciplined cultural consumption as "realism was often defined against sensational and sentimental fiction, usually on the grounds that these latter forms were addictive but realism was not." This stance was not only gendered but class inflected, as "The emotional discipline that differentiated men's

¹⁴ "The editors and contributors of these magazines not only tended to cross-pollinate them—as editors who had trained at one magazine took over another or contributed to others, and as contributors were published during the same period by more than one of these magazines—but also, in many cases, knew each other and shared similar backgrounds." Glazener, *Reading for Realism* 24-25, 34.

cultural consumption from women's also differentiated the cultural consumption of privileged groups from that of people usually lumped together as 'lower.'"¹⁵

By reconstructing the critical debate and its opposition, Glazener complicates the dominant conception that realism was above all a democratic mode, evidenced in part by the respectable distance between reader and writer. Rather than an unproblematic rejection of authority, for instance, Atlantic Group critics' contempt for didacticism marks a process of constructing sentimental literature and women writers as unliterary. Didacticism closed the distance between reader and writer and left the reader with no work to do, thereby encouraging passive (feminine) consumption, and it marked a text as one written by and for women at a time when explicitly defining a moral imperative authorized women writers to transgress gender norms and enter the public sphere.¹⁶ Katherine Adams has pointed out that women journalists also privileged the moral imperative, often writing under pseudonyms to efface any semblance of ambition:

As they spoke against fame and ambition, and even avoided naming themselves, these women were seeking the safe definition not as artist, but instead as humble and simple do-gooder, and they described their products as anonymous types of reform documents, like religious tracts, in which the doctrine, not the quality of the prose or the personality of the writer, would matter.¹⁷

This moral imperative skirted questions of literary value to foreground writing's communicative function. Yet emphasis on doctrine over the "quality of the prose" typical of religious tracts

¹⁵ Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 94-95.

¹⁶ Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 100.

¹⁷ Adams, Katherine H. *A Group of their own: College Writing Courses and American Women Writers, 1880-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 17.

helped consign such writing to the “subliterary.” For instance, even an author’s or a character’s overt interpretation or lament against the status quo were constructed as signs of sentimentalism, both for subordinating form to (moral) content, and for the unseemly lack of self-control that it implied. Two rhetorical strategies commonly deployed by women writers--the moral imperative and the address to the reader that I am calling “oratory”--were constructed as unliterary, then, both by critics with significant cultural authority and by the emerging profession of English.¹⁸ (Ironically, the communicative transparency of explicitly stating one’s reason for writing and speaking directly to the reader do not signify “clarity,” designated the essential element of style by the Harvard faculty and by generations of rhetoricians before and after them.)

Jane Tompkins argues that the strategies of moralism and oratory in antebellum sentimental novels functioned to clarify the author’s political intentions. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tompkins reminds us, “Stowe addresses her readers not simply as individuals but as citizens of the United States: ‘to you, generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South,’” and so on, imploring her readers to rectify the injustice of slavery. Tompkins argues that sentimental novelists of the 1850s—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Lydia Cummins—were remarkable for their achievement in expressing the “one great fact of American life” in the antebellum United States, “in Perry Miller’s words, the ‘terrific universality’ of the revival,” and she notes the extraordinary narrative and representational similarities between sentimental

¹⁸ A concomitant development would also shape the kind of attention given works of literature as the MLA adopted literature as an object of study. Michael A. Warner argues that “in important ways, critical labor—what the critic does, his work and the acceptable forms of his work—did not follow from the literary so much as it reinvented the literary.” “Professionalization and the Rewards of Literature: 1875-1900,” *Criticism* 27 (1985), 2.

novels, publications of the evangelical American Tract Society, and pulpit oratory.¹⁹ What many of today's readers reject about didacticism, after all, is what we might call its preachiness; the postbellum nineteenth-century distaste for didacticism was shaped by not only a recognition of its use by women but also a contempt for preachers and reformers of all kinds.

Explicit moralism and oratory were regrettable but not unexpected in a woman; in a man they signified effeminacy. E. Anthony Rotundo traces how nineteenth-century reformers were imagined to embody an endless array of gender transgressions, and the discourse of "third sex" metaphors "was applied before the Civil War to women abolitionists ('unsexed females'), and after the war it was used frequently against members of either sex who favored women's suffrage or any other sort of political reform."²⁰ Whereas only female reformers were transgressing gender norms before the war, after the war reform activities were construed as transgressive for both sexes: in the case of women, for entering the public sphere; in the case of men, for acting like women.

In his role as cultural critic, A. S. Hill urged preachers to reject the language of sentimentalism in favor of vigorous English. In an essay originally published in the *Christian Register* and compiled in *Our English*, Hill addresses the feminizing excess of pulpit oratory: "Both the ecclesiastical-sentimental and the sensational extreme are avoided by the best modern

¹⁹ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 149, 139, 151. Michael Denning argues that after the Civil War, the link between sentimental literature and reform still operated through the factory girl heroines prevalent in the dramatic productions and cheap fiction of the 1870s. *Mechanic Accents*, 186.

²⁰ *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 171-72, 272.

preachers. Shunning theological and philosophical pedantry in every form, and vulgarity of every species, they draw their language from the well of English undefiled.”²¹

The problem, Hill argues, is “That which ought to be the manliest of all professions has a tendency, practically, to make men unmanly.” Ministers’ tendency to be sentimental derives from their positions of dependence: “ministers are, or have been until very recently, placed by the community in a class by themselves, as if they were different from other men. They have been treated like persons exceptionally weak, in whose favor discriminations had to be made. It has been taken for granted that they were not above accepting help of any kind from any quarter.” In prescribing how to achieve good pulpit English and purge it of sentimentality, Hill urges preachers to change their working conditions and, if necessary, their profession:

If a minister finds that his salary is so small that he cannot make both ends meet, without either starving, or becoming dependent upon public or private charity, let him call a parish meeting, and frankly preach to his people from the text, ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire.’ If that experiment fails, he may seek some other field of usefulness.²²

Like Briggs’ recommendations to improve teaching, Hill urges preachers to demand just compensation, a change in condition that by improving their character would improve their English. Sentimental and sensational styles only indicate weakness of character because they are the languages of dependence.

These relations between moralism, oratory, and sentimentality were also established in evaluations of the Harvard entrance examinations. In an 1888 article in *The Academy*, Briggs

²¹ Hill, *Our English*, (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1890), 160.

²² Hill, *Our English*, 176-79.

defends the Harvard examination in composition and reprints excerpts from student examination papers. In the process, he instructs secondary school teachers how to recognize and correct oratorical and moralistic responses to literature:

[student]: “Everything is liable to change, and we ourselves are not excluded, it is wisely ordained thus, for terrible would be the results were all first impressions permanent.”

[Briggs]: The last passage recalls the schoolgirls’ sentiments in *Elsie Venner*—‘that beauty is subject to the accidents of time,’ and the like. The rest of the same theme, however, is neither oratorical nor flat; so that the work as a whole is far better than that of the following essay, where vicious morality and ‘fatal facility’ blight every line:--

[student]: ‘Mr. Darcy’s Courtship.’

‘What a strange paradox of character Darcy at first seems? You hardly can account for it. It may seem unnatural when first you think of it. But think. Know you not many of your friends whose actions seem to be inconsistent. Aye, look you at your own. Think how often you astonish yourself, as well as those who know you, by your various actions and then look at Darcy...

Can it not be put this way? Darcy had pride. Love crept in. That love grew and grew. That love startled his pride. It was too late for the love to be stifled, it could only be restrained. His pride was broken, and his love

unrestrained filled his life. Pride can no more enter that heart of which true Love has full possession.’²³

The first student writer appears to be guilty of sentimental clichés: “schoolgirl sentiments and the like.” Briggs especially condemns the “vicious morality” and “fatal facility” of the second writer, but Briggs’ description of bad writing must have been incomprehensible to many readers of this education journal. With Harvard’s emphasis on character and individuality, “morality” was obviously prized; but how, exactly, does one recognize the point at which morality becomes “vicious”? Briggs perhaps means to connote “superficiality” with the charge of “facility” but given that the highest achievement in writing (“ease”) was synonymous with “facility,” even Briggs’ defense of his evaluative criteria and his attempt to make the process of evaluation transparent was riddled with contradictions.

What is particularly striking about the above excerpt is that the student does not write in the heightened emotional register often associated with sentimentalism and demonstrated by a young A. S. Hill at the top of this chapter. His sentences are short and direct; the writer himself, in other words, does not communicate an agitated emotional state. One could argue that the student demonstrates, if nothing else, *clarity*, a highly valued element of Harvard style and also, according to Dobson, the aim of sentimentalism as a “language that mediates its subject matter without either foregrounding itself or erecting linguistic barriers—such as learned diction, obscure tropes, or experimental uses of language—that impede comprehension,” the aim of which is to “render its objects affectively available to a wide readership.”²⁴ What could be

²³ Briggs, “The Harvard Admission Examination in English,” in Brereton, *Origins*, 68-69.

²⁴ Dobson, “Reclaiming,” 270, 272.

interpreted as clarity, however, is instead read as didacticism and gush, and Briggs has a dire prediction for this student's future at Harvard:

None but a cynic can fail to sympathize with the writer of this theme for the agony that awaits him in Harvard College, the lashing that he must endure before he finds his true place in that hard-hearted little world. If there is one thing that Harvard College will not tolerate, it is 'gush,'—'gush' in general, and moral or oratorical 'gush' in particular... Illiteracy a student will pardon (it is the weakness of a man and a brother, and no drawback to touchdowns or home runs); even immorality he will often overlook: but the blatant moral oratory of a man that he thinks no better than himself cannot be lived down in a four years' course.²⁵

Gush is the frequently invoked quality of being "extravagantly and effusively sentimental" and this particular writer achieves it by addressing the reader directly, and for Briggs, didactically: "But think . . . Think how often you astonish yourself, as well as those who know you, by your various actions and then look at Darcy." Collapsing the distance between himself and his reader, instructing his reader to identify with Darcy and examine himself, the writer demonstrates "blatant moral oratory."²⁶

This student, however, also performs an unauthorized reading of *Pride and Prejudice* by sentimentalizing it, thereby misrecognizing a work of high literature as a low cultural product. Originally a respectable enough action meant to "bring into or out of a condition by the expression of sentiment," by the late nineteenth century "sentimentalize" had shifted to "turn into

²⁵ Briggs in Brereton, *Origins*, 69.

²⁶ *The Century Dictionary*, 1895, s.v. "Gush."

an object of sentimentality.”²⁷ Here we see the student sentimentalizing Darcy: “Darcy had pride. Love crept in. That love grew and grew. That love startled his pride. It was too late for the love to be stifled, it could only be restrained. His pride was broken, and his love unrestrained filled his life. Pride can no more enter that heart of which true Love has full possession.” In a reading generous to the sentimental stance, love moves Darcy out of a condition of sin, but Darcy maintains his integrity. Yet reading it consistently with Harvard’s evaluative discourse, Darcy becomes a man with no barriers: he is consumed, invaded by an external force that overflows and then possesses him, and the student offers this horrific permeability as the moral message of “Darcy’s Courtship.”

Briggs continues the critique of moralistic reading in other students’ essays. One student writer concludes his composition with, “In spite of trial and difficulties Jane and Darcy meet again and renew their love. Soon Darcy’s Courtship ceases for they are united in the happy bond of unity,” to which Briggs responds: “The ‘lukewarm moral atmosphere’ of the last essay suggests a serious fault of many examination books, the fancied necessity of infusing morality somewhere. The favored spot is usually the end; and the moral peroration is so common that some teachers, as I fear, must encourage it.”²⁸ Rather than demonstrating their taste and individuality, Briggs finds students reading literature for overtly moral purposes, a way of reading that was gendered female.

We can read this gendered theory of subjectivity in Briggs’ writing on women’s education. Briggs’ theory of the self is consistent with the discourse of civilization positing gender differentiation as evolutionary progress. Although Briggs was a staunch advocate of

²⁷ The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Thumb Index edition, s.v. “Sentimentalize.”

