The Galaxy and American Democratic Culture, 1866–1878

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During the post-Civil War decades, the major Eastern literary magazines – the Atlantic, Scribner's, Harper's – came to serve, in Malcolm Cowley's phrase, as the "principal voices of the genteel era." The business of the magazines – with Boston's Atlantic at the head – was delivering "culture" to the middle class. As Walt Whitman wrote in his essay "Personalism," published in The Galaxy in May 1868, "The writers of a time hint the mottos of its gods. The word of the modern, say these voices, is the word Culture." But in pointing out that the culture everywhere advocated by American writers was based largely on European models, Whitman exposes a pathetic irony: "Never, in the Old World, was thoroughly upholster'd exterior appearance and show, mental and other, built entirely on the idea of caste, and on the sufficiency of mere outside acquisition – never were glibness, verbal intellect, mere the test, the emulation – more loftily elevated as head and sample – than they are on the surface of our republican States this day." In their slavish worship of European models and consequent devaluation of the native, American writers had become the high priests of a thin and bloodless "culture" that was distributed abroad through the magazines.

Whitman shrewdly recognized, as Alan Trachtenberg has written, that

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3 Ibid.

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genteeel culture had become an instrument of "social control." That culture was available only to those with the money and leisure to consume it and in turn be consumed by it. And so Whitman argued the need for a "radical change of category, in the distribution of precedence." He sought recognition of the idea that a living culture is based on the actual lives and values of all the people, on the "high average of men," not on a remote ideal imposed from above:

I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlor or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes and engineers, and of the broad range of the women also of the middle and working strata, and with reference to the perfect equality of women... The best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts, and loving perception, and of self-respect -- aiming to form, over this continent, an idiocy of universalism... recruiting... able, natural, perceptive, tolerant, devout believers in her, America, and with some definite instinct why and for what she has arisen...  

One way of destroying the idol of high culture, Whitman argued, is through a tolerant regionalism, which implicitly rejects the cultural supremacy of New England and welcomes the expression of all regions in a "social and aesthetic democracy." Whitman related regional liberation to an analogous liberation of other submerge groups: women, farmers, workers.

That the Galaxy had the courage and vision to publish Whitman's "Personalism," and before it "Democracy," which comprise the first two parts of Democratic Vistas, suggests something of its importance as a magazine willing to challenge the cultural orthodoxy of Boston's Atlantic. Its character was in large part determined by its founding in New York in the spring of 1866. As the Nation observed, the "raison d'etre" for the Galaxy is "partly a 'divine discontent' which prevails in these parts with regard to the Atlantic Monthly, and partly the feeling, also widely diffused, that New York ought to have a monthly of its own..." The Nation assured its readers that it had no "sympathy" whatever with the idea that local feeling should have anything to do with the creation of something as important as a literary magazine and warned that New York had not yet developed the sort of "literary atmosphere" necessary to support such a venture. But the young Galaxy editors, the brothers William Conant Church and Francis Parcellus Church wrote, in one of their early "Nebulæ" or editorial columns, of their confidence that New York would soon emerge as "both the commercial and literary centre of the country." Local feelings were powerfully involved. Edmund Clarence Stedman wrote to his friends that the Church brothers are doing their bravest to establish a New York magazine, and ought to be helped and encouraged by New York authors. Yet while many of those on the scene saw the magazine primarily as an expression of New York, writers from other sections looked to it to fill a national need. To cite one comment, the pioneering realist Rebecca Harding Davis wrote the editors from Philadelphia of her hope that the Galaxy would "fill a vacuum in our literature more apparent every year -- a national magazine in which the current of thought of every section could find expression as thoroughly as that of New England does in the Atlantic." Founded as it was out of a local pride not entirely free of boosterism, the Galaxy was challenged to become a truly national magazine, hospitable to the thought of every section.

The nearly boundless pride that many New Yorkers felt at the emerging power of their city is reflected in the editors' decision to publish in May 1867 a panegyric to "New York and Its People" by O. J. Ottarson. After reviewing the history of the "acknowledged Metropolis of the Western Hemisphere," Ottarson spoke of the New Yorker's assurance that the "greatness" of his "noble city" is "manifest and everywhere known; that to doubt such greatness would be to doubt the daylight with the sun at the meridian; and he is quite content that his city and her people should manifest and approve themselves in what they have done and will yet do for this country and the world." There is something more than local pride here. Ottarson observes that the character of New York -- and he is speaking of the entire metropolitan region -- has been determined by its position as the country's principal port, "the point of ingress of two-thirds of the foreign commerce of the nation and a much greater proportion of all the emigration from the Eastern Hemisphere." This has made it "very naturally a city of many peoples and many tongues, a polyglot cosmopolitan capital -- a half-way house for gregarious races." And so New York, "with the largest crotchety of toleration" is "distinctively American." It is precisely that toleration and respect for diversity that we find in the Galaxy at its best.

