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ARTICLE

Toward a Fungible Scrip: Orestes Brownson's *Boston Quarterly Review* and the Valuation of American Literature

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This paper considers how Orestes Brownson used the *Boston Quarterly Review*, the periodical he established, edited, published, and, for the most part, independently composed, to undertake an immanent critique of American political economy between 1838 and 1842. In opposition to virtually all of his contemporaries, Brownson believed that American literature should be perceived as operating within a single value structure that joined aesthetic and market modes of valuation. In the wake of the nonrenewal of the US Bank's charter in 1832 and the Panic of 1837, the American paper money system became unstable and Brownson proposed that the shared formal identity between literature and economics meant that literature was the forum best fitted to advocate and enact economic reform.

The paper considers the genesis and development of Brownson's ideas and methods through three stages: first, the establishment of equivalence between conditions of aesthetic and economic value; second, the means by which literary form might intervene in and direct the progress of economic literacy; finally, the backgrounds to Brownson's recourse to the value structure of Catholicism after 1844. Focusing on Brownson's extraordinary and unique prolixity, I argue that his formal innovations were explicitly intended to disrupt the lexicography of contemporary paper money and assert a new institutional form of value based on labor time, something represented in the text by his emphasis on the collaborative literary labors of author and reader.

In his seminal survey of the American philosophical tradition, Cornel West determined its 'evasion' of the prevailing conditions of European philosophy by setting up an opposition between the first major American philosophical movement, Transcendentalism, and its contemporary Karl Marx. Marx offered an immanent critique of social and economic systems and a mode of resolution through collective action. Emersonian Transcendentalism, in contrast, drew attention away from direct action and toward a universal remedy in 'courageous self-reliance by means of nonconformity and inconsistency' (West, 1989: 10). This opposition is particularly acute in the field of economic critique. As Jeffrey Sklansky has written, Emerson's early work presented itself as an 'explicitly noneconomic kind of psychological self-expression or self-representation' that rejected principles of socio-economic dependency and was therefore 'sharply in tension with [the then current models] . . . of classical political economy' (2002: 42). Despite the lack of any genuine political economists within the Transcendentalist circle, however, there were exponents of alternate ways of thinking. Most notable was Orestes Brownson, who in 1840 published 'The Laboring Classes'—an incendiary call to abolish the institution of hereditary property and a prophecy of class war. The radicalism of Brownson's tone and statements in 'The Laboring Classes' have ensured that it is now by far his most read work, earning him the epithet 'an American Marxist before Marx', as applied by Arthur M Schlesinger (1939) in an essay which usually accompanies pedagogical approaches to 'The Laboring Classes'. Yet, as I will argue here, 'The Laboring Classes' is merely the most consciously outrageous and provocative part of a broader scheme of literary economic critique that Brownson undertook in the *Boston Quarterly Review* between 1838 and 1842, a periodical he founded, funded, edited, and, for the most part, composed for the duration of its existence.

My contention is that the method of Brownson's economic critique in these years—during which he became first an affiliate and then an opponent of Transcendentalism—is inadequately understood. Within American letters, he was the most outspoken exponent of an immanent critique of contemporary economic conditions. The *Boston Quarterly Review* was founded expressly as a response to the Panic

of 1837 and as a vehicle for reform efforts.¹ What further distinguishes Brownson's project, however, is that it took *literature* to be the means by which a reform of the concept of value in general might be undertaken. Unlike those around him, Brownson collapsed the constructed dichotomy between economic and aesthetic value and rejected the Romantic ideological premise that '[t]he pursuit of wealth . . . is a low degrading pursuit, proceeding from a mean and sordid ambition. It can in no sense compare with the elegant and ennobling pursuit of letters' (Brownson, 1839a: 11).² Instead, literature should be instrumentalized to political ends and valued in accordance with its social benefits, as he would write in the *Boston Quarterly* for 1841:

Of literature proper, I have not much to say. I place no value on literature for its own sake, and never make it an end to be sought. It deserves our attention only as a means of individual or social growth . . . I would enlist literature on the side of the people, and secure all its influence to the cause of democracy. (Brownson, 1841a: 19)

My analysis in what follows explores the methods by which Brownson instrumentalized his writing toward 'enlisting it on the side of the people' for their economic benefit. Brownson developed a mode of direct action where literature was to be not only the means *through* which alternative economic ideas were proposed, but also the means *by* which they might be enacted. These two stages structure my argument. Initially, the *Boston Quarterly Review* contained much criticism of the dominant economic problem of its day: the paper money system, which was unstable even before the Panic of 1837 considerably worsened matters. The profusion of nonfungible bank-issued paper currencies that were in circulation from

¹ As Brownson's most recent biographer, Patrick Carey, writes, the object of the *Boston Quarterly* was to free Brownson from the editorial restrictions placed on his writing in other periodicals, such as the *Christian Examiner* and the *Boston Reformer*, and enable him to 'publish more extensive essays on the political economy' appropriate to the contemporary crisis (2004: 66–7).