²⁸ Briggs in Brereton, 67.

women's education who became Dean of Radcliffe College in 1905, he opposed coeducation in all of its forms, especially the admission of women to Harvard College. A college education trained women out of "feminine frivolity" and made them better suited to their own sphere of work, but only by separating the sexes would each be able to develop their individuality. He attributes gender ambiguity and inferior student writing to the same cause: a person particularly susceptible to his or her environment. "In the effeminate man and in the masculine woman we feel a want of size—much as we feel a want of size in the American traveler whom a few weeks in England have covered with what Professor Greenough used to call 'Brittania Plate.' It is the littleness of a person not strong enough to resist the moulding force of surroundings." Here are echoes of the cultural imperviousness urged on writers; just as allowing debased forms of literature and journalism to affect one's speech and writing, so demonstrating gender ambiguity is a betrayal of one's individuality. "College life" for the college girl, Briggs explains, "should teach her to understand better, and not worse, herself as distinguished from other beings of her own sex or the opposite, should fortify her individuality, her power of resisting, the contagion of the unwomanly."²⁹

It is the morally superior yet intensely private role that the college girl is trained to assume, and he urges his audience in "To Schoolgirls at Graduation" to cultivate truth and devotion in themselves. Yet "truth" he defines as "staying-power, to prevent a girl from losing her head where her feelings are concerned, from warping her reason by emotion and saying anything which for the moment seems to help her cause,—to give her, in short, a *trained* sense of truth and a trained hold on it."³⁰ Women's emotional sensitivity, then, makes them less capable

²⁹ Briggs, *To College Girls*, 89.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

of discerning truth and can make them prone to moving outside their sphere which, for Briggs, is a simultaneous relinquishing of their own power: “It is these things, constraining the very essence of woman’s power, of which some women are doing their best to rid themselves and their sex. The restlessly agitating woman in public life and her near relative, the nagging woman in private life, may have a kind of truth and a kind of devotion, but not the sense of things in their true relation and not the vision of the strength of gentleness.”³¹ Briggs’ theory of gender proscribes women from the public sphere designates women reformers (or simply women who speak in public) as hysterics with a questionable hold on truth. (Such strictures against agitation of course moved the goalposts for women demanding access to Harvard College, which created a rhetorical problem I explore in the following chapter.)

One of the most effective nineteenth-century reformers was of course New England’s Harriet Beecher Stowe, who in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* surely transgressed the rules for appropriate conduct in writing as the Harvard examiners define them. Indeed, Stowe’s exclusion from the American literature canon occurred early. After Charles Eliot parlayed his career as Harvard President into one of elder statesman on the lecture circuit, he was fond of saying that any American could educate him- or herself with a five-foot shelf of the right books. *Harper’s* took him up on this claim and commissioned Eliot to select titles for what would become the Harvard Classics, a collection of historical and literary works marketed to middle-class readers in magazines like *McClure’s*.³² Among the American writers, Stowe was conspicuously absent.

In *Hard Facts*, Philip Fisher argues that sentimental narratives commented on their historical moment by extending humanity to those who were excluded from human status. What

³¹ Briggs, *To College Girls*, 49, 50.

³² Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America*.

reads to us as emotional excess or artificiality was a representational mode intended to counter the cruelty of actual dehumanizing conditions: child labor in the case of the nineteenth-century sentimentalization of the child, and slavery in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (98-100). Fisher points out that when Tolstoy singled out *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for praise in *What Is Art* he was lamenting the lost “tradition of thought and feeling” that sentimentalism embodied and that the late nineteenth-century ironic novel displaced when it became the aesthetic norm.¹ This shift emptied sentimentalism of its political potential as a discourse for change and made understanding it or utilizing it unavailable to later readers like us:

[T]he only remaining use for such words as sentimentalism or sentimentality is to point out flaws of representation, signs of weakness or evasiveness about moral or emotional reality, and false consciousness of a particularly contemptuous kind. All that is cheap, self-flattering, idealizing, and deliberately dishonest we think of as sentimentality. Self-indulgent, rhetorical, coy: at times sentimentality seems to include all of the moral flaws that the honesty, sobriety and objectivity of literary realism were designed to correct.³³

Sentimentality did not mark only an inappropriate relation between the reader and writer, but “flaws of representation,” an unrealistic way of representing the world that the reader was instructed to reject. Fisher calls the project of sentimentalism achieved by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the “politics of normality” for according the slave human status, but that extension of humanity and normality was being questioned by the turn of the century. In literature, this manifested in the representation of white middle-class experience as realism, while Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, a novel about lynching, (a real and all-too-typical fact of Black Americans’

³³ Fisher, *Hard Facts*, 98-100, 91-92.

experience) could only be marketed as romance. While in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suffering and loss had simultaneously constituted universal human experience and an impetus to moral action, with the advent of realism suffering fell out of the purview of the universal and was represented as the chaos ensuing from a failure in character. This consideration of representation is also relevant to a discussion of literacy, because how the Harvard faculty defined truth and individuality were dependent upon understandings of human, social, and racial progress that were then undermining equality as a realistic or desirable social good. The ways that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was reframed for a new generation of readers and Wendell's treatment of the anti-slavery movement it represented can help us understand the ways in which Harvard's construction of sentimentality was deeply reactionary.

4.3 WHITE WOMEN, BLACK AMERICANS, AND *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

In *Manliness and Civilization*, Gail Bederman offers three case studies of competing constructions of masculinity through the discourse of civilization. The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was a particularly contested site. The fair was an architectural marvel representing two racially distinct worlds: the White City, which showcased the civilized achievements of white men, and the Midway Plaisance, where peoples of color represented the savagery of developing races. But this allocation did not occur unchallenged. In 1890, a group of prominent white women petitioned congress to appoint a woman to the governing commission. Congress rejected this proposal and created a "Board of Lady Managers" with limited authority instead. Rather than exhibiting women's achievements alongside men's

throughout the fair, the Board of Lady Managers were allocated the Woman's Building, located at the border between the White City and the Midway Plaisance.

Black Americans seeking representation at the fair fared worse. According to Bederman, “[w]hat better example of the advancement of American civilization then [sic] the phenomenal progress African Americans had made after only twenty-five years of freedom? Yet no such exhibit appeared in the White City.” Black organizers including Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells circulated a pamphlet that turned the fair's dominant discourse of civilization against itself and attributed Black Americans' exclusion to the “barbarism and race hate” of White Americans, “in flagrant contradiction to boasted American Republican liberty and civilization.” The National Convention of Colored Men and the Afro-American Press Association petitioned President Harrison in 1890 to appoint a black American to the organizing committee, but Harrison declined, because it “would savor too much of sentimentality, [and] be distasteful to the majority of commissioners themselves,” demonstrating the effectiveness of naming an argument for social justice “sentimental” in order to dismiss it.³⁴

Just as medicine and neurology were offering persuasive evidence for mandating gender conformity, so ethnography and anthropology were offering justifications for sustaining white supremacy that helped to frame new readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel was described at the fair as America's most important contribution to world literature, and indeed, forty-two translations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were among the editions on display, arranged in a five-foot glass and mahogany bookcase at the Connecticut Women's exhibit inside the library of the

³⁴ Bederman, 38-39; “Introduction” in *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, 2-3, qtd. In Bederman, 39; Elliot M. Rudwich and August Meier, “Black Man in the ‘White City’: Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893,” *Phylon* 26 (Winter 1965): 354-55; qtd. In Bederman, 36-37.

Woman's Building. However, that America's most important contribution to world literature could be insulated by so many layers from a central position in artistic achievement at the fair attests to the tenuous literary status of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the contested ways to represent the agency of Black Americans in the latter third of the nineteenth century.

In her analysis of the exhibit, Barbara Hochman observes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* entered the public domain that very year and its publisher, Houghton Mifflin, had flooded the market with niche editions in the 1880s before its copyright expired. In her comparison of two representative editions from 1852 and 1890, Hochman finds that the two editions' illustrations conform to different representational norms. In the 1852 edition, for instance, abolitionist illustrator Hammat Billings drew attention to the educability and moral agency of the black characters, typical areas of focus for antebellum illustrators: "Many early illustrators of the novel engaged and extended Stowe's emphasis on literacy, providing numerous images in which black and white characters write and read, sometimes seated together in close physical proximity," and dressed in similar modest middle-class clothing. However, in the 1890 edition, (professional) graphic artist E. W. Kemble "departed from long-lasting norms shaped by Billings and other illustrators of the 1850s. Kemble's illustrations adapted conventions newly appropriate to photojournalism toward the turn of the century, especially conventions used by reporters and ethnographers to present foreign populations to the white American middle class."

Hochman argues that these new norms for representing the black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped close off for a new generation of readers ways of imagining "black responsibility, action, and literacy" that the norms of earlier editions had encouraged. Just as the only forms of representation allowed for peoples of color at the 1893 World's Fair were the exotic primitive displays on the Midway Plaisance, "Kemble's illustrations offered a sharp

contrast between primitive peoples and the realm of authors, illustrators, and consumers of print.” In their introductions, prefaces, and illustrations, the newer editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* framed the novel as a historical agent and artifact, one that responded to its historical moment but whose relevance had passed. Hochman argues that “like the Stowe exhibit at the fair, many new editions framed the book as evidence of America’s moral, political, and social progress,” an agent that helped America achieve a state of racial equality whose terms no longer needed to be questioned.

As an argument for equality ostensibly achieved, then, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was framed as an artifact inexorably tied to its historical moment, and this datedness undermined the work as a literary expression of universal truth. In characterizing the Anti-Slavery Movement in his *Literary History of America*, Wendell argues that more than this, the movement had “truth” wrong even at its own historical moment. Here Wendell draws on advances in modern science to draw important distinctions between common knowledge in the 1890s and the 1830s:

Modern ethnology seems to recognize a pretty marked distinction between human beings in the Stone Age and human beings as developed into the civilisation of the nineteenth-century; and though native Africans are not literally neolithic, they certainly linger far behind the social stage which has been reached by modern Europe or America.³⁵

Wendell commends the abolitionists in the New England Anti-Slavery Movement for their courage and zeal but relegates their arguments to the naïve status of preknowledge when he points out that they were operating under mistaken conceptions of progress: “To philanthropic

³⁵ Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 342.

people in 1830, on the other hand, the distinction between Caucasians and Africans seemed literally a question of complexion.” He adds that the New England enthusiasm for racial equality has since waned, due to the marked increase in the belief that “negroes were not human.”³⁶ An abridged version of Wendell’s textbook that included these observations was published especially for secondary schools.³⁷

Wendell reinforces this element of truth when he persistently offers abolitionist Wendell Phillips to illustrate a rhetor’s use of emotional force to obscure truth. Wendell presents Phillips as a major literary figure in the Anti-Slavery Movement for the power of his oratory, but he characterizes Phillips, a member of Boston aristocracy, as a traitor to his class for leading an attack on property: “The conviction that slavery, whatever its evils, was really a form of property, and that an attack on slavery therefore involved a general attack on the basis of civilization, was one of the strongest convictions of conservative New England.”³⁸ I want to quote at length Wendell’s description of Phillips’ genius for manipulating an audience’s emotions, and his characterization of those that did and did not allow themselves to be persuaded:

A man of distinguished personal appearance, with all the grace and formal restraint of hereditary breeding, he had mastered, to a rare degree, the subtle art of first winning the sympathy of audiences, and then leading them, for the moment unresisting, to points where, on waking from his spell, they were astonished to find themselves. Many people, particularly of the less educated sort, ended by

³⁶ Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 342.

³⁷ Barrett Wendell and Charles Noyes Greenough, *A History of Literature in America*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909).

³⁸ Wendell, *Literary*, 344.

yielding themselves to his power. Of the better sort, more grew to feel that at heart this power was only the consummate adroitness of a man so impatient of rivalry as recklessly to indulge his inordinate passion for momentary dominance.³⁹

Wendell's alarm concerns Phillips' power to move an audience: "he had mastered, to a rare degree, the subtle art of first winning the sympathy of audiences, and then leading them, for the moment unresisting, to points where, on waking from his spell, they were astonished to find themselves." He attributes Phillips' passion for abolition to the more dubious passion for power over an audience, the ability to moves them to a position they would not normally hold. "The better sort" in the audience remains resistant, but the less educated in the audience "yielded themselves to his power," displaying rank sentimentalism in the *Century* definition of the term: "tending to be swayed by emotion" and demonstrating a weakened resistance. This characterization of Phillips in Wendell's *Literary History of America* is remarkably similar, and does the same work, as the treatment of Phillips in Wendell's *English Composition*, and the overlap is an indication of the conflation of the literary and the literate.

In his 1890 publication *English Composition* Wendell introduced Phillips as an example of the dangerous use of "force," both "the emotional quality of style," and "the distinguishing quality of a style that holds the attention." He offers as an example of force at its finest a cautionary tale of Phillips' 1881 address to Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa society, "The Scholar in a Republic." Wendell offers the example as an object lesson in audience manipulation and instructs readers to monitor and recognize their own emotional responses as effects of manipulation:

³⁹ Wendell, *Literary*, 349-50.

