The Fate of Humor in a Time of Civil and Cold War: Vanity Fair and Race

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In September 1956 the journal Civil War History published a special issue guest-edited by Walter Blair devoted to analyzing the humor produced before, during, and following America’s bloodiest conflict. Opening his short introduction by quoting Josh Billings’s 1868 pronouncement that “AN AMERICAN LUVS T EW LAFF,” Blair claims that quite remarkably Americans on both sides found new outlets for their characteristic sense of humor: “For during a period of bitter controversy and ferocious warfare, Americans had managed to hold onto the sense of humor which is one of their finest attributes.” Both Blair and Billings assume a stable notion of the national identity, of this “AMERICAN” who “LUVS T EW LAFF” (Introduction 5). My purpose here is to revisit the subject of Civil War humor, but I will do so from the contemporary perspective of our more diverse, inclusive and less stable notions of national identity. After discussing the assumptions of Blair and his contributors on race, I will focus on the New York humor weekly Vanity Fair (1859-1955) and then conclude with a brief consideration of the function of humor in wartime, a question of particular moment as once again (June 2003) the United States is at war.

Three of the seven essays in the special issue treat genre: Larzar Ziff’s “Songs of the Civil War,” Robert Lucid’s “Anecdotes of War,” and Leon T. Dickinson’s “Civil War Humor: Its Role in Novels on Slavery.” Three others analyze the work of individual humorists: John Q. Reed’s “Artemus Ward,” Anne M. Christie’s “Bill Arp,” and Ellen Brenner’s “Orpheus C. Kerr.” In “The War in Vanity Fair” James T. Naidin treats the leading New York humor weekly. Pointing out that “these studies are intended to sample the humor rather than to treat it exhaustively,” Blair invites “other approaches” to these and other materials, because “The humor of the Civil War period was extraordinarily prolific and varied” (5). I will argue that with minor exceptions Blair and his contributors fail to examine critically the pervasive racism of Civil War humor and that several essayists attempt to justify the repression of African Americans and the denigration of abolitionists that characterizes much of this material. Such scholarship had the effect of sanctioning the repressive racial practices in 1950s America.

Interpreting Civil War Humor in the 1950s

When the special issue of Civil War History appeared in 1956, World War II had ended only eleven years earlier, following the use of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An armistice concluding the Korean Conflict had been signed in 1953, after President Eisenhower stepped up bombing of North Korea and threatened to bring that bombing campaign to China, with an implicit warning that nuclear weapons might be used. If the special issue was published on schedule in September, it came out only a month before Soviet tanks crushed an uprising in Hungary. Despite the bellicose anti-Communist rhetoric of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, America found itself powerless to intervene. Simultaneously, in response to Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal, French, British and Israeli forces invaded that country. Recognizing the dangers of Soviet intervention and the threat of nuclear escalation, the United States backed a United Nations resolution forcing their withdrawal. Even as many Americans
were growing more prosperous, moving to the suburbs, and becoming entrenched by the delights of TV sitcoms and variety shows, these remained tense, dangerous times, "a season of troubles" as one historian has written (Tilden 124).

There is evidence that in writing about the Civil War, Blair’s contributors were themselves confronting the multiple traumas of war, both hot and cold. "Even as one goes through the pages of Vanity Fair now," James Nardin remarks, "the need for some relief from war becomes apparent. War intensity may be lessened by laughing at some of its hardships, but there must be complete escape from it from time to time. In 1941, one of my college professors, weary of the increasingly gloomy headlines of Allied defeats, remarked that he would like just once to see the tabloid headline ‘Love Nest Raided’ and to feel that there was no more momentous news to report" (85). As a college student in 1941, Nardin may well have fought in World War II himself.

Two domestic events demonstrated that America still was far from resolving the underlying issue of the Civil War: the claims of African Americans for full citizenship. In its 1854 decision Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court unanimously outlawed racial segregation in education, but that did not lead to integration of the schools or to the elimination of segregation. On the contrary, Southern leaders, encouraged by the refusal of the Eisenhower administration to press for integration, offered "massive resistance." Integration would require decades of struggle; today de facto segregation remains the norm in many American school systems. In December 1955 the African American seamstress Rosa Parks, supported by the union leader E. D. Nixon, began the Montgomery Bus Boycott, inspiring Martin Luther King’s campaign of "militant nonviolence." However, that campaign would not move to the center of the national consciousness until early in the next decade (Chafe 149).