² My reasoning here relies on Mary Poovey's (2008) illustration of how British political economists and British Romantic poets inadvertently collaborated to entrench an ideology that aesthetic and literary values were absolutely incompatible with the terms of the free market.

the 1830s until the passing of the Banking Acts of 1863 negatively affected the steady measure of value necessary for a stable and developing economy, making value management a key concern for economic reformers. The potential uses of literature are recognized at this stage, insofar as literature necessitates engagement with the same cognitive practices that are employed to determine value in paper currency. Paper currency is a form of text, and the exertions of reading and writing necessary to engage in currency transactions at the time indicated that analogous forms of economic literacy could be developed in literary contexts. I contend that Brownson's position as funder, editor, and main contributor to the *Boston Quarterly* granted him the liberty to make formal experiments which intervened in how value was ascribed in reading.

Brownson was the most prolix author of his era, even defining himself as an 'incarnation of prose' in the pages of the *Boston Quarterly* in 1839 (1839b: 139). The demands of his periodical led him to write and publish, on average, in excess of 150,000 words of prose per year between 1838 and 1842.³ Such literary exuberance seemed to come naturally to Brownson, and the later *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1844–64, 1873–75) was, as its title suggests, also substantially his own composition. However, *Brownson's Quarterly* was for the most part a theological review, dedicated to fighting the corner of Brownson's form of Catholicism after his conversion in 1844. By contrast, since the *Boston Quarterly* defined its project to be the advocacy of economic and political reform, the singularity and personalism Brownson exerted over it came to have specific economic and political effects. Brownson's prolixity

³ Although often noted by Brownson's critics both in his lifetime and in the critical legacy, there is no work which closely analyzes this extraordinary literary productivity. For instance, Barbara Packer recognizes that 'the task of putting together four times a year a review each of whose issues was well over a hundred pages in length ... would have flattened most men, but the impression of the early volumes of the *Boston Quarterly Review* make on anyone willing to read them straight through is one not of the founding editor's exhaustion but of his exuberance' (1995: 433). Packer offers little further comment except to explain it as a practical derivative of Emersonian self-reliance. While such a reading is legitimate insofar as it indicates some of the internal contradictions in Brownson's method, there are qualities in it that deserve to be seen as more than merely derived Emersonianisms, as I argue here. For a detailed survey of the *Boston Quarterly's* contributors and Brownson's role in overseeing the project, see Gohdes (1931: 38–82) and H F Brownson (1898: 214–37).

was tuned to invoke a mode of readership that enforced recognition of the labor exerted both in its production and, of necessity, in its consumption. Establishing a link between the labors of all parties invested in the text, the *Boston Quarterly* takes on the quality of a forum for the mutual sympathetic recognition of a labor theory of value. By doing so, his writing seeks to establish an institutional form of value distinct from that of the unstable contemporary market, and better suited to his egalitarian reform agenda.⁴ My argument concludes by tracing how and why such efforts led Brownson to Catholicism and its own established institutional conditions of value.

These conditions make Brownson a significant figure in discussing the intersections between literature and economic development in America, something that has been a key concern for recent historicist critics of nineteenth-century culture. Existing studies in this field divide between two conventional approaches, and the example of Brownson is instructive insofar as he offers some indication of how one might move beyond their limitations. The first approach examines the social and economic histories of authorial practice in the nineteenth-century, represented most impressively by Leon Jackson's *Business of Letters* (2007), which demonstrates that authors worked within a range of embedded economies rather than a single overarching 'marketplace', and most extensively by David Dowling's trio of books (2009; 2011; 2012) which reveal the means by which authors collaborated and cultivated mutual dependencies to ensure their 'survival' in a tumultuous book trade. Given that such studies are avowedly histories of the conditions of cultural production, it is inevitable that aesthetic mediations of economic questions within the works studied are outside their remit.⁵ The second approach follows the dictates of New Historicism, in which a text is the case study

⁴ As Christopher Grasso and others have noted, the conservatism that characterizes Brownson's late thought is present as early as the 1830s in his insistence that humanity needed 'the right vision, and the right institutions' to reach its apogee. It was Brownson's self-appointed destiny to find or, if necessary, create those institutions (Grasso, 2002: 500).

⁵ Jackson's study is conscious enough of where the strengths and weaknesses of its methodology lies to state this point clearly in the introduction, emphasizing that his work is 'a social history of authorship' rather than literary criticism (2008: 4).

for an analysis of its manifestations of contemporary economic anxieties and how such anxieties may have conditioned its production. The range of such studies is broad, but their emphasis is always the social and cultural function of *literary representation*. Whether the mode of representation employed involved 'compensatory fictions' that helped readers to recognize alternative 'forms of currency and value' in their lives that had not been lost on financial markets, as David Anthony proposes (2009: 26–7), or whether it resorted to the representational lexicon of feeling to 'render more intimate and domestic the abstract forces of economy and polity', as Joseph Fichtelberg has contended (2003: 7), the responses of specific authors are consistently secondary to their shared methodological prerogative that the economy was naturalized or mitigated through representations that enabled the contemporary reader to come to terms with its impersonal and amoral processes.

