Republic of Intellect

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The book tells the story of an intimate circle of young men who lived in New York City in the politically and socially turbulent 1790s—an age of revolutions and counterrevolutions in politics, manners, and writing—when governmental structures, religious experience, scientific knowledge, gender norms, and principles of association all served as subjects of fierce debates in person, in correspondence, and in print. Meeting on Saturday nights in each other’s homes to pursue scientific and moral truth through “unshackled” conversation, these friends also assisted one another as they published in a broad range of literary forms. Made up of doctors, lawyers, scientists, merchants, playwrights, poets, editors, a novelist, and a minister, the Friendly Club produced much of what we now consider the cornerstones of early American literature. Its members also inaugurated American legal and medical publishing, and some of them held local and national political office. They founded a theater and multiple journals, and they ushered into being the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown, America’s first novelist of international distinction.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Friendly Club would be legendary in the multivolume, gilt-edged memorial histories of New York City, held up as examples of the city’s and the nation’s early intel-
lectual vitality. If at times these popular histories exaggerated the club’s list of members and visitors—even George Washington was supposed to have been a regular attendee—they recognized the basic fact that no group in the new United States boasted such a concentration of persons who would figure so prominently in so many fields, a recognition that has persisted to the present. The historian Henry May’s estimation of the club as “perhaps the most brilliant of all the [early republic’s] organizations of earnest and enlightened young men” owes its effulgence to the stature most club members had attained by the time they died, but it accurately assesses as well the extraordinary amount and variety of writing produced even in their early years.

None of this mattered to Friendly Club members in the fall of 1798. That season, local concerns trumped literary ambitions as an epidemic of yellow fever emptied New York shops and homes and monopolized what conversation remained in town. Instead, club members feared for their lives, and with good reason. New York had lost hundreds to yellow fever in 1795; a much more severe epidemic had nearly decimated Philadelphia two years before that. Those with means fled into the countryside; those who remained died by the dozen, especially in crowded waterfront neighborhoods, where streets that reeked of garbage and spoiled goods served as the seat of commerce and as home to thousands of immigrants and other urban poor. A month into the epidemic, on the afternoon of 19 September, the sun bearing down out of doors, a 27-year-old poet and physician named Elihu Hubbard Smith, the Friendly Club’s central force, vomited something the texture and color of coffee grounds, delivered a single-word self-diagnosis—“Decomposition!”—and died, a victim of what would be the worst outbreak of the disease in the city’s history.

For just over a week, as his own fever progressed, Smith had nursed a young Italian physician named Joseph Scandella, who had come to the United States in order to research the epidemic disorder that had plagued port cities up and down the eastern seaboard each of the past five summers. The previous winter, when Smith had agreed to compile for Scandella a “Catalogue of publications, in the United States, on Yellow Fever,” the two had formed a fast friendship. When Smith learned that Scandella had recently returned from fever-stricken Philadelphia and languished unattended in a coffeehouse, he took Scandella into his own rooms and added him to his regular medical rounds, which included boat trips to see patients in Brooklyn and visits to the New-York
Hospital, where he was a staff physician. Smith’s nights were plagued by “incongruous dreams,” humidity, and the relentless buzzing and biting of mosquitoes. The mosquitoes had appeared that season in unusually large numbers, some observers noted, though no one knew that the insects were transmitting a disease that would leave more than two thousand dead in a matter of months.

Smith died surrounded by his medical colleagues Samuel Latham Mitchell and Edward Miller, rising figures among New York physicians. With Smith they had founded and coedited the Medical Repository, the new nation’s first medical journal, then in its second volume. Smith’s housemates, a young lawyer named William Johnson and an aspiring novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, oversaw his burial in the cemetery of the Wall Street Presbyterian Church, where Edward Miller’s brother, Samuel, was a collegiate pastor. Then Johnson and Brown boarded a ferry and fled the “pestilential, desolate, and sultry city” for “the odors and sprightly atmosphere” of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, thirty miles away, where another friend, the playwright William Dunlap, kept a country home. “It was when the ravages of pestilence had become so tremendous,” Samuel Miller later wrote, “when scarcely any passengers were to be seen on the streets but the bearers of the dead to the tomb . . . that [Smith’s] friends, bedewed with their tears, and followed to the grave, the remains of a young man, in some respects one of the most enlightened and promising that ever adorned the annals of American science.”