In 1955 Louis Hartz published The Liberal Tradition in America, which argued, as Paul Gilroy has recently summarized it, that "the United States exemplified a state of ‘moral unanimity’ and ‘liberal uniformity,’ so that alternative viewpoints—conservative, socialist, or otherwise—tended either to be incorporated in the national narrative of ‘triumphant liberalism’ or else forgotten" (73). Hartz’s influential book followed other significant works of consensus history and political analysis, including Richard Hofstadter’s The American Political Tradition (1948) and Lionel Trilling’s The Liberal Tradition (1950). Four years later Daniel Bell’s The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties appeared. Hartz argued, as Giles has pointed out, that "the absence of any ‘comparative perspective’ produced ‘a silent quality in the national atmosphere, not so much blocking alien decisions as preventing them from ever being made’ (Hartz 81, 226; Giles 73). In the 1950s that silence was named in the language of struggle against Communism, when "there developed," William H. Chafe noted, "a growing tendency to identify any political demands of a radical or progressive nature with subversion and Communism." The most radical labor unions were purged from the CIO and "civil rights groups critical of the government were also charged with being Communist inspired." Consequently, "the Red Scare, by attacking any political program that was left of center, helped to create a politics of moderation and consensus that prevailed until 1965." Especially in the Deep South, African Americans remained virtually defenseless in the face of white violence and terror (Chafe 146–47).

In his essay “Faulkner and Desegregation,” originally published in a 1956 edition of Partisan Review, James Baldwin quoted from Faulkner’s attempt to reassure and "moderate" on race: "Things have been getting better... for a long time. Only six Negroes were killed by whites in Mississippi last year, according to police figures." Baldwin countered that "Faulkner surely knows how little consolation this offers a Negro and he also knows something about ‘police figures’ in the Deep South. And he knows, too, that murder is not the worst thing that can happen to a man, black or white. But murder may be the worst thing a man can do." (Nobody Knows My Name 125). Written at a time when the ostensible national "consensus" served to justify political and racial repression, none of the essays in Civil War History, as I mentioned, critically examines the racism underlying much of Civil War humor, although Lucid does report that the African American is typically the butt of the joke (44). With the exception of Ziff’s piece on songs, none includes materials from African Americans.

I begin with Dickinson’s discussion of humor in novels dealing with slavery. Conceding that most of these works are simply bad, Dickinson nevertheless praises several, including Mary Henderson Eastman’s proslavery Aunt Phyllis’s Cabin, or Southern Life As It Is (1852). He comments that the character Bacchus, Aunt Phyllis’s husband, is a "carefree soul. Drinking, playing his banjo, parading in his master’s cast-off garments, he thoroughly enjoys himself. He speaks with great glee and cheer. He is a swaggerer, envied by all his humber fellows. He is convinced that when he sees Aunt Peggy’s wrath, in spite of his wife’s ridicule, he will not rest until he has fired his shotgun at it, when the wrath proves to be Jupiter the cat. The portrait owes much to tradition, but it is skilfully drawn and it helps to make the book more readable than most of its kind" (51). That Dickinson could be entertained by such a characterization and then claim that its "humor" redeems the novel reflects a time when racial segregation was the norm and demeaning portraits of African Americans remained a staple of popular entertainment. Similarly, he finds "truly amusing" large portions of Mrs. G. M. Flanders’s The Ebony Idol (1860), which he describes as a "novel of the negro come North, in which he is shown not as pitiable but ridiculous." Characterizing it as "an extravagant satire on the fanaticism of Northern philanthropists," he goes so far as to claim that The Ebony Idol is "reminiscent of Conride." After asserting that Flanders is "often effective with her [authorial] mocking taunts," he claims that she is "equally satiric and more amusing when she speaks through her characters." For instance, the "notions of the abolitionists seem wilder than ever when voiced by the coarse and ignorant Mrs. Hobbs" (51-54). Apparently it does not occur to him to consider the political uses of such "humor," aimed at those who sought to eliminate slavery. Nor is he aware of the contemporary resonance of such attacks—just when the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum.