Brownson is unique amongst (and undiscussed within) such readings not only because his critique is explicit and direct but because it is structural, using literary form and aspects of what we would now call the phenomenology of reading to address the formal conditions of economic literacy. As Anna Kornbluh has recently written with respect to New Historicist models in British Victorian literature, the abnegation of the study of form within literary texts, and of the close reading that accompanies it, has normalized a view that methods of discourse analysis are incompatible with aesthetic inquiry. Kornbluh identifies this as a weakness: culture under the conditions of capitalism should be understood 'not as a matter of mimetic recording, but rather of aesthetic mediation', capable not only of conceptualizing or figuring 'what *is*, but also what *could* or *should* be' (2014: 11, 15 Emphasis in original). In what follows, both the possibilities and the limits of formal interrogations of value structures are explored. That Brownson eventually gave up his attempt in favor of the more rigorous value system of Catholicism is relatively unimportant. What is significant is that literature was seen, in concrete terms, as a space of economic interference according to a logic that would later be more successfully exploited by Marx and others, with Brownson's eventual

recourse to traditional and conventional value structures a perhaps inevitable consequence of his personal, political, and historical situation.

Transcendent Value and its Discontents

Brownson's objections to economic conditions in America were subject to continual evolution from 1837 through to the demise of the *Boston Quarterly* at the end of 1842, and the terms by which literature served to remedy it were equally mutable. Only in 1840 does his model of formal intervention in the structures of value reach coherence. Across its 1838 and 1839 volumes, the *Boston Quarterly* evinces the erosion of Brownson's conviction in a theologically-derived transcendent standard of value that applied equally to morals and to the market, meaning that the course by which his ideas developed is critical for grasping how his alternative model of value was eventually to work. Brownson had been involved in labor reform projects for many years prior to establishing the *Boston Quarterly*. In the late-1820s, he had been closely involved with the *Free Enquirer*—the newspaper for social, religious, and industrial reform overseen by Robert Dale Owens and Fanny Wright—and his interest in, and evident capacity for, engaging with the laboring poor led him to a Unitarian pulpit after George Ripley, later the founder of Brook Farm, recognized the need for such a minister in urban Boston (Carey, 2004: 23–29, 57).

His economic activism began in earnest in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837. A complex and global financial crisis, one of its most devastating effects in the US was to worsen existing problems with the stability of American currency. A boom in speculative purchases of federal land under Andrew Jackson's presidency was followed by bust caused in part by the issue of Jackson's 1836 'Specie Circular', an executive act that forbade the purchase of land with paper currency and had the effect of radically unbalancing the ratio between metallic and paper money (Rousseau, 2002).⁶ Brownson's initial response came from the pulpit. In a sermon entitled 'Babylon is Falling' delivered in May 1837, Brownson depicts a form of economic millennialism

⁶ For a comprehensive recent reading of the complexity and international extent of the Panic of 1837, see Lepler (2013).

that anticipates many of the concerns that would animate 'The Laboring Classes' three years later. He declaims of 'signs' that the grand 'system of fraud, deception, and injustice, which man's greediness for wealth . . . has built up' is imminently to collapse, and that this system is itself Revelation's 'city of Babylon . . . "mother of harlots and abominations of the earth"' (Brownson, 2001: 228, 227). As much as his sermon is inspired by the economic events contemporary with its appearance, at this stage Brownson retained an ecclesiastical absolutism on both the cause and the remedy of economic misery: 'however we may blame government and its recent measures', including presumably the Specie Circular, 'we must look for the real cause of what we see and deplore in that one word, privilege' (2001: 239). Brownson's conviction, in other words, is that all secular value should be transcended by the universal equality of man before God.

When he came at the beginning of 1838 to found the *Boston Quarterly Review*, therefore, the paradigm for the economic reform the periodical would undertake retained the logic of transcendent and religious conditions of value. This is evident in the first volume's introductory remarks when Brownson incorporates the lexicon of economics to advance his object, under the assumption that contemporary problems had less to do with structural economic issues than a basic lack of proper moral guidance. Opening by bemoaning the lack of 'channels of communication' for the kind of writing he would produce, Brownson enforces equivalence between the marketplace and intellectual transactions. As he puts it, the guardians of extant channels of communication are 'ignorant of the *value* of what he would utter, and they see no mark by which they can even guess what it will *pass for in the market*. His thoughts have not been through the *mint* of public opinion, and therefore must be debarred *from general circulation*' (Brownson, 1838: 2–3. Emphasis added). This is not irony, and in what follows he willingly submits the *Boston Quarterly* to these rudimentary conditions of exchange value. His writing, he insists, makes no attempt 'to fix its precise value'. His opinion will 'go for what it is worth', it is not his aim 'to give currency to this or that doctrine, to support this or that party, this or that class' (Brownson, 1838: 4, 5). Rather than seek to explicate the conditions of exchange value, Brownson

simply sees acclaim as coherent with the transcendent model of value which also underpins the presumed virtues of democracy. According to a doctrine of self-evident truths, that which is most valuable will be recognized as such by the reading public. The fault of American thought and culture was merely the lack of sincere works to meet a demand that Brownson assumed to exist.

This model persisted into 1839, underscoring the *Boston Quarterly's* early stance on the role of American literature in reform. The *Boston Quarterly* for 1839 began with a review-essay of Emerson's recent 'Literary Ethics Address' titled simply 'American Literature'. Brownson begins by echoing the general contemporary sense that Emerson was guilty of obscurantism before turning to considerations of literary value. He insisted on the validity of popular acclaim, asserting that he could 'recollect not an instance on record of remarkable posthumous fame, in opposition to the decision of the people during the man's life time', a calculated rejection of the Wordsworthian model according to which only posterity was entitled to judge literary value (Brownson, 1839a: 22; Poovey, 2008: 290–91). Brownson presses the point here and in other essays that year. 'American Literature' postulates that literature is the necessary product of a certain stage of economic development, and as such America's lack of cultural diversity by the 1830s was explained by the fact that the nation had found it necessary to 'obtain those things without which life is not possible, before we attempt life's embellishments' (Brownson, 1839a: 8). An address on the same subject given later in 1839 and printed in the *Boston Quarterly* in 1840 extended the logic of economic necessity, proposing that cultural development could proceed through the terms of the international marketplace: 'literature adequate to our wants was furnished by the mother country, of a better quality, and at a cheaper rate than we could furnish it for ourselves' (Brownson, 1840a: 66).