Brown sent his brother the news: “The die is cast. E.H.S. is dead. O the folly of prediction and the vanities of systems.” A few days later, he added that Smith’s death had “endeared the survivors of the sacred fellowship . . . to each other in a very high degree; and I confess my wounded spirit and shattered frame will be most likely to be healed and benefited by their society.”

The death of Elihu Hubbard Smith likely led to the Friendly Club’s premature climax; its formal activities—other than organizing Charles Brockden Brown’s first magazine effort, the Monthly Magazine, and American Review—are difficult to trace once Smith’s diary comes to its abrupt conclusion. In the turbulent fall of 1798, the club included Smith, Brown, Dunlap, Johnson, Mitchell, and the Miller brothers, as well as a recently appointed state supreme court justice, James Kent, and Dunlap’s brothers-in-law, the merchants William and George Woolsey. Diverse in politics, religion, and profession, their circle came together on the principle that such association facilitated self-improve-
ment, general and useful knowledge, and, ultimately, the public good. The responses of Smith’s friends Samuel Miller and Charles Brockden Brown highlight several ideals of the Friendly Club that will resurface in the pages that follow: its ideal status as a “sacred fellowship” severed only by death; the belief that such “society” could have physical, intellectual, and moral effects; and, signaled especially by the intensity of Brown’s despair, the terrific faith they had placed in a rigorous pursuit of scientific truth. Ironically, members had numbered among their scientific and civic efforts—particularly through their work on the Repository—a determination to end yellow fever’s perennial returns. Only a few weeks earlier Brown had assured his brother that the friends’ geographic location in the city, along with their abstinence from alcohol and strict vegetarianism, would protect them from the plague.  

My story begins with Smith’s deathbed scene—the same narrative his friends circulated as part of an aggressive campaign for his literary and scientific canonization—because it begins to reveal the contours of a late-Enlightenment intellectual culture that set the terms by which the earliest U.S. literature came into existence. Friendly Club members, like many of their contemporaries, lived and published within a literary culture that has not been fully understood by historians or literary critics: a “republic of intellect,” defined both by the breadth of its interests and by its transnational boundaries. The phrase invokes but revises the Enlightenment ideal of a “republic of letters” that obtained from the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century, and signals in its revision a slight shift in emphasis from the centrality of the communicative forms (the circulation of “letters”) to the intellectual prowess on display in its ranking representative citizens. Imagining themselves as members of this body, club members struggled together for reputation by cultivating personal networks of influence and information, even as they understood that the progress of knowledge would require them to send their writings far beyond the bounds of personal association. Smith and his friends were duty bound and driven not only to outperform their indolent peers but to provide disciplinary models for them and for international audiences alike as they gathered important knowledge about the new nation and its inhabitants and nurtured individual and collective identities as “men of observation.”

Such an agenda can be discerned in the multiple retellings of Smith’s death. Even before Smith died, Brown had begun to shape the dramatic death scene in letters to anxious friends and family mem-
bers, with Smith and himself as benevolent heroes battling a “fatal pest [that] has encompassed us and entered our own doors.” The scene reads like a passage from one of the gothic novels Brown would publish in the coming years:

On Tuesday last, an Italian gentleman of great merit and a particular friend of E.H.S. arrived in this city from Philadelphia. The disease had already been contracted, and admission to the boarding houses was denied him. Hearing of his situation our friend [Smith] hastened to his succour and resigned him to his own bed. A nurse was impossible to be procured, and this duty therefore devolved upon us. Many moral incidents concurred to render this a most melancholy case. This disease was virulent beyond example, but his agonies have been protracted to this day. He now lies in one apartment of our house, a spectacle that sickens the heart to behold, and not far from his last breath, while, in the next, our friend E.H.S. is in a condition but little better.¹¹