Dickinson’s interpretation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which he terms the outstanding novel dealing with slavery, also reflects the racial situation of 1956, as in the following comment on Aunt Ophelia’s attempts to educate the slave Topsy:

Brought together in a missionary experiment, the odd pair are doubly humorous. The comedy is enhanced still further by the presence of St. Clare, who has purposely engineered the scheme. He is amused with his cousin’s tireless efforts to achieve what he knows to be impossible, and his gentle chiding adds a third comic dimension to a situation already richly humorous. But amused as he is, St. Clare has not given his cousin this chore for laughs alone. Like her pupil, this stern daughter of the Puritans needs educating. She does learn, with St. Clare’s help, by confronting the negro as a living reality she is led to give up some of her pious and impracticable formulas. In some of the most forceful passages in the book... St. Clare makes plain what too few Northerners realized: that the solution to the problem of slavery,
admittedly an evil, is an infinitely more complex matter than mere emancipation. The spectacle of Ophelia and Topsy, with St. Clare plotting and enjoying it, is more than a humorous interlude; it is an organic part of the book's preachment. (62)

In asserting that Northern abolitionists like Miss Ophelia do not realize something about "the negro as a living reality" that slaveholders like St. Clare understand, Dickinson implies that even in 1856 it would be unreasonable to expect too much from educating African Americans. In "Pulaski and Desegregation" Baldwin unmasked the political significance of such a stance: a refusal to alter repressive social conditions. "When Faulkner speaks, then, of the 'middle of the road,' he is simply speaking of the hope—which was always unrealistic and is now all but smashed—that the white Southerner, with no coercion from the rest of the nation, will lift himself above his ancient, crippling bitterness and refuse to add to his already intolerable burden of blood-guiltiness. But this hope would seem to be absolutely dependent upon a social and psychological status which simply doesn't exist" (125). Dickinson's treatment of these novels aligns him with St. Clare: given the "living reality" of the Negro and the foolishness of Northern do-gooders, there is no reason to challenge a system that consigned African Americans to inferior status.

In another essay, Anne M. Christie praises the Georgia humorist Charles Henry Smith (1826-1903), "Bill Arp," for articulating the views of "most patriotic Southerners," by which she means white Southerners. In April 1861 that "patriotism" expressed itself in widely circulated letters addressed to "Mr. Linkhorn—Sure" in which Arp adamantly refused the order for Southern militia to disband. Drawing from the tradition of Southwestern humor to articulate a defiant message, Arp used cutting irony, Christie writes, to express "the sentiments of all classes throughout the South," thereby becoming "the most popular Civil War humorist produced by the South." Noting that if "Smith had not been extremely loyal to the South he might have never written at all," Christie writes approvingly of his ability to speak out "boldly" on "the cause and aim of what he called 'the Uncivil War'" (103, 104, 109).

Beginning with a "tariff that discriminated against the South," Arp blamed the war on just about everyone other than the slaveholder. The main cause was that a president was elected by sectional party pledged to shut up slavery and put it in and give it no outlet into the public territories. And here it must stay and fester and endanger our own section by its own increase until it became a "stench" (106). Christie quotes at some length Arp's use of a vernacular voice to explain "the connection between slavery and the war":

Old Pewtryan went off one day with some ships, and took a few beeds and Jews harps, and brought up a lot of captured fingers...and stole a few more on the coast of Africa, and brought 'em over and educated 'em to work in the field, and cut wood, and make bars, and so forth, but not including votin', nor misterin', nor the jury business, nor so forth.

Well, after a while they found that...New England did not agree with the negro, and so they began to slide 'em down South as fast as possible. After they had sold 'em and got the money, they jined the churches and became sanctified about slavery, sorter like the woman that got converted and then give all her novels away to the unconverted sister. Well, the Old Dominion and sich of her sons as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Randolph, bought 'em and worked 'em to satisfaction; whereupon Old Pew got jealous and began to preach again it to break it down...They kept peggin' away at us until we got mad—and we resolved to cut loose from 'em and paddle our own canoe. (106, Bill Arp, So Called 160-61)

The claim that slaveholders are the true victors is patently self-serving, but it is one that Christie does not challenge.