A good many went to hear him with much curiosity as to what he might say, and apprehension that they might have to disapprove it by silence at moments which to less balanced minds might seem to call for applause. In the earlier parts of his oration they found themselves agreeably surprised: he said nothing to which they were unprepared to assent, and what he said, he said beautifully. They listened with relief and satisfaction; when the moment for applause came, they cordially applauded. So the oration went on with increasing interest on the part of the audience. Finally, when some fresh moment for applause came, they applauded as a matter of course; and it was not until they had done so that they stopped to think what the cleverest of our oratorical tricksters had betrayed them into applauding was no less revolutionary an incident than the then recent assassination of the Emperor Alexander of Russia. Now, this result was attained simply by a skilful [sic] use of words: in this case very probably by a deliberately malicious use of words that should make a theatre full of people do a thing which not one of them really wished to do. It was not what he said that they applauded; it was what he implied;--not dynamite and dagger, but that not very clearly defined notion of liberty and freedom and the rights of man, which still appeals to the American heart.⁴⁰

Phillips is dangerous here because he manipulates his audience's devotion to liberty and freedom, so they momentarily leave their true selves behind. A receptor must monitor his or her own emotional responses, and attribute any emotional response that does not coincide with reason to successful manipulation. One's mind, Wendell argues, should not be changed by

⁴⁰ Barrett Wendell, *English Composition*, 243-44.

feeling, but by truth. Wendell lets the reader know they are vulnerable to such appeals through his initial description of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, “as conservative a body as is to be found in New England,” that was predisposed to be on guard. If this elite group can be moved to applaud assassination, who of us can resist? That the literacy crisis had infiltrated the most elite center of higher learning was a testament to the expertise required to recognize, name, and remediate subliteracy.

Thus changing conceptions of what constituted the human (or inhuman) condition are germane to literacy at Harvard, because the faculty read for individuality and those coming up short were subject to remediation. Just as commonplaceness marked a writer’s inability to distinguish himself, so sentimentality marked a feminine-coded and irrational response to literature and life that rendered one’s ability to recognize truth, one’s capacity for self-government, one’s independence, questionable.

Such high stakes are a key to understanding why the teaching of writing was for Briggs an activity for gentlemen, as he consistently proposes the ideal teacher as one who will model proper conduct, writing, thought, and speech for his students. It is hard work that requires discipline and character training:

It is so much easier to be gushing than to be scholarly! so much easier to use decorative cant which has been worked to the verge of nervous prostration than to be sincere and strong! so much easier to teach the rhetoric of ‘color’ than to teach the rhetoric of truth! Color, as Viola said of Olivia’s face, is ‘excellently done,--if

God did all;’ but how much of what semi-literary critics call color is of God’s doing?⁴¹

Briggs’ proposals to improve composition and its teaching persistently presume and prescribe men of character to teach it: “What I have said suggests the first requisite of preparation—a judicious teacher;” and “...if he is anything but a plain-spoken gentleman using all his power and all his culture in persistent effort to make his pupils say *what they think*, as simply, as directly, as logically as they can, he is not, whatever his attainments, the man to teach English to boys.”⁴²

But in the early 1890s, the Committee of Ten and the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric released reports whose recommendations undermined Briggs’ teacher ideal by cordoning off conceptual learning to the colleges. Emerging divisions of labor within the field of English and between the secondary schools and colleges resulted, as Donna Strickland has argued, from a need for an efficient division of labor that was reproduced and institutionalized nationwide: “In short, writing programs tended to divide the labor of teaching writing not only to make that teaching more efficient and more economical, but at the same time to distinguish the teaching of the mechanics of English from the conceptual work of English.”⁴³ With individuality and originality the work of colleges, and emotional language an indicator of “low” women, the teaching of correct, mechanical English became the responsibility of middle- and upper-class white women. The new Radcliffe College would function as a teaching pool to staff Massachusetts schools with workers familiar with the “Harvard methods.” As Elizabeth Aborn Withey reported on the Harvard examinations 1897, she continued the work of gender differentiation.

⁴¹ Briggs, “The Correction of Bad English,” 306.

⁴² Briggs, “The Correction of Bad English,” 306.

⁴³ Strickland, “Taking Dictation,” 470.

4.4 ELIZABETH ABORN WITHEY AND THE LITERACY CRISIS

In Chapter One I addressed Withey's "Sub-Freshman English" as a place where we can read the transition in correctness from "socially acceptable" to "formally acceptable" and argued that her categories for commonplaceness in student writing marked a myriad of possibilities for demonstrating vulgarity. I now want to consider Withey's treatment of sentimentality in the same articles, an interesting part of her analysis because she offers it in comparison to the only A in the 794 examinations. Withey offers two contrasting interpretations of one of the texts on the reading list, Longfellow's narrative poem "Evangeline." Separated from her beloved Gabriel in her youth, Evangeline devotes her life to ministering to the poor and meets him again only while nursing the dying in an almshouse. The examination prompt is "Gabriel's Death," thereby identifying a scene in the poem that deploys several tropes of sentimental literature: separation, exile, and the deathbed reunion.⁴⁴ After offering several short examples of bad writing, Withey gives us a student essay that, "more than any other, shows literary appreciation on the part of its writer. This theme has been chosen, not because it is the best in the book, but because its subject, perhaps the most popular on the paper, usually calls forth either a few dead sentences, or, as is more often the case, a gush of weak sentimentality":

"Gabriel's Death."

⁴⁴ Dobson, "Reclaiming," 272.

[student] “After many weary years of wandering, the faithful woman came to Philadelphia. Her constant duties, during her later years were missions of self-denial and mercy in hospitals and battle-fields.

“Yet her love ‘that endured and hoped and was patient’ never failed . . . In the Philadelphia hospital Evangeline’s search was ended. There she saw an old man lying on a pallet and slowly expiring. Something of his old expression returned, the likeness of his youth.

‘So are wont to be changed the faces of those who are dying.’

“Evangeline recognized Gabriel and the exquisite anguish of the recognition forced a cry from her lips.

‘So that the dying heard it and started up from their pallets.’

“On hearing his name from Evangeline’s lips Gabriel remembered his youth, his home, and the beautiful maiden. His feeble strength enabled him to merely shape her name with his lips and he died with his head on Evangelines bosom. And the woman’s words were: ‘Father, I thank thee.’”

[Withey] Marked literary appreciation is not to be expected of boys in their teens; but something between this and total literary apathy might reasonably be expected of those sufficiently mature to enter college. Yet apathy is apparent almost everywhere; appreciation deserving the name is at present almost the exclusive possession of the man who gets an ‘A,’ and he either has natural literary aptitude or has had unusual advantages.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ “Sub-Freshman English (II),” 64-65.

Withey's essay is singular for its treatment of student writing and her specificity to her evaluative methods. The above "A" essay—the only one out of 794 essays—is due to the author's literary appreciation, the mark of "decided individuality." The student characterizes the poem "Evangeline" by Evangeline's self-discipline rather than the excessive tones of sentimentality. Below is an example of a student writing in what Withey describes as "above the common level" but "of the sentimental style":

"The Death of Gabriel"

Sweet Sister of Charity! Clad in somber but fitting garb, with a face like that of an angel; what is more gladsome to the heart or more refreshing to the eye?

Thus Evangeline went, scattering her kind deeds among the sick the poor. Something told her that morning, as she wended her way towards the place where the dying lay, that her journey was almost finished; that before long her sad heart would be at rest.

She stood before the cot of an old man, on whose features death had already set his stamp; and as she looked, the recollections of the past swept over her as a flood, and with one wild shriek, she fell fainting upon his bosom.

It was soon all over. Two little slabs now mark their resting place; but their spirits are united.⁴⁶

Withey singles out this student's essay as above average in quality but marred by the sentimentality which proscribes it from true literary appreciation and in her characterization,

⁴⁶ "Sub-Freshman English (II)" 69.

unhealthy: “The sentimentality which marks very many of the themes on ‘The Death of Gabriel’ is something I was wholly unprepared for in the work of healthy boys.”⁴⁷

What Withey singles out here as in need of remediation (and unhealthy in a boy) is a sentimental response to a text. The “tragedy of separation” that marks sentimental literature and reception is enacted by this writer as Evangeline and Gabriel finally meet after a lifetime of separation: “and as she looked, the recollections of the past swept over her as a flood, and with one wild shriek, she fell fainting upon his bosom.” This writer fails to keep what Withey considers the proper emotional distance. Whereas Withey’s excerpt of the writer demonstrating literary appreciation stopped at Evangeline’s demonstration of self-restraint and gratitude (“Father, I thank thee”) at the moment of Gabriel’s physical death, the sentimental student extends the scene to the end of the poem, where Evangeline and Gabriel lie in unmarked graves. The writer reunites the lovers in the hereafter: “Two little slabs now mark their resting place; but their spirits are united.”

“Literary appreciation,” then, is not simply a demonstrated enjoyment of the required reading; indeed, the student exams Withey singles out as “correct” yet “dull” lack the spark of appreciation because their performance of “correct” is not convincing. The sentimental student appears convincing in his enjoyment, but his very excessive emotionality is aberrant in a “healthy boy” and his reading transforms the text.

The students Withey offer us perform the same convention of representing the scene of “The Death of Gabriel” yet the first student respects its genre, and lets Evangeline keep her sense of duty and mercy, her self-control. “Evangeline recognized Gabriel and the exquisite anguish of the recognition forced a cry from her lips. ‘So that the dying heard it and started up from their

⁴⁷ “Sub-Freshman English (II),” 69.

pallets.’”⁴⁸ (65) The sentimental student, however, sentimentalizes the text itself: “The recollections of the past swept over her as a flood, and with one wild shriek, she fell fainting on his bosom.” In this student’s representation of the text, Evangeline is physically overwhelmed by memory, and emits a “wild shriek,” falling. Both of these student writers demonstrate literary appreciation, but only the unsentimental student demonstrates decided “individuality.” Her surprise at the emotion exhibited by “healthy boys” is an indication of the physiological and moral weakness attributed to men whose style is read in the emotional register associated with irrational women.

4.5 LITERACY AS COGNITION

In his study of Barrett Wendell’s papers, Thomas Newkirk suggests that Wendell was rethinking his theory of discourse in a follow-up to *English Composition* that was never published. Wendell wrote in an unpublished manuscript that “the principal danger for the critical writer is that his personality should ‘assert itself repellently,’ that ‘invasive assertion of personal oddity as should make him seem eccentric’ (41, 42).” Newkirk notes that “[t]he term Wendell chooses to describe this ideal is *sanity*.”⁴⁹ The “sanity” (meaning both physical and mental health) that correct speech and writing were increasingly thought to signify meant cognitive defects could be made visible through literacy assessment. As the nineteenth century came to a close, theorizing literacy as the expression of an individual mind was being put to invidious uses. As Susan Miller has argued, focusing on correctness “allowed written texts to become instruments for examining

⁴⁸ “Sub-Freshman English (II),” 65.

⁴⁹ “Barrett Wendell’s Theory of Discourse,” *Rhetoric Review* 10.1 (1991), 25-56.

the “‘body’ of *a* student, not just *the* student body,” which was a pedagogy that “participated in a broadly conceived nineteenth-century project of cleanliness,” especially regulating access to institutions of socioeconomic mobility and political power. Catherine Prendergast has traced the legal status of literacy as the property of whites through case histories of immigrants attempting to prove themselves “free White” people. In cases where applicants appeared to be white but the “one drop rule” could disqualify them, Prendergast notes one’s literacy could be offered as evidence of racial distinction. “When some of the physical characteristics were beginning to seem a little murky and the reliability of color as a signifier of race had been challenged, the taxonomy of ethnologist A. W. Keane (1908) explaining differences in ‘mental’ characteristics was invoked in *In re Najour* (1909) as incontrovertible scientific evidence” of race, including achievement in letters.⁵⁰

In his social history of writing assessment, Norbert Elliott notes that the written examinations in composition that began under the purview of faculty in English were contracted out to the College Entrance Examination Board in 1901 and under the authority of its experts in psychology and psychometrics. There, the link between cognition, literacy, and heredity that was presumed in much of Harvard’s discourse of evaluation became the subject of eugenics research.⁵¹ The College Board produced the “Hillegas Scale,” a poster distributed to schools that helped teachers correlate composition skill with cognitive ability, and issued reports documenting the superiority of the Nordic race. Congress required literacy tests in the Immigration Act of 1917 on its authority, reducing the numbers of annual immigrants by more

⁵⁰ Miller, *Textual Carnivals*, 57; Prendergast, *Literacy and Racial Justice*, 111-12.