Brown’s letter inseparably binds a literary narrative form with the specific knowledge his correspondent seeks about the epidemic. The facts he conveys—that the fever in New York is spreading, even into their own neighborhood, which they had previously considered safe—have moral implications, he seems to insist, that may best be conveyed by his hyperbolic notation of superlative melancholy, unprecedented virulence, sickening spectacles, and final breaths. The account not only frames the friends as heroes but also situates Brown as an observer and an author. Narrative, knowledge, and moral authority cannot be disentangled here; instead, the combination, which seems calculated for emotional impact, will also give Smith entry into literary and scientific “annals.” Such writing played significant roles for Smith, Brown, Miller, and their cohort, not only as they accumulated “useful knowledge” (the rationale for Scandella’s travels) but also as they sought to secure cultural authority and reputation, even, in Smith’s case, for the dead.

Consider the anecdote’s extraordinary print history, following its more immediate circulation in diaries and letters. The narrative appeared in Smith’s obituary in the Medical Repository; in newspapers throughout the northeast (“In him science and humanity have lost one of the noblest ornaments which this age or this country has produced,” eulogized the Connecticut Courant); in journalistic instant histories, such as James Hardie’s An Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Preva-
lent in the City of New-York (1799); in the satirical poem *A Political Green-House, for the Year 1798*, written by Smith’s Connecticut friends; as the template for an episode in Brown’s fever novel *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800); in another American medical magazine in 1814 and James Thatcher’s 1828 *American Medical Biography*; in Dunlap’s 1815 biography of Brown and his 1832 *History of the American Theatre*; and in the entry on Brown in Evert Duyckinck’s canon-making *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855), to cover only the first half-century of its circulation. In spite of his early age of death, the tale helped ensure Smith’s inclusion over a century later in that who’s who of American cultural aristocracy, the *Dictionary of American Biography.*

Such circulation, which also provided Smith’s friends with their own opportunities for public recognition, reveals the group’s confidence that reputation served as a counterweight to republican injunctions toward anonymous participation in public discourse. For young men of this educated, ambitious, and upwardly mobile demographic, the public performance of being informed and informing others—of being a man of information—was as important as the specific knowledge one had to convey. With this point in mind, recall Smith’s final diary entries, which emphasized the relationship between a knowledge culture and being known in his account of the ailing Scandella: “The history of this most accomplished, & unfortunate man is calculated to awaken the deepest interest & foster the profoundest regrets.” Even in his final days, Smith cannot help but worry about how audiences might receive a new publishing project. His imagined Scandella biography would not depend simply on medical information for its utility, although Smith would likely use it, as he had his professional friendship with Scandella, to further his particular medical views. Its “moral incidents,” to recall Brown’s initial telling of the story, would make the Italian traveler a martyr for knowledge, a model for other seekers after truth and purveyors of useful information. Smith’s friends followed this same pattern in telling the story of his death.

This self-conscious attempt not only to shape American culture but moreover to write themselves into positions of influence and reputation, illustrates the Friendly Club’s usefulness as a case study for understanding the relationships between literary and intellectual cultures in the late-eighteenth-century United States. The primary social form this book examines—the intimate conversation circle—helped bring into existence and serves as a template for reuniting the diaries, medical
journals, newspaper essays, novels, reports of traveling physicians and jurists, memorial biographies, and literary histories that provide this book’s subject matter, genres in which Elihu Smith was memorialized and in which he had worked himself (with the exception of the novel, which he eagerly consumed but did not produce). The gentlemen’s conversation club, a principal Enlightenment form, allowed its members to enact on a miniature scale their ideal principles for public debate, what one critic has described, reading Charles Brockden Brown’s fiction, as a “juridical public sphere” in which readers would converse about and judge morals and knowledge in relation to the material they voraciously read. This conception underlay most of their publications and public activities just as it defined their imagined republic of intellect.