Yet these early assumptions came under review once he attended more closely to the mechanisms of value in operation in American economics. Before 1837, the problems with American paper money were already evident. The bimetallic coinage introduced in 1792 had been difficult to maintain, since divergences in market value

between gold and silver meant that coins were frequently worth more as metal than their dollar value indicated and thus they inevitably disappeared from circulation to be exported or smelted. This loss of specie led banks to hoard their diminishing reserves as collateral, against which bank bills and promissory notes were issued to bolster the money supply. While the Bank of the United States was under charter (1791 until its failed renewal led to dissolution in 1811, and 1816 until its second dissolution under Jackson after 1832), the paper system was relatively stable, but the Bank's conservatism and restrictions of credit made it unpopular and encouraged Jackson's decision to veto its renewal. From the mid-1830s until the Banking Acts of 1863, therefore, the authority to manage credit and to augment the money supply was in the hands of state-chartered private banks, and the lack of a central regulatory authority on the value of the currency contributed to the instability which was partly to blame for the Panic of 1837.

Although Brownson initially neglected the bearing of this problem on his own thought, it nevertheless became a key subject for the *Boston Quarterly* through the intervention of a pair of articles by the diplomat and politician Alexander Hill Everett published six months apart in July 1839 and January 1840. These discussed the causes and remedies of the currency problem and advocated the 'hard money' solution common to former Jacksonians who were now critical of Martin Van Buren's economic policies. The situation was less the consequence of the strengths or weaknesses of a regulatory central bank, Everett proposed, than of a currency which had no inherent value. As such, he advocated the restoration of a specie-based coinage and the complete suppression of banknotes of denominations less than \$20 (Everett, 1839; Everett, 1840). Although Everett's two articles are concerned almost exclusively with economic issues, he briefly employs the argument that an unreliable measure of value is liable to impact the poorest in society most significantly (1840: 100). Economic history corroborates this argument. State chartered banks issued paper promissory notes against a specie reserve that averaged just 15.6 percent of their total deposit and note issues in 1836, a figure that equated to a holding of \$4.60 per capita across the United States (Rousseau, 2002: 463). When economic

instability led to an increase in attempts to redeem specie for notes held, then smaller banks, with their smaller reserves, were at higher risk of collapse. Given the localism of the banking and currency system under the aegis of the state charter, those who operated only within a local economy were most likely to be affected by their possession of suddenly valueless, because nonredeemable, paper currency. These were the sociological points that meant more to Brownson, and their influence is evident as they structured his objections to the currency in the later volumes of the *Boston Quarterly*. In April 1840, he declaimed that '[a]ll we want in this country, for the encouragement of industry, is its entire freedom, and a uniform and steady measure of value' (Brownson, 1840c: 223). Later that year, 'The Laboring Classes' contained explicit reference to the inherent 'evil' of 'your paper money banks' and demanded that '[u]ncompromising hostility to the whole banking system should therefore be the motto of every working man, and of every friend of humanity' (Brownson, 1840d: 375, 393).

The significance of this context, and of Brownson's belated response to it, lies with the recognition it enforces that the insidious effects of the market were sustained by bad faith in the persistence of transcendent standards of value, standards that the issuers of paper money depended upon to maintain the more profitable industry of printing, rather than minting, currency. The alternative was recourse to an institutionalized form of regulatory authority, whether it was a central bank or the 'hard money' solution of a presumed naturalistic measure of value in a metallic currency, a model that did not want for popular support.⁷ It was within this framework that literature might have a part to play, since the deferral of trust inculcated by the paper money system exactly reflected the sequence of deferred meaning that language encodes. In other words, language and money were profoundly complicit in controlling contemporary systems of value assignment, as the following points demonstrate.

⁷ Lendol Calder notes that coins containing silver and gold were "'real" enough that [they] could be bitten and tasted', conferring on them a sensory guarantee of value that was readily understood (1999: 78).