⁵¹ A. S. Hill quotes Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* in “English in the Pulpit,” musing that the unmanliness characteristic of ministers may well be hereditary; see *Our English*, 176.

than two thirds.⁵² The College Board's first director, Edward Thorndike, pioneered research in the intellectual differences between men and women. Like many scientists of his time, Thorndike recommended that since women were capable of only mid-level intelligence, they should be relegated to the appropriate education: "*the restriction of women to the mediocre grades of ability and achievement should be reckoned with by our educational systems.*" Women were more uniformly competent, but less likely to be brilliant, Thorndike argued, so they should also be directed to professions "where the average level is essential."⁵³ Thorndike is writing as College Entrance Examination Board director in 1905, but in the following chapter I trace how women at one college negotiated similar arguments as they struggled for access to Harvard.

⁵² Elliot, *On a Scale*, 39-43, 69-71.

⁵³ Qtd. In Trecker, "Sex, Science, and Education," 359-60.

5.0 “THOU SHALT NOT BE ILL-BRED”

I could feel the mist in the air, although it was visible only beyond the first roll in the ground. It seemed to be in layers, each one denser than the one in front of it. The gray sky, indistinguishable from the mist, contrasted strangely with the brilliant green of the grassy field below it. The delicate leaves and blossoms on the trees looked as if they would like to shiver in the cold breeze, if only it would not be pathetic fallacy to do so. –A. W. D.¹

The above passage was printed in the literary monthly *Radcliffe Magazine* in the section “Daily Themes.” The student contributor distinguishes between the density of layers of mist, the strange contrast between gray sky and grassy field, and demonstrates a sensitivity to the “delicate leaves and blossoms” of the last line. Yet that very last line takes an ironic turn as she observes inaction, a desire to act stayed by the anticipation of criticism. But more than this. A. W. D. performs a pathetic fallacy as she endows those impersonal objects, leaves and blossoms, with desire, (they “looked as if they would like to shiver”) but credits their stillness to potential criticism (“if only it would not be pathetic fallacy to do so.”) The ostensibly natural response of shivering in a cold breeze is transformed into an error of subjectivity, of the inhuman acting human, and the awareness of that error results in paralysis. Such is the dilemma of the woman writer at Radcliffe.

¹ “Daily Themes,” *Radcliffe Magazine* 2 (1900): 30.

This writer's representation of emotional control highlights its artifice as a literary value of high realism, what Glazener argues helped construct sentimentality as emotionally excessive artifice even though emotional control was itself simply another kind of performance: the visible mastery of one's emotions. This was also a facet of literariness privileged in Harvard's discourse of evaluation. In *Principles of Rhetoric*, A. S. Hill begins his chapter on "Description," in fact, by quoting Ruskin on pathetic fallacy to justify a reversal of aesthetic hierarchies:

Now we are in the habit of considering this fallacy as eminently a character of poetical description, and the temper of mind in which we allow it, as one eminently poetical, because passionate. But I believe, if we look well into the matter, that we shall find the greatest poets do not often admit this kind of falseness,--that it is only the second order of poets who much delight in it.²

By reordering what is popularly considered the poetic mind (because passionate) to second-tier poets, Hill proposes a reordering that puts emotional control on a plane with the literary, reinforcing the literary as a masculine enterprise.

This chapter is devoted to how the nineteenth-century women students of the Harvard Annex and Radcliffe College negotiated demonstrating academic literacy in writing through discourses that proscribed women, as a category, from producing it. At the Harvard Annex, students were constituted through Harvard's discourse of evaluation and subject to its construction of an individuality coded male; as women who were struggling for access to Harvard College and the Harvard degree, they were also constituted through a class-specific discourse of gentility that prohibited assertive conduct as unladylike. The Annex student writer

² Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. Iii. Part iv. Chapter xii. Qtd. In A. S. Hill *Principles of Rhetoric*, 259.

under study in this chapter, Annie Ware Winsor, critiques Harvard's discourse of evaluation through the discourse of gentility, writing that the institutional position of Annex students limits the possibilities for their learning.

However, even though the problem of women's education was ostensibly resolved through the founding of Radcliffe College, the terms of its establishment ensured that its students' conflicting subject positions would continue. James Paul Gee writes that conflicting discourses can produce enormous tensions and conflicts when individuals are members of discourse groups with competing interests:

What counts as an "individual" is differentially defined in different discourses within a single society and across different cultures. The various Discourses which *constitute* each of us as persons (or subjects) are changing and often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent.

In the women students' writing and in the Harvard Annex annual reports I read an adherence to gender roles delineated by class through the eradication of sentiment, writing that demonstrates what Catherine Lutz calls a discourse of emotional control, wherein women "play the roles of both the super- and subordinate, of controller and controllee." The resistance of such a discourse lies in the self-disciplining function that "includes a process by which women come to control themselves and so obviate the necessity for more coercive outside control."³ We can read one instance of this self-disciplining function in the epigraph by A. W. D., as leaves and branches

³ Lutz, "Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power, and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse," *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 74.

control their desire to shiver to ward off criticism. Yet in the struggle for access, while emotional control warded off potential criticism and conflict, in hewing closely to gender norms Harvard's women students accepted the terms of a challenge they could not win, regardless of their scholastic performance and mental health. They were urged to demonstrate, above all, their individuality, but in the terms of Harvard's evaluative discourse individuality was a delicate trick for a woman to pull off because it was coded male. On the one hand, the fully individualized feminine self controlled her emotions to demonstrate her rationality; on the other hand, rationality opened her to charges of being insufficiently feminine, and even unoriginal and incapable of conceptual thought. When we remember that "imagination" and "literary appreciation" signified individuality in the two As out of 794 entrance examinations in Withey's "Sub-Freshman English, (II)" and that violations of individuality—commonplaceness and sentimentality—were feminine-coded conventions, the impossibility of their situation becomes clear.

5.1 A POLICY OF LADYLIKE, AND INCREMENTAL, CHANGE

Elizabeth Agassiz, president of the Harvard Annex, ran the Agassiz School for Girls for twenty years and was respected as an educator in her own right before setting out to gain the Harvard degree for women in the early 1870s. Educational rigor was an entrenched women's tradition in Boston before women lobbied for admission to Harvard College, but a tradition that adhered to gender norms and commenced in private. The wife of renowned Harvard botanist Louis Agassiz, Elizabeth Agassiz assisted him in his research and after his death publicized his work and wrote a two-volume biography on the man; in this capacity she was one of many New

England women that assisted their better-known male partners and family members in their professional work. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, for example, cites Clover Adams' knowledge of foreign languages as an indispensable and previously unacknowledged part of her husband Henry Adams' research in history.⁴ Schwager notes that the Boston women who organized for access to the Harvard degree did so out of a cultural tradition that valued education, but not political rights, for women: "The tradition of liberal culture in New England, and the special woman's culture in which they shared, led these Boston women at once to champion educational reform on behalf of women, and yet to stop short of bold political action and achievement in the public sphere, which they still believed remained the special domain of men."⁵ Their investment in Harvard's cultural authority as an institution drove their desire to gain women's admission to Harvard, but cultural taboos against challenging that authority checked their methods.

For most of the nineteenth century, women were welcome to participate in educational opportunities at Harvard. As its geographic reach was expanding in the last third of the nineteenth century, however, Harvard instituted new restrictions against women. Women's effort to gain official access to the college was in part an alarmed response to the increasing elimination of affiliate programs that women had informally participated in at Harvard since the early 1800s. After gaining the presidency in 1869, for instance, Charles Eliot cancelled the University Lectures, a series of courses predominantly attended by women teachers and women

⁴ Ulrich, ed., *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 7.

⁵ Sally Schwager, "Harvard Women": A History of the Founding of Radcliffe College" (EdD diss., Harvard University), 7.

amateur scientists.⁶ When Harvard implemented the written entrance examinations in 1874, Boston women formed the Women's Education Association (WEA) and lobbied for access to the same examination. Conceding in order to raise standards at girls' schools and somewhat appease the WEA, Eliot agreed to offer examinations to women modeled on those at Harvard, and grant those who passed a certificate stating the examination's equivalence to the Harvard exam.

Harvard professors began informally instructing women students in 1879, and these courses for women were incorporated as the Society for Collegiate Instruction for Women and became familiarly known as the Harvard Annex. The arrangement was seen by Annex students and administrators as a step toward gaining the Harvard degree, and by Eliot and the Harvard Corporation as a compromise toward forestalling it. In the meantime, women students accepted a certificate attesting that they had taken a course of study equivalent to that of Harvard as the Annex administration raised money for an endowment. The WEA, for its part, accepted the convoluted terms of both the examination certificate and the Annex certificate and settled in for what they saw as a tactical struggle to ultimately achieve the Harvard degree for women. The organization purged its membership of its radical members and denied membership to known suffragists in order not to appear too strident and alienate the Harvard administration.⁷ Other WEA members appalled at the compromise resigned.

At a time when women were earning degrees in state universities to the west of them, Harvard's official position that the social good of educating women had yet to be proven gave credence to pseudoscientific theories that study would impair women's mental and physical

⁶ Schwager, "Taking Up the Challenge: The Origins of Radcliffe," in *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, Ed. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 90-92.

⁷ Sally Schwager, "Taking Up the Challenge," 96.

health and render them sterile. Edward Clarke published his *Sex in Education* in 1873, as women were applying for admission to Harvard's medical and divinity schools. (They were denied). Harvard's emphasis on science and the social good was persuasive to even liberal Bostonians. In his biography of Charles W. Eliot, Henry James recounts a friend's experience seeing Eliot debate Wendell Phillips on women's access to higher education: "In time Eliot spoke, without rhetoric, simply presenting the facts and the practical considerations which must govern the decision. The result was that no doubt about the necessary conclusion remained in anybody's mind."⁸ Arguments such as Phillips' that appealed to principles rather than science could seem quaint and out of date by comparison, as well as irresponsible by ignoring "practical considerations." Annex students and administrators therefore simply resolved to prove their educability and their continued good health on Eliot's terms.

While women struggled to gain access to Harvard, Eliot countered that any policy change would have to follow proof that women could withstand the rigors of study without physically and mentally breaking down. Because the goal for the WEA was the Harvard degree, they kept their relations with Harvard cordial and set out to gather evidence that women could withstand the physical and intellectual rigor of study, and remain women, in hopes that Eliot and the Harvard Corporation would change their minds about allowing a form of coeducation at Harvard.⁹ The Annex administration's willingness to counter Harvard's discourse on its own terms evidenced their reluctance to risk their class privilege by demonstrating or representing

⁸ James, *Charles W. Eliot: President of Harvard University, 1869-1909, Volume One*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge 1930), 330.

⁹ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: design and experience in the women's colleges from their nineteenth-century beginnings to the 1930s*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 95.

their students as emotional, whether that took the form of aggression, assertion, or sentimentality. An assertive demand for gender equity for its own sake would violate the gender norms of this privileged class and risk the social benefits accruing to its members.

5.2 AMASSING THE EVIDENCE

Secretary Arthur Gilman, principal of Boston's Gilman School for Girls, co-founded the Annex and wrote the annual reports. In these documents we can read his attempts to provide evidence that met Harvard's stated objections to women's access by stressing the students' intellectual progress and good health. Despite his status as an educator and the founder of Boston's Gilman School for Girls, as the author of the Annex's annual reports Gilman seeks to advocate for women's access to Harvard without violating the terms of class membership.

In the first eight annual reports, Gilman takes pains to prove that the experiment is working. He insists that the students are grateful as well as mentally and physically strong enough to withstand the rigors of study. In the first annual report, for instance, Gilman writes, "The marks have been high and the Instructors have from time to time expressed great satisfaction with the progress of the young ladies, and have noticed their strong desire to gain all the advantage possible from the opportunities we afford them." And significantly, "No one has shown a tendency to break down, and in some cases there has been evidence of increased strength and vigor during the year."¹⁰ In the report for the academic year 1883-1884, Gilman

¹⁰ *Harvard/Radcliffe Online Historical Reference Shelf*. 2005. Harvard University Library Digital Initiative. Radcliffe annual report, 1880-1881, 8. 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2573647?op=f&id=2573647&n=8&s=4&preview=>>

notes that “the health of the students has been even better than in former years, and that the regular habits involved in pursuing a course of academic study have, in several instances, shown their influence in improved physical appearance.”¹¹

Protecting the Annex from charges of agitation, in the third year’s report, Gilman emphasizes its propriety in a new heading:

The Society not Creating, but Satisfying a Demand. It is not the purpose of the Society to stimulate a demand for the education that it offers. Its directors have never held the doctrine that it is the duty for every young woman to pass through a regular course of study such as is represented by the four years’ course of the candidates for the Bachelor’s degree in College. It is simply their wish to offer to women advantages for this highest instruction, and to admit to the privileges of the Society any who may actually need them.¹²

Gilman carefully represents the Harvard Annex as an organization meeting the needs of the few, rather than an organization agitating for the Harvard degree for women. The students’ continued instruction is contingent on this attitude, so much so that Gilman repeats it every year. For

¹¹ *Online Historical Reference Shelf*. Radcliffe annual report, 1883-1884, 15. 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?op=f&id=2573644&n=15&s=4&preview=>>>. The 1885-86 report continues, “The health of our students has been satisfactory during the year, and, in fact, our experience thus far proves that there is no danger for a women [sic] in a collegiate course of instruction, provided it is not combined with late hours in the parlor and ballroom” (7). 15 November, 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?id=2573644&n=39&s=4>>.