In post-Revolutionary New York City, this larger public sphere could be found or facilitated in a variety of spaces outside the club. Though recent histories of this era have rightly emphasized the complementary significance of voluntary association and print culture in producing the new nation’s public sphere, most of this work has emphasized the ways in which politics dominated public discourse. Friendly Club members did not so much compete with their many acquaintances who were politicians (as, at times, were members like Kent and Mitchill themselves) as they hoped to influence moral and intellectual structures of a broader sphere that subsumed political discussion. In this effort, they believed, their chief competition was the clergy. For Friendly Club members, whose partisan views were not uniform, the divide between “modern philosophers” and “religionists” was more significant than the division between Federalists and Jeffersonians. They saw the decade’s partisan turmoil as inimical to the progress of knowledge and hoped to supplement or supplant the seemingly relentless focus on domestic and international politics with what Smith called “communications . . . of a more permanently useful nature.”

To do so they took advantage of a range of publishing opportunities. Smith, who had published newspaper verse and edited a volume of American poems before moving to the city in 1793, started his writing career in earnest following New York’s 1795 yellow fever epidemic, when his medical history of that season appeared in a collection edited by Noah Webster. William Dunlap saw several of his own plays staged before he became manager of the Old American Company and, eventually, founded the new Park Theatre in 1798. Charles Brockden Brown began his career as a newspaper essayist, then novelist, and finally a
magazine editor, all with the assistance of his fellow club members. In perhaps the most literal incarnation of a “juridical public sphere,” James Kent established a program of legal education at Columbia that emphasized reading broadly in the century’s most important philosophical works; with William Johnson as a court reporter, he saw his decisions printed in order to establish a body of new American precedents, while at the same time securing an Americanization of British common law tradition. In addition to taking advantage of or establishing such print outlets, Friendly Club members belonged individually and collectively to a range of additional associations, from the Manumission to the Mineralogical, most of which gave rise to additional oratorical or publishing ventures.

Such disparate literary endeavors united in the premium they placed on “information.” Contemporary documents rarely define “information” with any more specificity; broad lines distinguished “men of information” from the uninformed. The distinction implied that such men knew not only about current events at home and abroad but also were familiar with the latest publications in science, philosophy, and belles lettres. Becoming informed—by newsprint, correspondence, domestic and imported journals, or through participation in voluntary associations—qualified one to govern what observers then and now understood as an “information revolution.” As participation in public discourse broadened and forums for such participation multiplied, information of all sorts—from news of global importance like the events of the French Revolution to studies of South Carolina soils—became more pressing and plentiful than it had been in earlier generations. Face-to-face communication and letters gave way to a new profusion of print media distributed among personal acquaintances and via a constantly improving postal system.

As Friendly Club members repeatedly witnessed and sometimes experienced themselves, this overabundance of political, scientific, and social information generated anxiety among many elite authorities. Though this situation eventually gave rise to the creation of disciplinary knowledge and to the consolidation of the liberal professions, such consolidation forms only part of the Friendly Club’s story. Clashes between epistemological frameworks (played out, for example, in conflicts between “religionists” and “modern philosophers”) and intramural professional competition (such as the fierce medical rivalry over the subject of yellow fever) often had more immediate public visibility than
the structural shifts that would eventually result in the emergence of
disciplinary thinking and a culture of elite professional expertise.\textsuperscript{22}

Scholars most often treat the literature of this period, including the
writing of Friendly Club members, as contributing to new forms of
nationalism; those treating “the American Enlightenment” more gen-
erally have similarly emphasized ways in which the political writing
of the founding generation both led to and interpreted the American
Revolution.\textsuperscript{23} This book both challenges and complements such ap-
proaches by examining ways in which the Friendly Club’s literary of-
ferings were perhaps less oriented toward a new nationalism than to the
authority-making rituals of civic fraternity that constituted a transna-
tional intellectual culture.

Shifting how we approach these authors and texts requires a serious
consideration of club members’ reading as well as their writing, and so
this study begins from a late-eighteenth-century definition of the term
literature that was expansive enough to accommodate the extraordinary
range of writing such figures produced and consumed. Arguing that lit-
erature in this period “meant all the forms of written discourse and the
uses of literacy,” Michael Warner quotes New York newspaper editor
and Friendly Club acquaintance Noah Webster to support his point:
“Literature comprehends a knowledge of the ancient languages, de-
nominated classical, history, grammar, rhetoric, logic, geography, &c.,
as well as of the sciences.”\textsuperscript{24} When Friendly Club members planned to
establish a “Literary Journal,” their design “reaches to every division of
literature & while it comprehends, at once . . . letters & arts, customs
&manners, the history of nations & the peculiarity of individuals,—it
becomes alike the Manual of Science & of Conversation.”\textsuperscript{25} The fi-
nal phrase sums up the connections between “literature” (broadly con-
ceived), a professionally diverse circle like the Friendly Club, and the
information networks that made up the republic of intellect.