Noting that Arp's purpose was to "articulate the Southern view on all points of contention between the sections," Christie insists that his work "resembles much more closely Artemus Ward's [humor]" than that of other contemporary authors, because "the New England ancestry had strengthened their moral tone, made them reformers at heart. Furthermore, the criticism of both writers, though at times sharpened by strong indignation, was more often tempered, even sweetened, by natural kindness" (105, 117). Can an apostate for slavery ever be considered a "reformer at heart?" In what ways was his "natural kindness" extended to slaves? In what way was that alleged "natural kindness" shown to the slaves or, after the war, the newly freed African Americans? After the war, he resisted changes that would bring equality to African Americans. Arp's gratuitous reference to the Jews' harps the Puritans allegedly brought with them to Africa may well be an attempt to harness anti-Semitic feelings. In "Anecdotes and Recolections" Lucid reports on the "strong anti-Semitic feelings in the Confederate soldiery," even though "the anti-Semitic joke, with heavily underscored dialect, is occasionally found on both sides" (44). Nevertheless, Christie credits what she calls Arp's "individuality among Georgia humorists" to the fact that he combined his several purposes—humorous, historical, moral—with other purposes natural to a man of his fiery partisanship, his intense love of the Old South and its way of life, and his sense of obligation, as a thoughtful, privileged citizen, to those less well informed. His humor is generally original, artless, natural" (118). Was Christie oblivious of the contemporary political implications of his celebrating a writer who displayed "fiery partisanship" in his "intense love for the Old South"?

Christie mentions Arp's "much-quoted letter to Artemus Ward in protest against the harsh criticism of the South by the Northern editors and the humiliating conditions imposed on the South by the Reconstruction program" (115). Through it, Arp encouraged other Southerners to refuse responsibility for the war or slavery; instead, he continued to speak defiantly, claiming that while he had given up armed resistance, he would not be "subjugated, and humiliated, and amalgamated, and enervated" (Peace Papers 244). The tragic consequences of such an attitude for both races are now all too obvious. We will see below why he would choose to address his letter to Ward.

I mentioned that Lucid recognizes that "More than any immigrant group...the negroes were the butt of the Civil War anecdote." Even in the North following the Emancipation Proclamation, which "espoused the unqualified freedom of the slaves as a companion cause to the preservation of the Union," one does not find "emotional warmth" in the treatment of the African American. "Northern collections reveal a number of sketches about the gratitude of the escaped or liberated negroes, but no real effort is made to personalize the issue in the way, say, Southern writers wrote of the violation of their homes by Federal troops. Serious Southern anecdotes about the negro, of course, deal with his warm loyalty to his masters, his love of slavery, and the prosperity of the negro under the slave system compared with his starvation and ruin after emancipation." When it came to humor, Lucid concludes that "The majority of negro anecdotes, on both sides, are quite indistinguishable." Further, "the convention was that
Ziff's essay considers three basic types of songs—sentimental, patriotic, and light-hearted. As he points out, by their nature, songs raise a number of interpretive questions. Are we to trust the lyrics or the music? To what extent do the lyrics of certain sentimental songs mask pain and anxiety? Most intriguing is how to understand the fact that “the most popular dialect by far was that of the negro. It was heard in Stephen Foster’s songs as well as in the spirituals which both armies took up, and it was also heard in both camp and battle songs. One of the most famous negro dialect songs was one which the Union called ‘The Year of the Jubilee’ and the Confederacy called ‘The Contraband’...” (20).

In considering Civil War songs, we must know when to look beyond the words themselves: “Not only are the words of songs a poor literal record of an era,” Ziff insists, “but there are also likely to be misleading as to the meaning held for those who sang them” (27). But words cannot be overlooked, as in Carrie Belle Sinclair’s famous Confederate song, “The Bonnie Blue Flag,” which was first performed in an old Irish tune, “The Old Jailing Car.” Here is part of the song as quoted by Ziff:

The homespun dress is plain, I know
My hat’s palmetto, too;
But then it shows what Southern girls
For Southern rights will do. (13)

Similarly, “A Southern Song” defends a state built on hierarchies of race and class:

If ever I consent to be married,
And who would refuse a good mate?  
The man who I give my hand to,
Must believe in the rights of the State.