¹² *Online Historical Reference Shelf*. Radcliffe annual report, 1881-1882, 4. 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?id=2573647&n=17&s=4>>. In the Second Year’s report, 1880-1881, Gilman defended the Society from charges of activism: “They have in no way endeavored to attract students, but have merely proposed to supply the demands made upon them by duplicating the courses of instruction given in the college,” (10). 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?op=f&id=2573647&n=10&s=4&preview=>>>.

example, for the academic year 1886-1887, Gilman writes, “The Society did not seek to create a demand for the instruction that it offered; it presumed the demand existed, and proposed to supply it. The nature of the movement led its projectors to avoid any step that might appear like an attempt to create a demand.”¹³ Despite his status as a prominent educator and a man, Gilman is still bound by the discursive restraints put on women because he is representing a women’s institution, and one dependent on the good graces of Harvard.

New social concerns arose over whether a college education would unfit a woman for her domestic duties, and her emotional capacity was questioned after her physical and intellectual capacities were proven. In the Annex report for the academic year 1887-1888, Gilman addresses how the terms of the experiment have changed. He announces that the initial experiment is over: “We feel now a certainty which we did not then have that mental and physical health are alike safe for the woman who gives herself to the pursuit of a collegiate education.” He also counters the concern that college unfits a woman for domestic duties by confirming that “she is as much better prepared to perform her share of the work of the world in her own sphere as a man is after he has put his mental apparatus through the same process of preparation.”¹⁴

But in the same report that Gilman establishes women students’ mental and physical fitness as certainties—and attests that education only better equips them for the domestic sphere—he responds to a new concern:

¹³ *Online Historical Reference Shelf*. Radcliffe annual report, 1886-1887, 5. 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?id=2573644&n=53&s=4>>.

¹⁴ *Online Historical Reference Shelf*. Radcliffe annual report, 1887-1888, 5-6. 15 November 2006 <<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?op=f&id=2573644&n=69&s=4&preview=>>>.

Our experience does not yet prove much in regard to the tendency to rush to intuitive conclusions, rather than to give reason her proper work, which has been predicated of women; but the emotional in their nature does not restrain them from sober thoughtfulness. Perhaps they show more ability in gathering facts than grasp in making generalizations.¹⁵

Gilman introduces doubts about women's capacity for emotional control and conceptual thought the same year that Briggs published his most acrid critique of sentimentality in the Harvard admissions examinations. This new emphasis on irrationality in students and the ways that students demonstrate emotional control in writing proved to have traction. Annex students, self-conscious of their position in a virtual institution, required to demonstrate capacities and conduct appropriate to women, found themselves negotiating shifting expectations and subject positions. I turn to the work of one of those students now.

5.3 A STUDENT'S ASSESSMENT

Annie Ware Winsor Allen, who attended the Harvard Annex from 1884-88, donated her papers, including hundreds of pages of her college work, to the Radcliffe College Archives. In 1942 Allen helped organize an effort to document student life at the Harvard Annex by urging her fellow alumnae to submit their memories of the 1880s: "Ours has been a modest and retiring group. True to our Victorian breeding, we have aimed to be inconspicuous. 'Above all, girls, do

¹⁵ *Online Historical Reference Shelf*. Radcliffe annual report, 1887-1888, 5-6. 15 November 2006
<<http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?op=f&id=2573644&n=69&s=4&preview=>>>.

not make yourselves conspicuous!’ Today the motto is:-- ‘Make yourselves count. Be somebody!’ We can make ourselves count very heavily with our Alma Mater, now, by reording [sic] our Annex Days.”¹⁶ Her classmates’ responses to this initiative comprise a fascinating account of Annex student life. However, from this considerable collection of papers I first limited my materials to Winsor’s work as a composition student, and then selected those wherein her topic is the position of women students or the relations between Harvard and the Harvard Annex—topics she returned to repeatedly. Winsor writes of experiencing the same kind of institutional contingency that Gilman demonstrates in his reports. As an Annex student, Winsor consistently raises and then dismisses or complicates claims that men’s and women’s intellects are inherently different, instead privileging considerations of their institutional situations, motivations for learning, and social expectations. The papers include several short themes on classroom experience and one long argumentative essay called “What the Annex Might Become.” In this last paper, Winsor argues that in order for women students to demonstrate independence and originality, they must be awarded the Harvard degree.

In “6th Soph. Theme--An Argument” dated May 18, 1885, Winsor’s topic is the scholastic superiority of Annex over Harvard students. She begins by stating and dismissing two popular conceptions: that instructors grade more leniently with Annex students, and that women are inherently intellectually superior to men. Winsor argues instead that the different institutional conditions produce better grades at the Annex; while Harvard has a dormitory life, learning is the only incentive to attend the Annex:

¹⁶ Annie Ware Winsor Allen to fellow alumnae, -- 1942, Annie Ware Winsor Allen x’88 Papers, 1865-1955, SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 1, Radcliffe College Archives, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Boston (hereafter cited as RCA MSS).

At the Annex it is the lazy who finds public opinion against them; at college it is the studious.

In view of all this it is not necessary to consider whether the instructors are charitable to the young ladies, nor to go into a discussion of the intrinsic differences of character between man and woman. The considerations which I have brought forward are quite sufficient to show that if the average marks at the Annex were not higher than those at Harvard, the S.f.C.I.o.W. had better be given up.¹⁷

Annex administrators deliberately avoided building dormitories or offering any social advantages to its students in order to represent the Annex to Harvard as a serious institution of scholarship.

The following semester Winsor wrote a new theme on the same topic:

So all this notion of Annex superiority is a mere surface appearance; a little common-sense and mathematics judiciously used will show its hollowness. By the aid of common-sense we understand that the Annex girl, coming to the Annex as she does because she chooses to study, is likely to do faithful and good work; while no such presumption can be made about the College man, for he comes to College for every variety of reason and most not from love of study.¹⁸

The notion of Annex superiority was a fraught issue that cut many ways. One element is one she alluded to in the previous theme: that study was valued at the Annex but not at Harvard. The

¹⁷ Annie Ware Winsor Allen x'88 Papers, 1865-1955, SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 1, RCA MSS

¹⁸ "Annex vs: College," November 17, 1886, Annie Ware Winsor Allen x'88 Papers, 1865-1955, SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 2, RCA MSS.

social value of study at Harvard decreased even more the year Winsor is writing, when freshman composition became the only required course and struck a blow to class cohesion, dividing the Harvard student body into the wealthy “society men” and the working- and middle-class “grinds,” who identified themselves through their study habits.

In a January 1886 theme called “Misrepresentation,” Winsor addresses the tendency of Annex students to hide their own capacities in the classroom:

I wonder what it is that prevents us from saying the very things which would gain for us most credit . . . in writing themes, etc., instead of saying all we truly think on a subject and putting down such notions as we know would probably gain us credit for cleverness, we seem intentionally to choose the words and subjects which do us most injustice; in the French class, unwilling to make an audacious sentence or to say an original thing unless we are sure our grammar is correct, we confine ourselves to platitudes—though our grammar and pronunciation could not be worse; in everything which we undertake, we seem literally to misrepresent ourselves our powers.¹⁹

Winsor presents several scenarios in which Annex students choose, intentionally or not, self-effacement or correctness rather than demonstrating their originality. The theme functions as an invitation to the instructor to reflect on his pedagogy as Winsor explains a class dynamic that he may not understand. Winsor explains that what may appear to be mediocrity or inferiority is instead Annex students’ habit of demonstrating self-effacing behavior.

¹⁹ “Misrepresentation,” January – 1886, Annie Ware Winsor Allen x’88 Papers, 1865-1955 SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 2, RCA MSS.

The following year Winsor wrote a theme on the same topic, addressing instructors' conceptions of their students by positing her own theory of their timidity in the classroom:

Men who have taught both men and women say that in general women have too much conscience and too little independence. Lately my attention has been so attracted by this fact that I have been led to try again—as I have done before at various times to make clear the difference between men's minds and women's minds. But as I do not feel at all capable of judging about the men, I have this time turned most of my thought to the women.

I think women, besides being lacking independence, add to their apparent servility by their timid silence. Women students often disagree radically and emphatically with their instructor's statements and opinions, often have independent sensible notions of their own, but they do not dare to express this dissent, or they do not feel justified in propounding original theories to men who have spent years in study. They are not the mere receptacles which they seem to be.²⁰

Winsor begins her analysis by acknowledging women's seeming dependence. Their servility is only "apparent," Allen writes, not real, but the classroom, situated as it in a dependent institution, does not allow for their dissent. Interestingly, Allen writes "[t]hey are not the mere receptacles which they seem to be," countering the conception of women as the kind of writer that Harvard's evaluative discourse defines as subliterate: the writer that represents him- or herself as what Hill

²⁰ Annie Ware Winsor Allen, Papers, 1865-1955; SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 2, RCA MSS.

called a “vessel,” and what Briggs described as weakness that could be read in gender ambiguity: the writer that is influenced by his or her surroundings.

In a theme written that same month, Winsor overtly addresses pedagogy:

That man will be successful in the education of women, who learns to know and use their peculiar characteristics. I think there are few men, even among those who have taught women a long time, who understand how much might be brought to light if the right means were used; women are so easily frightened back into their ignorance, and on the other hand as easily led to believe themselves quite wonderfully clever, that they need very judiciously and even crafty management. I do feel certain that the man who practiced the right method would be surprised himself at the results which he produced.

These women, timid, narrow in consequent as they are, have great powers of persistent endurance and a most delicate perception. Women as students do not show for half what they are worth; the man who teaches them has but little notion of some of their most valuable possibilities. Of this I am sure,--if women are not interesting inspiring pupils, it is not that they cannot be, but that they do not know how to be. I see enough of Annex girls to know that most of them never show in the class their individual ability nor their most attractive mental characteristics.²¹

In this theme Winsor again addresses the abyss between Annex students’ perceived and real capacities, but shifts to a consideration of the teacher’s responsibility with “I do feel certain that the man who practiced the right method would be surprised himself at the results which he

²¹ Annie Ware Winsor Allen, Papers, 1865-1955; SC 35 Box 1: 1-9, Folder 3, RCA MSS.

produced.” Classroom results were complicated by institutional and professional expectations of both the teachers and the students, however, which Winsor addresses in her analytical essay.

In “What the Annex Might Become,” a remarkable essay about women’s experience at the Harvard Annex, Winsor argues that she and her fellow women students internalize their institutional contingency in ways that shape their work as well as their conception of themselves as learners, thinkers, and writers. Winsor specifically treats how the Harvard Annex’s dependent relationship to Harvard shapes the experience of its students and indicates that it is a general, not individual, experience.²² Winsor opens her essay by recounting the conflicted feelings Harvard Annex students have about their status: “At present the ‘Harvard Annex’ is undeniably not profoundly respected; its students have not yet got over an objection to acknowledging in society that they belong to it,—they know too well the half-amused, half-horrified feeling that such an admission is likely to send through their interlocutor.” Winsor then gives the history of the Annex founding in terms that echo Gilman’s attention to maintaining female respectability:

In the beginning, the “Annex” management was called the Society for the Private Collegiate Instruction of Women (by professors and other instructors of Harvard College). Since then the word, private, has been dropped, but its spirit has been kept; the founders of the “Annex” had a justifiable horror of publicity for women, and of coeducation in its ordinary form; yet realizing the necessity to women of good men teachers.

²² A parenthetical remark next to the title of this paper reads, “With grateful acknowledgments to the men and women with whom I have talked on this subject.” “What the Annex Might Become,” Annie Ware Winsor Allen, Papers, 1865-1955, SC 35, Box 1: 1-9, Folder 3, RCA MSS..

Winsor shares with Gilman the necessity of protecting the Annex and its students from any hint of self-promotion or embrace of ordinary coeducation. The WEA and the Annex administrators wanted women to be educated within a department or school within Harvard College, not to promiscuously share classrooms with Harvard men. Winsor shares the WEA's investment in Harvard's cultural authority by identifying the Annex's "simple creed" of offering intellectual opportunities to women and securing the best instruction possible, which by definition must be male and must be from Harvard. "In accordance with its first aim" of intellectual pursuit, Winsor writes, "the advantages offered have been not emotional or social, but intellectual."