After Jackson's veto of the renewal of the national bank's charter in 1832, the number of state-chartered banks surged, from 506 in 1834 to 788 in 1837, and eventually up to 1,562 by 1860. As each bank issued its own banknotes, there was a corresponding surge in the range of paper currencies in circulation. By the early 1840s, the number of differing notes was over 5,000; by 1861, it was over 10,000 (Fite & Reese, 1973: 157, 160; Henkin, 1998: 139). This extraordinary range of notes, each bearing a promise of redemption in specie, meant America was flooded with nonfungible scrip. As David Henkin has written, even when these notes were not counterfeit (at times, as much as 40 percent of the currency was fake) their value was fluid and determined by a wide range of factors including the reputability of the issuing bank, the geographical distance of the note from the bank of its issue, whether the credited bearer was personally named on the note's inscription, and so on. The effect was that the process of acquiring and spending paper money in America required the exertion of 'a fair amount of scrutiny' on each note to pass through one's hands (Henkin, 1998: 139). In no uncertain terms, banknotes were 'texts to be read', and the acumen to read *well*—which is to read for value—was a critical survival skill for all those who were economically active, a category that extended far beyond the mercantile class to include all strata of society. Ascertaining trustworthiness was paramount, and the difficulty in doing so led to a profusion of published 'counterfeit detectors'. These were catalogues describing known counterfeits in circulation at that time, along with details of the means to approximate the value of legitimate banknotes as issued by the various state banks. In this chaotic scene, the printers of banknotes (whether legitimate or not) understood the necessity of an impression of authenticity, which led to an ever-increasing emphasis on the detail and individuality of the markings on paper money. As Henkin notes, the implicit standard of value that underwrote this endeavor relied on nostalgia for the presumed stability of personal trust: the idiosyncrasies of banknotes, which included names of banks in impressive bold type, unique images or 'vignettes', and, most importantly, apparently handwritten signatures, constituted a 'typography . . . [that] reaffirmed . . . [the] ostensibly personal character of the fiduciary commitments they encoded' (1998: 143).

Paper money therefore had ontological significance in excess of its economic role in precipitating the Panic, since it evoked the same existential crises concerning the individual's relation to society that dominated the American philosophical and literary scene. As such, contemporary projections of American political economy followed religious and philosophical logic toward positioning relationships of transaction under laws of personal virtue. In 1837, the theologian and former literary editor of the *New York Journal of Commerce* Horace Bushnell spoke before the Phi Beta Kappa society at Yale on the extant 'science, so called, of political economy'. Criticizing 'the mercenary and merely economical polic[ies]' of contemporary political economists, Bushnell offered an alternative measure of 'national wealth . . . in the total value of the persons of the people' (1864: 44, 70, 51 Emphasis in original). On similar terms, Everett's second piece on currency for the *Boston Quarterly* in January 1840 proposed a system in which promissory notes would be issued against the collateral of personal trust and reputation, so that 'the notes of each individual and company will enjoy the credit which may belong to them from his or her known character and solvency, and no more' (1840: 102). In aligning personal virtue with economic trust, these writers sought to institute a mode of embodied value, a transactive dynamic in which contiguity between the persons involved is maintained and not lost in dissemblance or deceit.

These were terms with which literature could engage. As Walter Benn Michaels has written with respect to later realist fictions, the impression of personal presence in text is literature's own mode of the 'logic of the gold standard', otherwise defined as 'the desire to make yourself equal to your face value' (1987: 22).⁸ It is here that Brownson's intervention is unique, because against the modes of a domesticated, affective, or sentimentalized appropriation of the reader's feelings common amongst contemporary novelists he directly engages with the condition that made banknotes

⁸ I do not have space here to discuss the relevance of my argument to a recent movement analyzing the philosophical dimensions of personhood in nineteenth-century American literature. Suffice it to say that the emphasis placed on personhood by Brownson and Bushnell indicates that the concept has considerable economic significance, a point so far undiscussed within these philosophical enquiries. For the fullest expositions of these theses of impersonality, see Cameron (2007) and Arsić (2014).

hard to value—the indeterminacy of their sparse and often spurious promises of trustworthiness. To diminish the effects of the empty promises on America's paper scrip, American letters needed to develop the hermeneutical capacities of its readers and the ability to recognize sincerity in text as the presence of its author and an embodiment of their labor. Developing the recognition of sincerity thus became his object, and formal intervention into contemporary reading practices became his means.

Incarnation of Prose

Throughout his essays on literature in the *Boston Quarterly*, Brownson's model for the American author to come embodied the qualities of personal presence that were the root of the problem of contemporary economic literacy. His ideal appears in 'American Literature' as an author who would 'be touched with a sense of human infirmities, sympathize with our weakness, and through sympathy redeem us'. In short, he must be 'their impersonation' (Brownson, 1839a: 21). A year later, in the April 1840 number that would precede the publication of 'The Laboring Classes' in July, these conditions were explicitly applied to Brownson's own writing for the first time. Two essays appeared here that herald what was to follow later in the year. One, reviewing Michael Chevalier's *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States* (1839), discusses the reformism of the Saint-Simonians and their desire to abolish hereditary property, an idea that would be recycled as Brownson's own a few months later (1840c). The other, however, is more significant. Bearing the title 'No Error Can Be Useful; No Truth Can Be Injurious', it begins in a definition of eloquence that depends on personal contiguity, in which the speaker 'must speak himself, throw out his very soul, and breath[e] his very being into the souls of those he addresses' (Brownson, 1840b: 168). Originally written in 1837 (a point that Brownson confirms in a footnote), its recovery and publication here was no doubt intended to prepare the ground for the aggressive revelations of 'The Laboring Classes'. However, it also contains a methodological statement that would come to be critical: 'Let [the author] speak right on with an entire forgetfulness of everything but his subject; let him not think whether his language be coarse or refined, reverent or irreverent, and

if possible leave his hearers *no spare time or attention to criticize him* (Brownson, 1840b: 170. Emphasis added).