We girls are all for a Union
Where a marked distinction is laid
Between the rights of the mistress
And those of the kingly hair'd maid. (14)

Ziff speaks of the “invective” characteristic of a number of Southern songs, acknowledging that politics cannot be separated from cultural expression (10).

Concluding by celebrating an emerging American nationalism, a shared identity forged ironically in a conflict that came close to destroying the Union, Ziff writes that “there is... a universal delight in the myriad nature of America—in the swaggering Southern gentleman, in the German’s manhandling of English, in the Yankee farmer’s first contact with Southern weather. The humor is, at times, one of joyful recognition, of a nation discovering itself even as it sets out with good prospects of destroying itself. Although a battlefield was their meeting place, and their homes were separated by thousands of miles, they are capable of doing” (28). Unfortunately, Ziff excludes African Americans from this roll call of those ethnic strains contributing to the postwar national identity, a surprising omission given his recognition of the importance of spirituals for both North and South, and one that points to the need for a new assessment of Civil War songs.

John Q. Reed praises the humorist “Artemus Ward,” Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867), for his “uncommon ability to reveal issues and events in their true perspective during a period of intense ferment and confusion. His clear-sighted and searching criticism was badly needed, and there is... evidence that Ward took seriously his role as critic of the American scene. His writings were widely read, and his constant vigile, common sense, and moderation served as a much-needed antidote to the fever of mob excitement” (200-1). But why excuse bigotry and intolerance?

Reed documents Ward’s astonishing campaign directed at African Americans and abolitionists, beginning in the years just before the war when he was working on the Cleveland Plain Dealer where he attacked Oberlin College for enrolling African Americans and supporting abolitionism: “Strongly pro-slavery, he lashed out continually at the abolitionists” in a campaign that “did not cease until the movement was a dead issue” (88). He quotes the humorist’s “unbiased opinion that they go it rather too strong on the Ethiopians at Oberlin.” Ward asserted his lack of sympathy for the slaves and also treated Lincoln harshly during the presidential campaign—as did Vanity Fair, which became Ward’s primary outlet after he moved to New York in January 1861.

Writing in Vanity Fair, Ward urged the South not to secede, assuring white Southerners that his own tolerance of slavery was widely shared in the North. In “The Southern Gentleman on the Crisis,” he attempts to strike a bargain with the South, as Reed summarizes the essay, “if they will send their extremists to Mexico, the North would banish its abolitionist leaders to the same place.” This was exactly Vanity Fair’s editorial posture; if both sides agreed to ignore the slavery question, the threat of disunion would evaporate.

Writing in Vanity Fair on January 26, 1861, Ward deployed his vernacular style to remind readers that “the African” did not merit membership in human family, much less the American nation.

Fellar Sitterzuns, the African may be Our Brother. Several hilly respectfuly gentlement, and sum talentil females sell us so, & fur argyment’s sake I mite be infurcated to grant it, tho’ I don’t be’eev it myself. But the African isn’t our sister & our wife & our uncle. He
isn't several of our brothers & all our lust wife's relashuns. He isn't our grandfather, and our great grandfather and our Aunt in the country. Scarcely, & yit a numeris persons would hav us think so. It's true he runs Congress & severel other public grousery, but then he isn't everybody & everybody else likewise.

But we've got the African, or he's got us, rather, and now what are we going to do about it? He's an orful noossance. Praps he isn't to blame for it. Praps he was created for sum wise purpose, like the meelies and New England run, but it'smighty hard to see it. At any rate he's here, and it's a pity he couldn't go or somewhere quietly by himself, where he could wear red weskets and speckled neckties, and graterly his ambilash in var'ious interesting wase, without havin a eternal fuss kick up about him. But praps I'm bearing down too hard on Cuffy. Cumn to think on it, I am. He woodent be sich a infernal noossance if people would let him alone. He mite indeed be interesting. And now I think of it, why can't the people let him alone. What's the good of continiously stirring him up with a tenfoot pole? He isn't the sweetest kind of perfumery in a natural stat. (3: 37)

After hostilities broke out both Ward and Vanity Fair rallied to the Union side, but that did not mean that either he or the weekly, which he edited for a short time, surrendered their Negrophobia. For these reasons, the unconstructed Bill Arp would address to Ward his letter pleading for a quick end of Reconstruction. Reed concludes that it is true, of course, that as a literary figure Artemus Ward will be remembered primarily as a humorist, but it should not be forgotten that his role as a critic of his times was far from an insignificant one (101). What can it possibly mean to praise Ward as a social critic? Reed turns a blind eye to his refusal to recognize the humanity of African Americans.