The Annex had been just as dedicated to procuring only Harvard instructors for the students, and Winsor notes that neither a woman nor a man unaffiliated with Harvard has taught Annex students. However, Winsor notes the unintended consequence of such a focus: "This looking continually to Harvard, besides producing its intended effect of keeping a high standard of work, has had an unexpected marked result and one deserving notice. It has given an humble dependent aspect to the whole institution." Winsor notes the contradiction in values between the class and gender discourses of Cambridge, as the Annex supporters unapologetically want equal educational opportunities for women and access to the cultural capital of the Harvard degree; but because their class position proscribes political equality for women, demanding the degree would mean transgressing the gender norms of their class. Winsor, like the Annex managers, is "justifiably horrified" about potential publicity, but she also notes that the wait-and-see strategy has put the institution and its students in a position of subservience:

As an alma mater, the Annex certainly does not inspire enthusiastic loyal love; her own children have so little pride or confidence in her, that one hears a good deal of grumbling among them, to somewhat the following effect. "She blandly offers

us, instead of a happy social life under her roof, the inestimable—very inestimable advantage of being near Harvard College, and then, in dismissing us, gives us, instead of a degree, the cold assurance that we deserve one. She has declared that Harvard College has the most admirable²³ educational feast in America, has got as near to it as possible, and there sits thankfully accepting the scraps of instruction which are thrown to her,—seldom daring to ask for more, and never daring to complain of its quality or the way it is given, for fear the supply should be stopped altogether.

Here Winsor analyzes the effect of institutional position on student subjectivity as Annex students are keenly aware awarding an “equivalent certificate” instead of the degree rationalizes and prompts poor treatment of them as students. Winsor indicates that knowledge of their intellectual equality, even superiority, does not mitigate their conviction that they lack *originality*:

The consequence of this subservience is that there is a marked absence of original action among us Annex girls . . . We know in a vague way that we do as well—sometimes better—than the College; but we are haunted with a suspicion that there’s something wrong about our work,—somehow or other it is not as valuable as what the men do,—there is no brilliancy among us;—but why, we cannot make out.

Students at the Harvard Annex excelled in measurable ways—their scores on examinations and their class grades were frequently higher than those at Harvard College, which Winsor references

²³ The instructor has underlined “admirable,” written above it “delectable,” and noted in the margin: “Wrong adjective for this metaphor.”

in her essay. Yet Harvard rationalized its exclusion of women through doubts about their physical, mental, and emotional capacity.

Winsor also elaborates on the limited access the Annex students have to their instructors, whose primary duty is to Harvard College. Annex students have no recourse, however, because requesting more access to instructors would be an act of ingratitude:

We cannot get at our teachers in any satisfactory way; they are always in a hurry, and we feel guilty if we keep them three minutes beyond the time, for we know they are bound to serve the College first and give their best work to it. If they come late, we must not complain for fear they should say they can not come at all then . . . Of course, such feeling is exaggerated, inexperienced, blind and ungrateful, but it is rational to a certain degree; its very prevalence shows that something is not quite right. In fact this repression is perhaps the most marked disadvantage of Annex life at present and the trait which prevents it from being completely what it was earnestly intended to be—the highest and freest intellectual life. No one can do her best under a constant conviction that she is of slight account and presumably foolish.²⁴

In describing her conflicted feelings about her instruction as the most “marked disadvantage” of intellectual life at the Annex, Winsor is identifying her contingency: as an Annex student she cannot expect a dialogue with her instructors, which she believes is the heart of intellectual

²⁴ The instructor’s comment here is “hardly explained by what you have said,” with an arrow connecting Allen’s phrase “presumably foolish” to “there is no brilliancy among us.” The instructor appears to want to reassure Allen that she is not foolish, that there perhaps is brilliancy among Annex students, yet he doesn’t respond to her description of how they experience their institutional situation. This is the only substantive instructor’s comment on the essay: the others demonstrate attention to grammar.

inquiry; if she complains she may lose the instruction she does receive, and she feels ungrateful for wanting more from instructors whose primary duty is to Harvard. Winsor is living the contradictions of Harvard's policy of exclusion.

Winsor also notes that instructors have little incentive to teach Annex students, because there is no prestige in teaching women. "There's no glory in it" for the instructors, she writes, because even the best students' careers will be cut short when they marry, so the most talented instructors concentrate on professionalizing at Harvard. To remedy the precarious situation of Annex students and make instruction attractive work, Winsor proposes a solution: make the Annex an independent college within Harvard University and grant its students the Harvard degree, "so this women's college should be at last, not an 'Annex,' dependent and submissive, but a fellow-worker with the same right to respect and the same reward."

What Winsor describes as the Annex's "dependent and submissive" status only worsened as Harvard's position remained fixed and the prestige of women's colleges such as Wellesley and Vassar increased. A contributing factor was, ironically, the Annex's reliance on Harvard professors while other women's colleges hired women faculty. By the late 1880s enough women had been through college to prove that they were both intellectually and physically capable of meeting the demands of a college curriculum, even one designed for men. But they were in ways too successful. Solomon charts the arc of late nineteenth-century arguments against coeducation: as at Harvard, the initial concern was to test women's health and educability, but the first generation of students succeeded all too well. In many colleges women students outnumbered and scored higher than their male counterparts, prompting early supporters of

coeducation to set quotas limiting the number of women students in order to protect male student recruiting and morale.²⁵

In the later Harvard Annex reports, Arthur Gilman makes a new case for Annex students, this time not on their abilities as students, but on their utility to the goals of Harvard College.

There is an increasing demand, Gilman points out, for Annex graduates as teachers of English:

The increased attention that has of late years been given to the study of our own language has had its natural effect upon our classes, and they have increased in the department of English more than in others. To this fact is to be attributed the growing demand for teachers from our classes who have learned the “Harvard methods.” This demand has in fact become larger than the supply. As the lower schools reach up to the standard that is presented to them by President Eliot, and endeavor to do in their classes some of the work that is usually accomplished in the Freshman year in college, the demand for teachers who are able to direct the scientific study of English will continue to increase.²⁶

Gilman’s argument that Annex students could be useful to Harvard as a teaching pool fit into Eliot’s secondary school reform agenda. Eliot had successfully participated in an effort to limit the influence of normal schools in teacher preparation in favor of college training. And the “scientific study of English” taught at the Annex met the recommendations for the high school English curriculum made by the Committee of Ten in 1893.

Teachers prepared at the Annex took a variety of classics, language, rhetoric, and literature courses such as Early English and Anglo-Saxon, English literature, and Greek and

²⁵ Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 81.

²⁶ 1892-1893 report, 6-7.

Latin, many of them taught by renowned Harvard philologist George Lyman Kittredge, who also served a pivotal function on the Committee of Ten as a member of its Commission on English that made the recommendations for secondary school curricula. The curriculum was one strategy to raise standards in schools; another was requiring advanced degrees for its teachers. In the academic year 1892-93, as the Committee of Ten and its commissions were planning the high school curriculum, Eliot and Agassiz began negotiations over how to award Harvard's women students degrees.

5.4 THE FOUNDING OF RADCLIFFE

Elizabeth Agassiz had dedicated her life to educating women in a curriculum equal to men's, but her horror of publicity prevented her from taking a strong stance or negotiating for the Harvard degree in public. In 1893, when she and Charles Eliot opened negotiations over granting women the Harvard degree, Agassiz asked Eliot to respectfully represent them to the Harvard Corporation: "My dear Mr. Eliot—I hear that you may bring forward our hopes and fears to the Corporation on Monday next,—not perhaps as an official communication, but as an informal opening of the subject. I am most anxious that we should appear in our true light, as reasonable and not aggressive."²⁷ Like many New England women of her generation, her belief in educational equality coexisted beside just as trenchant a belief in political inequality, hence she assured Eliot, too, that she neither expects nor desires political rights for women Harvard graduates: "In asking for [the degree] it should be understood that we think of these simply as

²⁷ Elizabeth Cary Agassiz to Charles W. Eliot, -- 1893, "Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, Papers 1884-1903, 1959", SC 4, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Boston.

credentials of scholarship, eliminating everything that may concern the rights and privileges of graduates in the general affairs of the college,--as votes for various offices, &c. &c.”

Educational rigor was an entrenched women’s tradition in Boston before they lobbied for admission to Harvard College, but a tradition that adhered to gender norms and commenced in private.

Negotiations got serious twenty years after women’s organized effort to gain the Harvard degree began. In the interim Annex students had excelled scholastically, but by the late 1880s the prestige of New England women’s colleges and other universities’ coeducational norm made Annex recruiting difficult. Columbia University embarrassed Harvard by publicly commenting on the alarming number of Annex students that routinely transferred to Barnard College, where women enjoyed access to the Columbia University library and were eligible to take its degree. Cambridge donors were therefore loathe to contribute to an institution with no faculty of its own, that could not award degrees, and that could be dissolved at any time by the Harvard Corporation.

In 1893 Agassiz therefore had two requests: that the Annex be made a department within the college to lock in instruction, and that students who fulfilled course requirements be granted the Harvard degree. The first serious counter-proposal stated that the Annex would control its own administration, discipline, and business management, but visitors from Harvard would approve all instructors, and diplomas would be countersigned by the Harvard president. The Harvard Corporation added a condition to this proposal requiring the proposed women’s college to be chartered as a degree-granting institution by the Massachusetts legislature, eliminating any confusion as to the origin of the degree.

Several organizations immediately petitioned the Harvard Board of Overseers to reconsider this requirement. One hundred prominent New Yorkers, for example, objected to the countersignature because it would “postpone indefinitely the bestowal of the full Harvard degree on women” and render the institution itself dependent. During hearings before the Massachusetts Committee on Education, the Collegiate Alumnae, an organization of women college graduates, protested the proposed new college on the same grounds, arguing that without their own resources, the college could not “maintain the high character which it is the duty of the state to require of all institutions which it charters to grant degrees.” They withdrew their opposition and the state granted the charter only after persuasive testimony by Eliot and Agassiz: Eliot assured the committee that Harvard would honor its commitment to women’s education when it assumed institutional responsibility for it, and Agassiz testified that Harvard tradition was too long and honorable not to take it (through Eliot) at its word. The resulting charter is what Schwager calls the institutionalization of how Charles Eliot—as Harvard’s official spokesman—conceived the natural role between the sexes.²⁸

These terms were bitterly disappointing to Annex alumnae, who were split between those who submitted their written protest of the negotiations to Agassiz, and those considered it indecorous to voice opposition. Arthur Gilman, who originally co-founded the Annex to gain his daughter access to Harvard College, resigned over the terms. But in true form, he delayed his resignation to deflect any bad publicity, writing to the Radcliffe secretary that,

At the moment of the adoption of the Statutes, I had said that I could not work under them, that they would force my resignation. The Statutes are

²⁸ Schwager, “Harvard Women,” 362, 366, 367, 372.

contradictory, not only to the agreement made with me, but also to the formal vote of the Associates on reorganization.

At that time I was induced to reconsider my intention to resign, because I was told that such an act on my part at the time would be bad for Radcliffe. I have kept my intention in abeyance until I could withdraw without detriment to Radcliffe.²⁹

Even as they accomplished supposedly equivalent work, they could not receive the Harvard degree, and their institutional relationship could be severed, their instructors hired and fired, and their diplomas signed, only by Harvard. The terms that Eliot fought so hard for on Harvard's behalf contradicted his own public and long-term stance that republican institutions must be free and independent. As a women's institution, rather than an institution for free and independent republicans, however, Radcliffe was evidently exempt from those considerations. Violating those terms ensured that Radcliffe students, under Harvard's protection and dominance, could not demonstrate independence to its visiting committees.

5.5 THE RADCLIFFE REPORTS

I want to turn now to the work of Radcliffe writers collected in the Appendix to the fourth Harvard Report from the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric in 1897. Brereton and Strickland have both noted that the committee praises the Radcliffe students on their execution but dismisses their capacity for problem-solving; I wish to extend this analysis by considering

²⁹ Arthur Gilman to Mary Coes, Dean of Instruction: Correspondence and Papers, 1894-1913, Mary Coes, Dean and Secretary, V. Ser. 1, Folder: "Arthur Gilman," RCA MSS.

the women's own writing and their institutional situation. Below is the prompt given to all Harvard and Radcliffe students for the 1897 report by the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric:

Describe the training you received, or the experience you may have had, in writing English before entering College, giving the names of schools in which, or the instructors from whom, you received it; and then, speaking in the light of your subsequent work and experience in College, point out wherein your preparatory training now seems to you to have been good and sufficient, and wherein it seems to have been defective and to admit of improvement.³⁰

Students were asked to describe their college preparation and to propose ways that would have better prepared them to write well for their Harvard instructors, which meant writing with originality and individuality.