At the start the Church brothers established an editorial policy reflective of the city's openness and "catholicity of toleration." They actively sought

7 Galaxy, 2 (Dec. 1, 1866), 675.
8 Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, M.D., Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman (New York: Moffat and Yard, 1910), 1, 360.
11 Ibid., 60, 64.
contributions from all sections of the country and from both established and unknown writers. They did not exclude New Englanders; approximately one third of its American writers were from that region with a third from New York and the rest from other sections, including the South.13 The Galaxy became, as Stedman recalled in 1903, “the first magazine after the war really to welcome above all American contributions. It was given out at the office, also, that quality and not reputation was a thing that was wanted. Best of all, we were allowed to affix our names to our articles; and that gave young fellows a chance, and consequently brought most of the talent to the aid of the editors.”14 The editors made this policy explicit in the number for April 1868, writing that “intrinsic merit is and will be the only rule for accepting and publishing articles… This principle has met with wide approval by the public and the press.”15 To cite one example, during its first several years, the Galaxy published a succession of articles by James Franklin Fitts, a lawyer from Lockport, New York, on his experiences as a Union soldier. Fitts describes battles and men vividly, in a crisp, realistic, sometimes even brutal style, and he writes movingly of the Negroes who came to the aid of the Union forces in the South. Yet Fitts is virtually unknown outside the Galaxy.

In welcoming the work of younger and unknown writers, the Church brothers also signified their willingness to publish material which, because of its outspokenness, could not appear elsewhere – certainly not in the Atlantic. The Boston magazine had rejected John Burroughs’ “Wait Whitman and His Drum Taps,” which the Galaxy published in December 1866. Including large portions of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” this perceptive article portrayed Whitman sympathetically as wound-dresser and poet of national reconciliation. And of course, the magazine published both prose and verse from Whitman himself.16

In the post-war decades the monthlies were forced to operate in an atmosphere of “moral censorship required by certain segments of the reading public. Especially explosive, of course, were references to religious unorthodoxy and suggestions of sensuality.”17 But in one of its first numbers the Galaxy published “The Pagan Element in France” by a twenty-eight year old painter and critic, Eugene Benson, which forthrightly denounced the pervasive Puritanism of American life and celebrated, by way of contrast, the openness and freedom of the French, their “pagan delight in bodily life,” “ardent worship of the beautiful” and frank acceptance of the nude in art.18 In “About the Literary Spirit,” published the next month, Benson attacked those whom he held responsible: “the eminently proper gentlemen who sit in editorial chairs.” The editors did not realize, he charged, “how far the sense of conventional propriety is destructive to the vitality and the charm of the literature of a people.”19 In “Literary Frondeurs,” a response to Lowell’s notorious attack on Thoreau in the North American, Benson cast himself in the role of outspoken social critic or “literary frondeur,” a writer who “affronts, outrages, defies, or rails at something which time or custom has made respectable.”20 He charged that Lowell’s vindictive assault on the recently-dead Thoreau came from the worst sort of provincialism, from his being “too close to Harvard, and too much involved in the gratifying social life of Boston.” And in a later essay, “Literature and the People,” Benson argued that current ideals of culture, based on such models as the British Saturday Review, are entirely destructive: “When culture enforces or deadens the heart, it is destructive to the literature of the people; it prevents the growth of letters for the people; it creates a heartless, critical literature…”21 As would Whitman in “Personalism,” Benson saw the reactionary, undemocratic implications of such standards of “culture”: “What an affront to the great West! What a literary tyrant for New England! What a dangerous advocate of the doctrine of caste and the privileges of the few!”22

Benson, more than any other writer, set the tone of the Galaxy during its first few years, but other Galaxy essayists, including Whitman, Burroughs, Titus Munson Coan, and Charles Astor Bristed, published outspoken criticism which could not have appeared elsewhere. For Benson, cosmopolitan New York was the place where the writer would best escape the provincialism which had led to Lowell’s uncharitable attack on Thoreau, and he was ever vigilant that the Galaxy fulfill the nation’s need for a magazine open to social criticism. As he wrote the editors, “The function of the Galaxy plainly is to entertain first; then it is to stir ideas… We have no magazine to meet this want; all avoid salient criticism.”23 This was true of