Ward assumed the editorship of Vanity Fair in April 1861 following the career of Charles Godfrey Leland, a strong Republican, for publishing editorials welcoming the war as an opportunity for America to eliminate the evil of slavery and realize the nation's democratic purposes. However, the dismissal of Leland is not an event that attracts the attention of James Nardin in "The War in Vanity Fair." Instead, he defends the magazine's continuous barrage of racist remarks and criticism of abolitionists as a necessary outcome of its decision to subordinate everything else to the preservation of the Union. Even "through the black years of the Civil War, [Vanity Fair] fulfilled its stated purpose: to fight for the Union and use mirth as its weapon" (84). Demeaning portraits of abolitionists and African Americans were justified, Nardin argues, since "Anything that hindered the successful fighting by the North was anathema to the editors" (76). In 1860s America it was similarly argued that the national unity in the face of Communist justified ignoring claims for civil rights and social justice.

Even while crediting Vanity Fair with helping to preserve the Union by poking fun at the enemy, satirizing generals who wouldn't fight, and skewering draft evaders, war profiteers, and Copperheads, Nardin himself provides ample evidence of the weekly's racism. Nardin reports that after his election, Lincoln was "ridiculed [by Vanity Fair] for supposedly being 'in the colored tier' of a theater along with Horace Greeley" and "was urged to have nothing to do with Abolition. Vanity Fair considered Abolitionists enemies of the Union and attacked repeatedly such people as Wendell Phillips, Horace Greeley, and Henry Ward Beecher for being of that group" (70, 71). Nardin correctly reports that during 1862, when it became increasingly likely that Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, Vanity Fair grew more pitted in its attacks: "Lincoln was lampooned as a keeper of blackbirds who turned them loose because no one would buy them. Customers in restaurants reminded colored waiters that they had better hurry up their service and not forget their station in society "since the Proclamation set in," and two negroes exchanged the information that Jefferson Davis was going to "italize" by declaring all 'de niggers in de North' States slaves after the war."

Nardin justifies such talk by arguing that as patriots committed above all to the survival of the Union, the editors did not wish to risk dissent at a perilous time.

But in fact, the belated issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation helped to save the Union, since it provided a rallying cause in Britain for those seeking to head off what seemed almost inevitable: British recognition of the Confederacy. The move for recognition was led by the London Times and other influential voices. As R. J. M. Blackett wrote in Divided Hearts, "Lincoln's preliminary proclamation of emancipation in September served as the precipitating factor 'for the emergence of pro-Union activity in Britain,' which 'changed the terms of the debate' about recognition (75, 230).

Following the issuance of the Proclamation, its British defenders could argue that the Union was engaged in the same moral undertaking that had led the British themselves to abolish slavery in their own possession back in the 1830s. Nardin's failure to appreciate the strategic and moral importance of the Emancipation Proclamation is a piece with his justification of the weekly's attacks on abolitionists and African Americans.

The political burlesque and the African American

In an article on Charles Godfrey Leland in Leland's Dictionary of Literary Biography, David E. E. Sloane claims that "Leland was a staunch Republican and steered Vanity Fair, which he edited from early 1861 through the spring of 1861 accordingly, welcoming the fall of Fort Sumter because it heralded a war that he had already recognized as inevitable" (260). It is true that Leland, who actually took over in July 1860, was one writer who spoke out firmly and forcefully for equal rights for all Americans. His "Gone—For Good," published on April 30, 1861, charges that the "Cotton Confederates" was the "last stronghold of that old primaeval Serpent of the Sum of all Sin—the principle that a vast mass of men should be Mid-Sills, whereas the privileged few may rise to pleasant aristocracy and pleasant ease... Only in Cotton-dom does its president shamelessly proclaim, that henceforth slavery, and with it of course aristocracy, shall be enforced as fundamental principles. He who strikes such a land a blow does God good service" (3: 198). But Leland's employers saw the editorial as itself an act of rebellion against their policies, and he was soon "gone for good." The incident tells us a great deal about the opposed values of Leland and those who controlled the magazine and established its essential values.