In the final report the committee notes that Radcliffe student writing is a refreshing change from Harvard students, especially those at the Lawrence Scientific School, which they have just excoriated for their ungrammatical and slovenly writing:

This cannot be said of the seventy (70) papers from the Radcliffe College students (female) which are included in the collection. (Vol. VIII.) These have an interest and value of their own, and will repay examination. Nearly all the English courses are represented in them. In mechanical execution,--neatness, penmanship, punctuation and orthography,--they show a marked superiority in standard over the papers from the courses of the College proper,--perhaps three (3) only of the whole failing to reach the proper level. In their contents also they

³⁰ Adams, *Reports of the Visiting Committees*, 1897, 402.

reveal unmistakably a greater degree of conscientious, painstaking effort,—the desire to perform faithfully and well an allotted task.

That favorable synopsis of the student writers as correct and conscientious soon shifts into a dismissal of the Radcliffe writers' ideas: "On the other hand, in thought and in form, they are less robust and self-assertive. A few are sprightly; none of them indicate any especial capacity for observing, or attempt, in pointing out defects and difficulties, anything which might be termed a thoughtful solution of them."³¹

The committee's conclusion recalls Gilman's report that women students show a greater capacity for "gathering facts" than making interpretations, which of course limits the intellectual possibilities imagined for them and guides a reading of Radcliffe student writing in the overdetermined terms described by Strickland: white women excel at correctness, not conceptual difficulty. How, exactly, did the committee recognize "painstaking effort"? In what ways were these women writers not "self-assertive"? And did they in fact fail to propose any "thoughtful solutions"?

Radcliffe writers in fact made many of the same recommendations that the committee itself made. At least twenty-one of the fifty-seven Radcliffe student writers recommended more practice in writing.³² Eight pointed to the conflict between the work of preparing for the entrance examination in composition, which required the study of literature, and the work of college freshman composition, which required writing about everyday life.

³¹ John C. Brereton, editor, *Origins of Composition Studies in the American college, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*. Pittsburgh series in composition, literacy, and culture. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995) 108.

³² I can only claim knowledge of fifty-seven of what the committee indicates is a total of seventy Radcliffe student compositions. I skipped several compositions that were illegible, and that I was unable to decipher within the time constraints of my visit to the Harvard University Archives.

That the committee report dismisses fully that any of these writers possess an “especial capacity for observing” or the ability to propose a “thoughtful solution” suggests that they were unable to see the observations and solutions that these writers did in fact make, or were unwilling to acknowledge them. The fact of their sex could, of course, blind any reader to the insights of a woman writer if they deem one incapable of making any. We must also take into account their institutional position. E. L. Godkin, for instance, signed both the New York petition urging the Harvard Board of Overseers to grant women students the Harvard degree as well as the follow-up letter to the Massachusetts legislature protesting Radcliffe’s charter on the grounds that it would establish Radcliffe as a dependent institution. Regardless of his views on women’s intellectual capacity—and there is evidence that he believed them perfectly capable of a Harvard education and deserving of its credential—their position in an educational institution considered dependent diminishes their credibility and potential.

In addition to their unique (dependent) institutional situation, the Radcliffe writers are caught between the conflicting criteria of their Harvard instructors and the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric. In Chapter One I pointed out that the recommendations made by the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric conflicted with the discourse of evaluation produced by Harvard for the preceding two decades. Twenty of the writers attest that better training in English would have helped them develop their originality and individuality, attesting to how intertwined these concepts were with Harvard academic literacy. The Harvard examiners read for originality and individuality and urged teachers to cultivate themselves and character in their students to improve student writing. The Committee, however, imagined composition as facility in writing best taught through practice and drill, and recommended a division of labor that

relegated the teaching of literary concerns such as originality and individuality to the university, not preparation for the university.(Brereton 96)

In all of their reports, the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric considered practice the key to achieving ease and facility in expression. Consider this statement proposing more time devoted to composition teaching in schools:

On the other hand, if, as part of the necessary school discipline, the scholar were compelled to use his pen instead off his tongue for one or two hours a day, what skill in composition would he not attain? What he wrote would, it is true, probably not repay reading, just as what he says is, as a rule, not worth listening to; but that, as a result of practice, any youth could be trained to express himself in writing with as perfect an ease and facility as he does in speaking, cannot well be gainsaid.³³

Ease is for the committee an elementary skill to be mastered before entering college through drill and practice. But for the Harvard examiners, ease is the highest stylistic achievement and the one most difficult to acquire. In *Principles of Rhetoric*, Hill proposes “ease” (Wendell calls this elusive quality “elegance”) as the winning combination of labor and character:

To avoid harsh or clumsy expressions is comparatively easy; but to acquire the positive excellences that contribute to ease in style is very difficult. These excellences few, even among famous authors, possess in full measure or have always at command. They are unattainable by any one who does not possess those qualities of character out of which they spring; for ease in its highest form is a gift rather than an acquisition, the gift of an engaging personality. It is,

³³ Adams, *Reports of the Visiting Committees*, 1892, 155.

however, a gift that may be developed; even Steele and Addison, Goldsmith and Irving, Newman and Thackeray did not attain perfect ease without patient and persistent labor.³⁴

Ease as an element of style therefore begins with inborn qualities of character (“a gift rather than an acquisition”) that even Addison and Steele had to then develop; but the committee presents ease as an instrumental and basic skill. This contradiction in defining literacy acquisition (and illiteracy’s ability to “pass” as literacy) is what makes it possible for Mary Newman to write so eloquently about her inability to write, attributing her lack of skill to her lack of “noble thoughts”:

Looking back upon my experience, I find it hard to determine just why I am unable now to write better. It seems as if I have had enough instruction and practice. I know that my instructors were faithful, and I think they were fairly capable. Perhaps, though, they have dealt too much with the theory, the dry skeleton of the matter, and paid too little attention to the life inside it. I do not remember even being shown the beauty and the pleasure of writing well. I do not remember ever being taught that if I filled my mind with noble thoughts, expression must come as a matter of course.

Newman gets to the crux of the problem by writing that individuality precedes and is a precondition for the kind of literacy the college demands. She continues to elaborate on style as an expression of genius:

I think, too, that my style of writing was never paid enough attention to. One teacher told us that, unless we were geniuses, we probably had no style of our

³⁴ Hill, *Principles of Rhetoric*, 133.

own. I was no genius, but I had a style, and a very poor one it was. The form of my work was criticised, grammatical and rhetorical errors were pointed out, but no one was good enough to tell me to get back to simplicity and leave off trying to make an impression. That I had to learn myself.

Newman, as a Radcliffe student, describes her style corrected at Radcliffe as “trying to make an impression” which signified vulgarity for the Harvard examiners: Hill calls it “affected” and Withey named it “ambition.” Newman therefore recommends teaching simplicity in style and nobility in thought to achieve individuality in writing.

Jeannie Currier identifies her teachers’ desire to eradicate sentimentality as an element of her defective training:

In order that we might not err on the side of sentimentality, we were not allowed to let our fancies have free play, and so we treated every subject in a matter of fact way: and this we have found to be one of the chief difficulties in writing themes here at college, that previously having had our imaginations kept tightly in check, now we do not understand when and where to give them a loose rein.

Currier indicates what contempt for sentimentality has achieved in her writing instruction. H. R. Hunt also identifies “correctness” as a hindrance and muses over whether writing ability is an inborn or teachable skill: “I think that more time of my preparation was devoted to gaining correctness than ease and interest. So whenever I write anything, I feel that there is something stiff and unnatural in everything I say. This defect may be owing to natural causes, but I think more to lack of development, so could be remedied by proper training.”

Roberta Reynolds was a “special student,” a returning teacher who characterizes herself as the opposite of Hill and Briggs’ teacher ideal, one who focused on exercises and correctness

in the classroom because she was unable to inspire her students: “Had I been able to bring my pupils into such a state of mind that the subject should be a real thing to them—not an exercise for combining words, I would rest happier now . . . Pupils guarded against using the phraseology of the original. No individuality of thought was developed in this exercise—only cold correctness of form.” Reynolds bitterly describes her teaching as fraudulent, and the committee’s request as invasive: “This reminiscence of my own attempt at teaching the subject is given under protest. I dislike to recount how, even unconsciously, I have humbugged an unsuspecting public; but as we are expected to make our instructor a father confessor, I suppose “nothing but the whole truth” will answer.”

Many of the Radcliffe writers link individuality to observation. Lucille Schulz notes that nineteenth-century composition books increasingly emphasized observation as a skill and in Harvard’s evaluative discourse, selecting the right detail was a demonstration of one’s ability to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant, the meaningful and the meaningless.³⁵ Many students, like Mabel N. Arnold, write that before Radcliffe they were in effect blind to detail:

If instead of one year we had had two or three given up to this sort of work, and if this had preceded practice in the earlier years of our school life, I think we might have acquired before reaching Radcliffe college, what some of us are now struggling after, a wide-awake interest in everything going on in the world around us, and a knowledge of how to tell to another in an interesting way the story of what our eager eyes see.

³⁵ Carr, Jean Ferguson, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille M. Schultz. *Archives of Instruction: Nineteenth-Century Rhetorics, Readers, and Composition Books in the United States*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005, 202-03.

Mary F. Griffin offers a similar criticism of her composition training and establishes a connection between individuality and the power of observation: “If we could have had daily themes for, perhaps, a month at a time, I think we would have not only trained our powers of observation, but have gained an individuality of style which we could not easily obtain by the sort of composition work which we did.”

“Practice” holds an ambiguous place in students’ relation to their composition training. Those who criticize their instruction’s overemphasis on correctness, for instance, implicitly criticize the drill involved, but others suggest they should have had more. Lucy Sprague is one of many students who proposes that practice would have developed her imagination and powers of observation: “As much as I dislike it I wish that I had been compelled to write regularly. I think I should then have less difficulty. I wish also that the little that I have written had been of a different character. Until this year, I have written nothing that could not be found in an encyclopedia, nothing that would stimulate or develop either imagination or powers of observation.” (Despite her dislike for writing, Lucy Sprague became a professor of English at University of California at Berkeley.)

Lillian MacConnell voices the paradoxical experience of being literate, yet not literate enough in her characterization of her “inability to write”:

I have always avoided anything which would require original work, because I soon became conscious of my inability to write. Through following this course for years, my repugnance for writing increased, and what was far worse, I lost not only the power of expressing myself, but also the thoughts and ideas themselves....

I saw recently some pretty little stories charmingly written and illustrated by the pupils of one of the lower grades: should the improvement be continuous, by the time they are prepared for Radcliffe, there will be no need of English A.

MacConnell for me gets to the links between individuality, observation, and originality. Because she frames her failure as an inability to write, literacy in her formulation becomes the pure expression of personality.

Rowena Lane Hooper recalls Hill's directive that writers should put themselves behind their pens: "In many little ways the instruction at college is broader and better fitted to bring out individuality, than was the teaching in school. The professors in English here have a way of rubbing up against life, and inspiring you to put life and yourself into your work." Yet Alice Kimball critiques that directive because it is defined in different ways by different instructors, and creates conflict for the person they are required to be for admission:

We are besought to put more of ourselves into our themes. How can we? We have but ourselves for five years to be molded into Greek and Latin scholars who should be exempt from criticism, as far as our teachers could succeed in their efforts. We have nearly lost ourselves and we don't know where to find ourselves.

I suppose it ought to have a broadening influence to have different instructors from year to year; but it is almost confusing, for after you have enjoyed the instruction of one for a short time, you soon find out from his criticisms of your work what his individual ideas upon the subject are. Upon this, you, in order to avoid criticism, an inclination which is very natural to any human being, immediately try to mold your own style in accordance with his views.

Then, you have to change your style somewhat to make it conform to the conceptions of another instructor. In my case, at any rate, I find that whatever I have offered in the line of writing English before coming to College, however satisfactory it was then, is not at all satisfactory in college.

Hooper summarizes the unfortunate experience of the ways that literacy is conceptualized. She notes that despite there is no consistent standard, no commonalities in the ways her teacher recognized and valued style. In Hooper's preparation for Radcliffe, her instructors had an eye on the Harvard requirements, yet there was no consistency in their evaluative criteria.