15 Galaxy, 5 (April 1868).
18 Galaxy, 1 (1 June 1866), 205, 207.
19 Ibid., 2 (1 Sept. 1866), 78, 80.
20 Ibid., 3 (15 April 1867), 872, 876.
21 Letter, Eugene Benson, to W. C. and F. P. Church, 6 Jan. 1867, Church Collection, New York Public Library. Quoted by permission.
the *Atlantic*, as Howells tacitly admitted when he returned one of Coan’s essays with the confession that if he should publish it in the *Atlantic*, “prayers would have to be said for the *Atlantic* – and for the reduction of its subscription list... As for you, I don’t know what would become of you.”

In the battle against genteel culture, the young *Galaxy* writers had an effective ally in Justin McCarthy, the Irish novelist and essayist. A frequent contributor, McCarthy bluntly revealed the alliance between social privilege and the sacrosanct British institutions which served as models in America. In “The English Universities,” for instance, he observed that Oxford and Cambridge, “so far from guiding the intellect of the nation... generally lagged far behind it, and were often found in direct opposition to it.”

And in a piece introducing American readers to reform movements in England, “The English Positivists,” he asserted that “culture” – he places the word in quotation marks – “‘Culture’ in England has, of late years, almost invariably ranked itself on the side of privilege... The journals which are started for the sake of being read by men of ‘culture’ are sure to throw their influence, nine times out of ten, into the cause of privilege and class ascendency.” McCarthy appears to have met with some success in encouraging an alliance between reformers on both sides of the *Atlantic*. Several months after the appearance of his “English Positivists,” the *Galaxy* published a short piece, signed by “An American Positivist,” attacking the “influence of wealthy corporations and individuals in controlling legislation and executive action for purely selfish ends.”

Perhaps because the editors saw New York as the *de facto* capital of the country, they regularly included articles dealing with a broad range of national problems. Frequently the authors, in touching upon an injustice or instance of corruption, called upon the Federal government to play an active role in its solution. In “Our Railway Management,” Edward Howland denounced the ruinous mismanagement of the railroads by stock manipulators and urged that the Government take over their ownership and run them in the public interest. At the same time, the pages of the *Galaxy* reveal a recognition of the growing corruption of the government in Washington: one article, E. Darwin Smith’s “The Great Danger of the Republic,” warned of the dangers of an unchecked concentration of power in a corrupt central authority: “If our Government be overthrown and our Union broken up, it will proceed from rottenness at the core. Corruption at the centre may become so rank, from excessive centralization, and the absorption of the just rights of the States, and the abuse of its legitimate powers, that the attachment of the people to the Union may be gradually undermined, until they become satisfied to see State after State fall away and assert and establish a separate independence.” The challenge for the nation – as Whitman had recognized in “Democracy” – would be to find a proper balance between the states and the central government, between region and nation.

II

In June of 1870 the *Nation* commented that “the *Galaxy* is a monthly newspaper in the sense of always being of current interest.” Of course some of the topics of current interest – the art of dining, proper diction, travel – may seem quite superficial to us. But more than any other monthly the *Galaxy* treated serious social questions, and it regularly brought to its analyses tolerance and a sense of social justice. Often its writers identified elements within the society, regions both geographical and social, which had been victimized or neglected. In “The Sorrows of Childhood,” Marie Howland, feminist, communitarian socialist, advocate of free love, described the plight of American children, raised in an adult world which shows little understanding of their emotional needs or recognition of their legal rights. Among other reforms, she recommended “large investments of capital in State nurseries and schools, where its future citizens could have the highest known means for development, physically and morally.” Similarly, in a series of eleven articles, “The Nether Side of New York,” Edward Crapsey explored in remarkable detail the interlocking worlds of crime and poverty in the city, clearly demonstrating the ways in which poverty contributes to crime. And at a time when those polygamous Mormons seemed to pose a dire threat to the moral foundations of American civilization, the magazine published two essays in which “A Mormon Elder” soberly described the way of life of the inhabitants of far-off Utah.

In their “Nebulae” column, the *Galaxy* editors confessed that they held...