Responsibility for creating and directing the magazine rested with three brothers: William Allan Stephens as general editor; Henry Louis Stephens as principal cartoonist; and Henry Louis Stephens as "publisher for the Proprietors." The financial angel who made the magazine possible was a Baltimore merchant, Frank J. Thompson. All were Democrats and opposed to abolitionism (Mott 529-30). Launched on December 29, 1859, Vanity Fair, as I have written in an essay on the magazine's sympathetic treatment of Walt Whitman, quickly made a name for itself as a lively, sophisticated and urbane humor magazine, one which could have come only from New York. Drawing
from a large circle of younger New York writers—many of them denizens of Pfaff’s Bohemian café—Vanity Fair treated risqué subjects with such style and flair as to help open a cosmopolitan space in American culture. In its cosmopolitan pages regional, vernacular traditions came together, thereby lending a new maturity and sophistication to American humor. Vanity Fair championed such iconoclastic writers as Whitman, Fanny Fern, and Adah Isaacs Menken. But while the Bohemians associated with Vanity Fair gladly enlisted in the battle to free humanity from the shackles of social repression, they “had no sympathy for abolitionists and those who were fighting” chattel slavery (Reynolds 377-78). At the beginning, in facing looming national disaster, Vanity Fair attempted to maintain a light, “why worry?” tone. Whatever the threat might be, Vanity Fair assured readers that its own brand of satirical humor could defeat it. The weekly itself would save the Union by deploying scorn and burlesque to render harmless all those ideologues who threatened the stability of the nation. These included such self-important politicians and firebrands as Theodore Parker and Senators Sumner of Massachusetts and Wigmore of Texas. Horace Greeley became a favorite target. An editorial on “Politics” in the opening number claimed that “We shall still believe that the country is safe” since Vanity Fair itself would “take the Union henceforth, and till further notice, under its wide-spread and protecting wings.” Calling “all politics” but “vanity,” the editors claimed a special franchise “persistently [to] intermeddle therewith.” Their magazine would “laugh all the Disunionists out of countenance,” keeping the Union safe. “The only hope the Disunionists have is in keeping serious themselves, making other people serious, and thus getting seriously treated.” Since “the one great panacea for social and political evils is mirth,” Vanity Fair would make sure that no one took himself too seriously (1:13). Vanity Fair did pillory Southern firebrands, but it reserved its most powerful scorn for abolitionists like Horace Greeley, editor of the antislavery Tribune, and the Illinois Congressman Owen Lovejoy, younger brother of murdered abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy. Determined to keep America white, the Stephens brothers deployed humor to depict African Americans as unworthy of the rights of citizens. They appear in the weekly’s pages variously as contented children, as loud, flashy, and slightly dissipated adult males; and even as threatening black bucks. The cartoon “Sambo Agonistes,” published on May 3, 1860, pictures the angry, blind slave unsuccessfully attempting to destroy the pillars of the state (Figure 1:1:153). Similarly, Vanity Fair set out to demean abolitionists, as in a cartoon from the first issue entitled “The Webster Statue after a Design by Mr. Wendell Phillips.” Phillips is a treacherous Brutus, murdering the noble Webster (Figure 2:1:13).

On June 16, 1860, Vanity Fair ran a humorous biography of the Republican nominee. Honest Abraham, identified as the “eldest of three brothers, respectively called Isaac and Jacob,” which is harmless enough. But this Abraham has suffered from “an endemic disease common to certain parts of the U.S., called the Tariff,” a reminder that Lincoln as a Whig had supported the protective tariff, which allegedly benefited wealthy Northern manufacturers at the expense of struggling farmers and workers. Vanity Fair warns that Lincoln has been stricken by a “virulent plague,” the “Abolition Mania,” which has, sadly, taken root in his system and would shortly “hurry him to his political grave” (1:389). Just the week before, the weekly portrayed Abe as making a “Shaky” passage across a deep ravine walking on a flimsy log. The gangly Republican desperately balances a Black child tucked away in a carpet bag. While Blondin might have made it across Niagara Falls on tightrope, it was doubtful that awkward Abe could possibly succeed, especially since he had assumed the burden of carrying the child, who