This provocative gesture evinces a commitment to aggressively engage his reader that Brownson would maintain throughout the controversies of 1840. Its logic—of occupying time, making his presence the reader's consistent present—works through multiple stages to effect Brownson's reform agenda. First, his stress on an investment of time is the basic component of the impression of personalism in text. This is emphatically staged in the October number, which immediately followed 'The Laboring Classes' in textual terms and incorporated a confession that this number was 'wholly prepared by the Editor' which seems calculated to impress (Brownson, 1840h: 518). Its first essay, 'Progress on Our Law', is a discourse from 1838, another recovered past text which reiterates his intimidatory stance in a remark on the work Brownson committed to taking on: 'There is for us no stopping place; no period when we may retire from our work, and feel that for the rest of life we may take our repose. Repose, in the sense of the absence of exertion, is not for man' (Brownson, 1840e: 399). The purpose of these recovered texts is clarified by the intensity of Brownson's association between eloquence and personal textual investment, each instance contributing to a parallel with the then-dominant Lockean sense of personhood as the singularity of consciousness in a body over time (Locke, 1997: 296–314). Thereafter, this concentration of Brownson's past and present becomes a consistent feature of the *Boston Quarterly* from volume three to the periodical's termination in 1842. His reproduction of past texts (three instances in volume three) and instances of self-citation in volume four come to a head in the lead articles for the first two numbers of volume five, which consist of extensive reviews of Brownson's first two books, *New Views of Christianity* (1836) and *Charles Elwood* (1840), penned by Brownson himself (1841b: 145–46; 1842a; 1842b). Its primary object is relatively simple, being to impress upon his reader in concentrated manner the singularity of the Brownsonian voice without reference to the time and context of composition. It is a guarantee of his presence, an exemplary instance of sincere commitment in writing that opposes the 'splendid

lie' inscribed on contemporary bank bills, as another essay in the same number claims (Brownson, 1840f: 413). Yet this is not its only effect, as 'Progress on Our Law' also demonstrates.

Toward the end of that discourse, a second methodological statement increases the intensity of Brownson's impositions:

As a friend of progress, I ask for more than toleration. I do not stand up before my age, and ask it merely to permit me to bring out my ideas on man and society, on God and religion. I demand cooperation, that the public do not only tolerate me in doing this, but that it aid me in doing it. (Brownson, 1840e: 408)

This explicit 'demand' of personal aid then finds its natural extension in the piece Brownson surely intended these recovered texts to stand as introduction to, and explication of: a gargantuan 92-page polemic expanding on the content of 'The Laboring Classes', reiterating its points, and demolishing its critics. As a demonstration of Brownson's conviction in his personal right to unbounded free speech, it is total. Yet it also incorporates the demand of communion between author and reader just described, and in doing so stakes a claim that has significant socio-political ramifications consistent with the reform projects that make up the article's content. 'The Laboring Classes', Brownson claimed, 'presupposed nearly all that we had previously written in our Journal, and, of course, was liable to be misinterpreted by those, who read it by itself alone' (1840g: 504). Prior to criticizing him, Brownson declares we must first understand him. But prior to understanding him, we must first have read his entire oeuvre, an oeuvre that is unique in its size, extent, and, correspondingly, in the investment of time-as-intellectual-labor it demands. To understand Brownson, we must take on the task of sincere appreciation of his commitment, a commitment that can be apprehended only by way of our *own* commitment. In the sincerity of such communion was value to be understood.

In an economic sense, what makes Brownson's textual performances unusual is their invocation of the logic and moral significance of a labor theory of value, a model that Marx would see as the critical component in his physiology of contemporary political economy in *Capital*. As the Marxian economist Ronald Meek has written, the labor theory of value may be defined 'in essence [as] an expression of the idea that the fundamental relationships into which men enter with one another in the field of production ultimately determines the relationships into which they enter in the field of exchange' (1973: 79). In other words, its prerogative is sincerity and moral clarity; it establishes value according to an abstract system such as money predominantly as a secondary function. Catherine Gallagher's recent analysis of the symbiotic relationship between literature and political economy in Britain after the Romantic period emphasizes how deeply this logic structured both disciplines, with each positing 'necessary conjunctures between the expense of life and the production of value, . . . between investing vital energy in an object and making it transferable to others' (2006: 8). The life and spirit that animated the text of genius within early Romantic thinking also underscored the theories of value of Adam Smith and David Ricardo; the consequent rejection of this analogue between aesthetic and economic value in the work of British political economy after Ricardo's death in 1823 as well as in the work of Victorian novelists was, as Poovey (2008) has demonstrated, a conscious undertaking by both parties in mutual aversion to a system that homogenized morals, money, and art. By reconnecting the divergent modes of valuation, however, radical alternatives might present themselves.