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23 *Galaxy*, 8 (Nov. 1869), 617.
24 Ibid., 7 (March 1869), 381–82.
25 “What To Do With Wealth,” Ibid., 8 (Nov. 1869), 706.
26 Ibid., 5 (June 1868), 737–61.
27 Ibid., 7 (April 1869), 492.
28 *Nation*, 10 (2 June 1870), 355.
29 *Galaxy*, 7 (March 1869), 433.
30 Crapsey’s articles ran from February 1871 through April 1872.
certain reservations about female suffrage. Nevertheless, they felt it to be their responsibility as editors to see to it that the proponents had the fullest opportunity to make their case. Among other articles, they published Julia Ward Howe’s “Women as Voters,” which vigorously argued the cause. Notably, Howe made common cause with the Negro, holding that in their demands for the full rights of citizenship both women and Negroes stand on “the platform of universal and ideal justice.” Similarly, in “Our Impending Chinese Problem,” the distinguished and well-travelled geologist Raphael Pumpelly called for the abolition of all restrictive laws regarding the treatment of the Chinese in California. After a lucid exposition of Chinese history and culture, he argued that the absorption of the Chinese into the country would strengthen it, socially, financially, and morally. He warned that the continued prejudicial treatment of its Chinese and Americans as sanctioned by that state’s statutes would bring with it the same moral evils attendant upon the institution of Negro slavery. While recognizing that it may be doubtful that “a whole state or nation is able to rise above all prejudice of race, to look upon such a question from a cosmopolitan standpoint,” he urged that the country’s lawmakers act in the spirit of the nation’s commitment to the proposition that “all men are created equal.”

Similarly, Whitman had warned in “Democracy” that segregation and discrimination posed the greatest dangers to the nation: “To work in...and justify God, his divine aggregate, the People...this, I say, is what democracy is for; and this is what our America means, and is doing — may I not say, has done?”

The largest portion of the Galaxy was devoted to fiction, and especially at the beginning the magazine featured serializations of English novels like those in Harper’s Monthly. Trollope’s The Claverings seemed to run forever from the first number. Incomprehensibly, no fewer than six novels by another English writer, the justly forgotten Mrs. Annie Edwards, were serialized during the magazine’s twelve years. Certainly it published its share of the trite and sentimental. As American writers began to respond to the editors’ solicitations, however, the Galaxy was able to publish generous amounts of American fiction. Over the years many of the best early realists, including Henry James, John W. De Forest, Rose Terry Cooke, Rebecca Harding Davis, H. H. Boyesen, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, appeared in the magazine. In keeping with the Galaxy’s interest in the problems of American society, these writers often treated subjects of immediate concern. Davis’s Waiting for the Verdict is a sympathetic exploration of the plight of the Negro. A story by the unknown M. A. Edwards, “Pamela Clarke,” treats the predicament of an intelligent, able woman who is denied the opportunity for independence by a society which places women in the narrowly circumscribed roles of wife, homemaker, and mother. The late 1860s and the 1870s were a time of trial and testing in American fiction: James, Howells, and Clemens had yet to publish important novels and so establish a clear realistic direction for fiction. The Galaxy’s contribution was in providing a congenial arena in which, to cite a notable example, a writer of the talent of Henry James, who published ten stories in its pages, could develop his craft.

Many of the discussions of the art of fiction in the magazine called for a greater responsiveness to the actualities of American life. Charles Astor Bristed (writing as “Carl Benson”) defined the problem of contemporary fiction when he reported in March 1870 that

During the past lustrum I have read and tried to read many of our native productions called novels, and what most struck me in them was their utter unreality and unfellleness. It is an amusing paradox that in a land where there is so much communication and interchange of all classes and sets, it should be so hard to find a correct written delineation of any class or set... [All] kinds and classes of our population...are ... caricatured.

The Norwegian-American novelist H. H. Boyesen, whose work figured prominently in the Galaxy, also used its pages to comment on American fiction. In concluding an “Interview with Tourgueneff,” another writer whose work the magazine published, Boyesen compared Russia and America:

We have long accustomed ourselves to think that our society presented no fixed or striking types, and that the mobile, ever-billowing surface of our life is unfavorable to artistic effects, if not incapable of artistic treatment. No doubt the Russians thought the same until Tourgueneff came and showed them that this so-called dreary monotony of their existence was, on the contrary, a grand, striking, and animated picture. And when our great novelist comes — as surely he will — he will teach us a similar lesson. But as yet Russia is one step in advance of America, for we have no Tourgueneff.