5.6 "THOU SHALT NOT BE *BOURGEOIS*"

In 1899 the *Harvard Monthly* published an article by Barrett Wendell arguing for a revocation of Radcliffe's charter. Drawing on his experience teaching at both Harvard and the Harvard Annex/Radcliffe Wendell describes the classroom dynamic in much the same way Annie Ware Winsor does, but Wendell laments its effect on teachers: "Whoever has taught both men and women must be aware of the comparative lack of mental resistance which he finds in a class composed wholly or chiefly of the latter. To some temperaments the consequent relaxation of mental muscle may be healthily unwelcome; to many others it is rather luxuriously agreeable."³⁶ Unlike Winsor, Wendell is not interested in what silences the women students, but whether the situation is good for Harvard. (What is good for Radcliffe is irrelevant). Therefore Wendell also

³⁶ Barrett Wendell, "The Relations of Radcliffe College with Harvard," *Harvard Monthly*, October 1899, 9.

cites the compensation Radcliffe offers to low-paid Harvard instructors as a temptation that negatively affects Harvard's potential scholars by eating time away from their own research:

They tend more and more to become mere schoolmasters. So while Radcliffe has undoubtedly helped Harvard instructors to increase their scanty earnings, there can be as little question that it has on the whole impaired their original power. It has thus tended to diminish the reputation which they might have won both for themselves and for the old college to which they owe prime allegiance.³⁷

Considering Winsor and Wendell's perspectives on Harvard's women students is instructive. In her work, Winsor acknowledged that teaching at the Harvard Annex had nothing to offer an ambitious Harvard scholar ("there's no glory in it") because its students were presumed to marry, but she offers a situational assessment that could help teachers generate and test new pedagogies by accounting for their students' institutional situation. But for that pedagogical change to occur, the student has to have institutional value. For Wendell, Annex and Radcliffe students simply do not count, and therefore to protect Harvard's institutional mission, its standards, and its scholars, its relationship to Radcliffe should be severed.

In 1902 *The Radcliffe Magazine* published an essay by Katherine Fullerton describing her class's penchant for distinguishing herself against "Philistines." Fullerton first offers a genealogy of the relation between art and life:

We believe that the Ten Commandments have had their day. One by one they have been superseded by the new enactments of society, and now all ten fade into derided insignificance beside the fresher fame of some twelfth or thirteenth law. "Thou shalt not be ill-bred" was surely the eleventh, brought over,

³⁷ Wendell, "Relations" 8-9.

perhaps—who knows?—from the exquisiteness of late Rome. Since then, there have been many, mediaeval and modern, some preserved, some disregarded so soon as hallowed: and surely the latest of these—we may call it, vaguely, the twentieth—is “Thou shalt not be *bourgeois*.”³⁸

Fullerton’s essay simultaneously celebrates and satirizes her class, which instead of “aesthetes” or “Barbarians,” she tellingly names “academics.” The academic orientation to art is not defined by its object, Fullerton continues, but its method of appreciation: “We admit sometimes into our Sanctuaries the thing that the Philistine adores; but with what a difference do we wear our rue! Between his appreciation of the Venus and mine, are immeasurable gulfs of appreciation.” Rather than universalizing appreciation, Fullerton sends it up as first and foremost a technique of distinction, even identifying the sociology of usage that locates vulgarity not in crudity but in what Hill calls “affectedness” and Withey “ambition,” those who presume likemindedness with their betters: “it is, on the whole, our rule to be rather tender than scornful towards the ignorance that we so deplore; and the only intolerance that we can fairly be said to have is the loathing of those who, outside our circle, yet profess like ideals with us.”³⁹

Fullerton’s “The Wisdom of Fools” is primarily a brief consideration (hence the title) of what virtues may lie in the Philistines’ way of life. One is, of course, their dominance. Another is their happiness. The last is sentiment, “another essentially Philistine possession”:

The use of this seems to be to transmute and glorify the unspeakably small things of life, and to give them an emotional *role*. The plea for sentiment rests on the fact that for mediocre minds it invests the commonplace relationships that fill

³⁸ “The Wisdom of Fools,” *The Radcliffe Magazine* 4, no. 2 (1902): 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

Philistine lives, with a dignity, nay a beauty, that they do not in reality possess. It involves much unintelligent sympathy, and much far more unintelligent expression thereof. Again, we must pass it forgivingly, since it is by such crude aids as these that they endure life at all; but no academic could consent for one instant to make life easier by glorifying the commonplace. We make oblation of our hearts to our intellects. It is by such renunciations as this that we have won the position that is ours.⁴⁰

Fullerton, like A. W. D. and other writers in *Radcliffe Magazine*, embodies refined ironic detachment, demonstrating a consciousness of the act of writing and evaluation as always already interested and situated. She acknowledges that academic appreciation is futile in the pursuit of power, for “the position that is ours” refers to a location that academics (at Harvard, too) experienced as their decreased cultural authority, and one sidelined to universities. Fullerton’s authority may indeed be limited. But the effectiveness with which commonplaceness and sentimentality were constructed as vulgar makes her essay immediately comprehensible as literary. (I include it here both to make a point and to share the pleasure it brought me with the reader.) She can satirize sentiment because she and her reader have been so thoroughly socialized to abhor it as a vulgar relation to art and life, yet her own finely honed sense of distinction, her more subtle appreciation of art and life (of life as art) whittles away the very ground she stands on.

⁴⁰ Fullerton, “The Wisdom of Fools,” 59.

6.0 CONCLUSION

I organized this study to bring into relief the materiality of academic literacy, as concerns at one institutional site vanish at another, manifest in different ways at another, and are read differently at another. In the Harvard chapters I foreground Harvard's institutional conflicts and contradictions to complicate scholarly conceptions of Harvard and its faculty as agents of hegemony. In their discourse of evaluation, the Harvard faculty in English defined literacy as literary appreciation, the fullest expression of individuality. As significant numbers of first-generation college students from both the south and west entered Harvard for the first time, as Eliot liberalized the examination subject requirements and moved Harvard to the elective system, as philology emerged as the scholarly pursuit that would define the highest professional achievement in the field of English, examiners emphasized the importance of taste to combat what they considered these new and vulgar institutional conditions. They refined their evaluative criteria until they were requiring for admission a kind of mastery acquired in privileged conditions, and one previously acquired through membership at Harvard. Ironically, refining the entrance examination requirements and dismissing the role of pedagogy in teaching writing only produced more methodical student writing and a literacy more in tune with the very specialization the Harvard scholars opposed. Two persistent violations of the literary appreciation they privileged—sentimentality and commonplaceness—are still familiar to us. While Harvard examiners in no way pioneered the denigration of either one, they participated in

the construction of these values as subliterate at a time when they had activist potential at other sites, as rhetorics that privileged social cohesion and subordinated individual to collective interests.

The student writers at Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College put pressure on Harvard's discourse of evaluation for these reasons, and we can read their institutional situatedness in their work. Because independence justified political power, and because groups successfully marked dependent were considered undeserving or incapable of self-government, independence was itself a property that groups struggled to define and enact through literacy. In a "Composition and English Literature" course, Illinois Industrial students deployed a commonplace literacy practice to revise the Agrarian myth, constructing the farmer's independence not through property, but through his labor. Radcliffe College writers struggled to demonstrate individuality while maintaining emotional control, but observing strictures against agitation only served to undermine women's struggle for access to Harvard.

I have argued in this study that what Brian Street calls the autonomous model of literacy enjoys such traction because it conflates literacy and independence. It also erases the subjects and situations that constitute literacies and give them purpose. In bringing the findings of literacy scholars to research in composition history, I find that adopting another institution's practices or standards as a model is even more ill-advised than I thought possible. This research as well as my current institutional situation reveal the limitations of assessment and curricular guidelines and standards when they are constructed at one site and implemented at another rather than generated and adapted to suit an institution's purpose and student population.

Here is one illustrative example. As a new director of composition at an open-admissions university, I sought to replace the universal rubric for instructors with assignment-specific

assessment guidelines. Charles Cooper's chapter on genre-specific writing assignments and criteria in *Evaluating Writing* was an especially helpful resource. The first assignment for both of my university's freshman courses is a literacy narrative, and Cooper lists five genre-specific criteria for an "Autobiographical Incident" assignment:

Tells an engaging story about a single incident;

Organizes the narrative so that it is easy to follow;

States or clearly implies the significance of the incident;

Achieves emotional distance from the incident and avoids sentimentality and moralizing;

Presents scene and people concretely and vividly.¹ (my italics)

My argument about our historical distaste for sentimentality and moralizing is by now, I hope, clear. I want to emphasize that Cooper helped me establish genre-specific evaluative criteria; with some reinvention I drafted criteria that I hope will be more culturally appropriate for my students, and invite, rather than close down, multiple ways of writing. I read Cooper deploying criteria that articulate the genre conventions of autobiographical writing, and how we evaluate a piece of such writing as "good." Yet among the majority Latino students at my university, defining "emotional distance" as an achievement unproblematically endorses the kind of individualistic upward mobility that conflicts with the centrality of extended familial relations in their lives. In other words, even Cooper's genre-specific criteria had to be adapted for a local student population. Instructors at my university who read an emphasis on relational rather than

¹ "What We Know About Genres, and How It Can Help Us Assign and Evaluate Writing," in *Evaluating Writing: The Role of Teachers' Knowledge about Text, Learning, and Culture*, (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999), 39-40.

individual response as “sentimentality,” and therefore subliteracy, would interpret a cultural value as a lack of literary and individual development.

The potential pitfalls in this one assignment are not restricted to the kind of authorial detachment the academy privileges in narrative and that many of our students may read as a display of arrogance. In their ethnographic research on Native American Indian narrative, Scollon and Scollon identify a four-part structure of meaning that violates the Anglo and western-educated reader/listener’s expectations of three-part narrative structure.² My university has a significant Native American Indian student population, and there are twenty-one indigenous American Indian tribes in my state. Even though I have rewritten the staff assignment and its evaluative criteria, how many of those students will write narratives their instructors (and classmates) read as incoherent? What about the significant number of students my university recruits from Samoa and Cameroon? And so on. Despite my considerable authority over the direction and design of the composition program, like every other Director of Composition, I work in an institutional situation which is unique and to which I am beholden. At this point, I wonder: given my university’s student population and its own institutional history and practices, how can I design a composition program that best serves its students and their long-term literacy learning? Every Director of Composition asks that question, I am sure, but the location from which they begin and the strategies they (collaboratively) design are unique to each one. As are the aggregate of literacies students bring to the classroom, and the literacies we privilege as we revise, assess our institutional situation, and then revise again.

In his study of the subject in composition, Lester Faigley compares the evaluative criteria in a 1931 report on the College Entrance Examination Board’s English examination to *What*

² Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon, *Narrative, Literacy, and Face*, 1981.

Makes Writing Good, a survey of forty-eight writing teachers compiled by William Coles and James Vopat in 1985. Faigley finds that the 1931 Commission on English, like the Harvard faculty under study here, recognized originality through literary appreciation(185). Faigley notes, however, that despite the diversity among the contributors to the 1985 volume *What Makes Writing Good*, thirty of the forty-eight student papers submitted as exemplary work were personal experience essays and that students repeatedly achieved excellence by demonstrating “honesty,” “integrity,” and “authenticity.” While the means of literacy assessment and the qualities that demonstrate individuality have changed, then, the ways that achievement in writing is recognized and categorized remains a measure of how successfully a writer constructs an individual self.

We must continually reflect on what we value in writing, and have that conversation with both students and our fellow writing instructors. But as this study and many of our working lives have shown, administrative and public policies can help determine the shape and purpose of literacies, and which ones will count in the academy. Unless we complicate the conception of literacy as a mysteriously-acquired talent, we reinforce the notion that literacy is simultaneously a basic instrumental skill and a marker of independence, especially given the accountability and privatization initiatives that dot the landscape of higher education. In her studies on literacy and work, Glynda Hull found the widespread and “now commonplace assertion, presented as a statement of fact, that because they apparently lack literacy and other ‘basic’ skills, U. S. workers can be held accountable for our country’s lagging economy and the failure of its businesses to compete domestically and internationally.”³ If workers cannot support themselves

³ Glynda Hull, *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, 661.

in a free-market economy their own lack of skills (and their teachers) is at fault; if U.S. (or Mexican) workers are illiterate, why pay them a living wage?

Reductive conceptions of literacy also conveniently deflect attention away from the multiple literacies of our students and alternative ways of knowing, communicating, and understanding that could challenge that reduction. The stories of Illinois Industrial University and Radcliffe College students are especially important for this reason. We cannot take the terms of the nineteenth-century literacy crisis for granted any more than we can the terms of the crisis we are teaching in, and learning in, now.

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