In 1839's 'American Literature', Brownson had written in general terms of the relationship between economics, the moral benefits of intellectual and literary enquiry, and the root of value that (labor) time comprises. He began in a declamation against the toxic influence of an elite literary class and advocated its opposite: the 'scholar here must not speak to a clique, a coterie, but to the entire nation . . . He who would be an American scholar must address himself to the whole American people' (Brownson, 1839a: 16). In what follows, however, this ideal is held up

against its practical limitations, limitations that informed the later enterprise of the *Boston Quarterly*. For this open literary culture to be of benefit, it must not want for sincerity or integrity:

[The scholar's] own attainments cannot far outrun the capacity of the masses to comprehend and relish his speech. It follows from this, that the first requisite to the scholar's success, in this country, is to make the whole nation a nation of readers, and to secure to the great mass of people the leisure necessary to attend to the subjects on which the scholar discourses. (Brownson, 1839a: 16)

It is the last point, of course, that causes the most fundamental stumbling block, for '[h]e who has worked all day with his hands, and sits down at night fatigued with the day's labor, and harassed in mind about the employment of the morrow, can hardly be expected to read and relish the profound and finished contributions of the true scholar' (Brownson, 1839a: 16). Rather than adapt a national literature to suit popular (marketized) taste, Brownson aspires to economic reforms that might permit the nation the leisure to develop and enhance its literacy. He was, it should be noted, remarkably acute. As Pierre Bourdieu has written, even if we have yet to find the means of achieving it, 'the link between economic and cultural capital is [or, one might add, must be] established through the mediation of time needed for acquisition' (2011: 82). However, the achievement of this ambition will only come about when cultural capital is 'invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles' of the social as well as cultural fields (Bourdieu, 2011: 83).⁹ The objections his former editors had raised about the appropriateness of Brownson's style to their paying audience were precisely what the *Boston Quarterly* permitted liberty from, and a

⁹ In 1857, Brownson would state a similarly worded case with respect to the role of print culture in allowing Catholicism to permeate the American mind. Writing that '[j]ournalism has become the most approved and the most efficient means through which ... the public mind is formed and directed', it would be necessary 'for Catholics to have their journals' and to use them 'to turn the weapon invented for their destruction against their enemies' (Brownson, 1857: 115–16).

critique of.¹⁰ Brownson's logorrhea thus constitutes a mode of direct action against the two determining conditions of the popular capacity for reading for value—it is both against the conventions of marketability, and against the acceptance of the promise of personal presence in text without something that passes for its formal guarantee.

Brownson's task, insofar as it sought to establish new institutions of value to arbitrate American society, was herculean, and events demonstrate how far the response diverted from his plan. In principle, aspects of his formal experiment worked. The controversy that followed 'The Laboring Classes' was partly informed by the formidable persona Brownson's writings had granted him. William Henry Channing would write ironically in December 1840 of having visited Brownson at home and entering the 'cave of this cyclops', but finding in his chambers 'no human bones' (quoted in Packer, 1995: 432). And even into his old age Brownson would continue to emphasize the sheer affective power of form and what we would now think of as the phenomenology of reading. As James Emmett Ryan has discussed, his later literary criticism worried extensively about the pathologies of 'diseased femininity' that could be caused in both sexes by reading sentimental, mawkish, or 'corrupt' prose (2003: 463). But, more importantly for the concerns of this article, the failure up to the end of 1840 to implement the communicative contiguity he desired led Brownson to modify his practice toward more consciously communitarian goals. In recognizing his shortcomings and the limits of his capacity to institute value structures from scratch, meanwhile, the reasons for Brownson's recourse to Catholicism become clearer.

Structured Value: The Appeal of Catholicism

Any institution founded on the ideal of lossless and sincere contiguity between persons must of necessity be communitarian. Brownson's project, which sought to make his textual persona the model of communion, did in its later stages adapt to

¹⁰ This was a key reason for Brownson's dismissal from the editorship of the *Boston Reformer* in October 1836 (Carey, 2004: 61).

incorporate a more conventional sense of community. 'The Laboring Classes' called for the removal of all forms of non-democratic authority, including the priesthood, but was not explicitly interested in determining the social structures that would replace them. Brownson's one exposition of the new principles on which social relations would be founded stipulated that it 'would combine labor and capital in the same individual . . . so that all shall be proprietors' (1840g: 467). His practical recommendations toward this goal were, however, minor. In 1841, he tentatively expressed an alternative which might set the value of moral and intellectual development on a better standard of equivalence with economically productive labor, according to which three hours per day of productive labor would be sufficient to satisfy society's economic wants, leaving a further six hours for 'mental pursuits', the fully democratic development of which would render irrelevant the socially-constructed professions of the clergy and literary class, all the while embellishing the cultural capital of the nation (Brownson, 1841a: 33).

In this respect, his ideas were at least loosely similar to the communitarian projects at Brook Farm and Fruitlands, but differing insofar as they sought to implement its practices on the social structure at large rather than within a closed economy. Residues of Brownson's early Transcendentalist allegiance are revealed in this practice, since his model of total subjective investment perpetuated the binary structures of Idealist philosophy—self and society, Me and Not-Me—that, in his philosophical writings of the period, he was beginning explicitly to reject. From 1841, he was extensively reading the work of the French Saint-Simonian and socialist Pierre Leroux, whose philosophy reversed the ethics of post-Kantian Idealism by placing human communion rather than subjectivist analysis at its center. In philosophical terms, therefore, a conflict in Brownson's theory and method was emerging. He wrote of Leroux's influence in July 1842, registering his conviction that self-realization could only be brought about through the reflective affirmation of the other. Only through communion could Brownson grasp 'the truth and reality of my life, [and] its *worth*' (1842c: 293. *Emphasis added*). It was a demand that impacted on Brownson's conviction in the efficacy of direct literary action.