Other outspoken critics of genteel culture helped shape the Galaxy. Edward L. Youmans, known as the “apostle of evolution,” was the great...
popularizer of the scientific ideas of his day. In 1867, he published *The Culture Demanded by Modern Life* in which he argued that "the system of culture which prevails in our higher institutions of learning...limited chiefly to the acquisition of mathematics, and of ancient languages" is no longer adequate to the demands of living in the real world. Youmans advocated a far-reaching reform in which students would receive training in the natural sciences and in such fields as sociology, government, and religion as well as the traditional disciplines. In 1871, he introduced a new department in the magazine, "Scientific Miscellany," which brought to *Galaxy* readers reports on the latest developments in the sciences and in the process something of the empiricism and objectivity of the scientific habit of mind. The magazine also published articles on a broad range of scientific subjects, from the severe problems of public health in the cities to the physics of outer space.

For a year, beginning in May 1870, Mark Twain conducted the *Galaxy's* humorous department, "Memoranda." Twain found the magazine congenial for the expression of the hard edge of a humor sharpened in the West and his work was immensely popular. However, the burden of preparing a monthly "humor" column proved to be too great for the young, recently married writer who was now living in Buffalo, and he withdrew at the end of his year's contract.

The *Galaxy* itself withdrew from the field in January 1878, when its subscription list was taken over — ironically — by the *Atlantic*. Just why it failed is hard to say. The magazine appears never to have been truly profitable, and in 1868 the Church brothers entered into a complicated business arrangement with the publishing firm of Sheldon & Co. to give the magazine the support of an established publisher. But the arrangement did not prove beneficial to either party; the Sheldons did not make money and the Churches, though they remained as editors, lost control of the magazine's finances. The intervention of the tight-fisted publishers prevented the editors from realizing James's *The American*, as both they and its author had intended. Since the Church brothers continued to publish the profitable *Army and Navy Journal* and made money from various outside investments, they may simply have felt that because of the lack of tangible rewards the extraordinary efforts required to publish a monthly simply was not justified.

If we look at the question from a broader perspective, the conclusion that New York literary society was not yet well-enough established to support such a magazine as the *Galaxy* is inescapable. The outspoken Eugene Benson once wrote William Church, "Why should not all of us young men, without formal organization, give ourselves to the ideas that hold the most liberty, the best future, the greatest veracity? Are there not enough of us in New York among painters, poets and journalists?" But such figures as Colonel William Church, E. C. Stedman, and Richard Grant White, who wrote regularly and tamely for the magazine on literature and philology, came to look to the city's business establishment and such clubs as the Century for acceptance. The "young painters, and poets and journalists" were, in a sense, left in the lurch. Benson himself, withdrawing from the magazine in 1869, became a lifelong expatriate in Italy. Sadly, the *Nation* 's warning of 1866 to the newly-founded *Galaxy* had been vindicated:

A good magazine has hardly ever flourished out of a literary atmosphere; this has still to be created in New York — perhaps will have to be created by the magazine itself. Literature is not in any great favor here and literary men do not abound. The moneyed world, which is the ruling social influence, bestows most of its favor on art... A literary society is still to be made, and, until it is made by some means or other, New York magazine publishers will have a good deal to contend with.

Its purse strings now controlled by the narrow Sheldons, the *Galaxy* alone was not strong enough to create that "literary atmosphere."

Further, as the decade of the 1870s wore on, the evidence of political and economic corruption became ever more palpable, and many liberals lost heart. The great hopes for social renewal engendered by the triumph of the Union and the abolition of slavery now seemed remote. A writer like O. B. Frothingham, a radical Unitarian and former abolitionist, would use the *North American Review* to ask if the time had not come to repudiate the "democratic faith" and to assert that the American belief in the "bare man" is hardly favorable to dignity or excellence of attainment" in any area of human endeavor, but had instead brought about a widespread collapse in the quality of civilization. Frothingham went so far as to suggest that "the modified democracy of Great Britain, under...a crowned republic," may, in the end, prove favorable to ethical interests." The *Galaxy* of the "literary

41 For a full discussion, see Pearson, pp. 290–95.
42 Pearson, pp. 296–97.
45 *Nation*, 2 (26 April 1866), 534–35.
“frondeurs;” the *Galaxy* of Whitman and Burroughs and Benson, could not survive in this conservative atmosphere. In a sense, its absorption by the *Atlantic* was symbolic of the new social and political reality. Still, born as it had been out of dissatisfaction with the *Atlantic* and all that that represented in the realm of an exclusive culture, the *Galaxy* had demonstrated the possibilities for a magazine which, while reflecting New York’s intellectual vigor, would also serve as a medium in which, to use Rebecca Harding Davis’s phrase, the “thought of every section could find expression.” And with its “programme...drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the workingman...and of the broad range of women also,” the *Galaxy* had been an important agent of American democratic culture.