Leroux's theory of value necessitated not only the renunciation of popular acclaim but also of the imposition of value by a single authority, demanding instead a mode of negotiated valuation. Brownson's 1840 writings placed excessive demands on their reader, lacking an entry-point to engage in negotiation. Early in 1841, he published a pair of linked dialogues which offered to provide this opportunity, but it is colored by the fact that these pieces also convey a tacit acceptance of failure. In both, Brownson ventriloquizes himself as a 'Radical' engaging in conversation with a 'Conservative'. Here Brownson offers his sharpest criticisms of the marketization of American literature; he also offers here the clearest sense that he alone holds the means of its redemption. 'To be popular', the Radical states, 'one must be a man of the present, uphold things as they are, never disturb the world with new views, but merely echo the sentiments he finds in vogue' (Brownson, 1841a: 15). *New Views*, of course, was the title of Brownson's 1836 book on religious reform, and he soon finds cause to allude to it again:

When the man of new views, the reformer, is dead, men will build him a tomb, or garnish his sepulcher; but so long as he lives they leave him to be—stoned. Yet let me not "bate a jot of heart and hope," but bear on my way. Mankind, thou canst only be saved by crucified redeemers. (Brownson, 1841a: 23)

Not having a stable metaphysical basis for value, let alone a legalistic or monetary one, Brownson consciously adopts the persona of the sage, the redeemer, the embodied arbiter of value. But in what follows, something uncharacteristic happens. For most of this first 'Conversation', the Radical, true to Brownson himself, dominates proceedings, the Conservative interjecting occasionally only to offer the Radical another chance to extemporize on his social theory. Yet, for the last three pages, the Radical is silenced, the Conservative is given license to critique his project in great detail and without interruption. Thereafter, it was three months until the Radical had the right of reply in that year's April number.

Why this overt, amplified silence? Paradoxically, it appears to constitute the most concentrated, and most urgent, of Brownson's attempts at enforcing communion through writing. The Conservative's uninterrupted argument concerns risk; specifically, the risk that the holder of capital stakes in investment—in the form of expenses, property, and debt—in excess of the risks of the laborer, who is said only to risk payment for his time. In the suspension of the argument that follows, Brownson makes his own stake. The return on his investment, we presume, would be the cooperation of his readers in his own reformist logic: the reader would recognize the time highlighted and bracketed between publications and utilize it to labor toward a shared intellectual reassessment of the conventional wisdom demonstrated in the Conservative's argument. Brownson's risk is that he will be generally ignored; that his imposition and bluster is merely provocative and not constructive. Brownson, relying on Leroux, speculates on the possibility that stability might be affirmed in this literary communion. But he also registers that his ideal of reciprocation was implausible, not least because the consequences of his writings of 1840 were that the openness he now aspired to was likely to be met with scorn.

When the 'Conversation' was taken up again in April 1841, Brownson led with the Radical's own direct response to the Conservative's arguments. They are, as might be expected, forthright and final, recycling the key points from 'The Laboring Classes' toward a general claim for egalitarianism. But a difference is swiftly apparent that seems consciously to address the ambitions and limits of the *Boston Quarterly*. It comes in a confession inflected with Leroux, the Radical observing that individual agency is insufficient to effect social change, collectivism is essential, and literature must formulate its aspirations accordingly:

Write if you will a book; bestow upon it all the labor, the strength of intellect, and power of genius you can, and it shall be counted a small affair, unless it meet, in some degree, the sympathies of the race, embody some of the views and wishes of mankind. It is purely idiosyncratic in its character.

It may be read for the purpose of ascertaining your idiosyncrasies, but for nothing else. (Brownson, 1841b: 177)

As the Radical goes on to say, only in the form of collective action could one contribute 'to the molding of the institutions which act upon us' (Brownson, 1841b: 178). Through arguably the most extensive and exhausting personal exertions of any individual associated with the Transcendentalist movement, Brownson had at last fully recognized the limits of individualism for himself.

The consequence was that by 1842 and the closure of the *Boston Quarterly* Brownson had passed through several attempts to institute an alternative evaluative logic but was no closer to success. His conversion to Catholicism in 1844 can therefore be seen as the logical consequence of the processes of institutionalization conducted across the years of the *Boston Quarterly's* existence. A few critics have asserted such continuity in Brownson's thought over the last 30 years, following reasoning similar in principle to that presented here. Paul Giles, for instance, argues for Brownson's intellectual consistency before and after 1844 on the basis that his interest in the concrete consequences of Transcendentalist social thought before his conversion echoes Catholic doctrines about God's perpetuated presence (as, for instance, in transubstantiation) as a 'brute material fact'. For Giles, this explains how Brownson conceived of literature's worldly effects, since 'Catholic poetics characteristically make analogy much more of a visible and material affair' than their Protestant equivalent (1992: 55–56). Indeed, Brownson's literary theory in his Catholic period is generally better understood than that of the period before 1844, and it perpetuates the logic of literature's direct effects on society and culture developed in the *Boston Quarterly*. As Ryan writes, the majority of his post-1844 literary criticism consisted of book reviews that attempted to direct his readers' interest toward books that 'operat[ed] in the service of Catholicism' and thus 'function as a mechanism of social control' (2003: 450). But although the critical elements of Brownson's uses of literature persisted even after his ideological motivations changed, it is nevertheless

a marked step back from the radical possibilities for literary intervention that Brownson had briefly opened earlier in his career.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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