Taking the period’s definitions of literature seriously has two ef-
facts crucial to the story I tell here. First, such an approach looks be-
yond post-Revolutionary politics to recognize ways in which the Euro-
pean Enlightenment had broader influence in the American 1790s than
has previously been recognized. Robert Ferguson’s argument that the
“American Enlightenment does not quarrel with religious orthodox-
ies as its French counterpart does” is only partly correct. Elihu Smith’s
reading of Condorcet’s Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the
Human Mind, for example, reinforced his belief in the human capac-
ity for perfectibility, which drove a serious wedge between him and his orthodox Congregationalist friends and former teachers. More than simply representing a “moderate Enlightenment,” Smith and his friends aimed to create a new intellectual order in which “undeceived and reforming man” would expose the “nakedness & insufficiency of Religion” and replace “her with the lovely & unsophisticated form of Truth.” Smith and his friends may not have succeeded in this effort, but we must recognize it nonetheless in order to see the ways in which they conceived of a range of authorial practices as directly competing with clerics and others for government of the public sphere.

Recognizing the catholicity of the period’s category of “literature” also means that some familiar ways of describing the writing produced in this period—as promoting a “collaborative” form of authorship, or as displaying a “devotion to factuality”—gain added significance. The Friendly Club’s literary output reveals the effects of collaboration across professional lines and demonstrates that a broad cultural predilection toward “facts” may have had less to do with Protestant didacticism than with attempts to “validate Enlightenment canons of knowledge,” as John Bender has described the literary situation in England in the same period. This means that even the group’s more recognizably “literary” offerings—poems, novels, plays—often read by modern critics in terms of early national politics or nationalism, may have had meanings more closely related to broad philosophical debates than to emerging nationalist ideologies.

The comparison to late-eighteenth-century English literature is instructive, not least because Friendly Club members understood the republic of intellect to be transatlantic in scope and aimed for correspondents and audiences overseas as well as at home. In early 1798, Elihu Smith wrote to John Aiken, the editor of the *Monthly Magazine, and British Register,* to complain that the “conductors of the ablest literary works in Gt. Britain” routinely offered “imperfect, partial, & erroneous” accounts of American “affairs, manners, opinions, & institutions.” Smith set out to rectify the problem by offering the Friendly Club’s services to the journal as American correspondents. He writes:

> There exists in this city, a small association of men, who are connected by mutual esteem, & habits of unrestricted communication. They are of different professions & occupations; of various religious & moral opinions; & tho’ they coincide in the great outlines of political faith, they
estimate very variously many of the political transactions of the men who have, from time to time directed the councils of the nation. This diversity of sentiment, however, as it has never affected their friendship, has made them more active in investigation; & tho' they may have formed different judgments concerning facts, has led them to a general concurrence in the facts themselves. Natives of America, & of remote parts of the Union, they are in habits of constant communication with several of the States, & are well informed of the state of letters, science, & opinions in these States, with some few exceptions. 29

Smith’s letter is one of the few descriptions of the club written during its activity. Its implications, though, are as structural as they are bound to a specific set of individuals. They indicate broad networks of communication that would both facilitate better information and also expand a European audience for the club’s medical, literary, and nationalistic endeavors. As a sample, Smith enclosed brief biographical sketches of America’s leading poets, the elder Connecticut Wits, which both the club’s own Monthly Magazine and Joseph Dennie’s Farmer’s Museum also eventually serialized. 30 But Smith’s letter emphasizes above all the importance of the circle of friends whose services he offers: “It is for you to judge how far the correspondence of such a knot of men may be of consequence to your Work,” Smith told the editor, “or of value to your curiosity . . . a means of readily furnishing you with the publications made in the United States; with such occasional remarks as may enable you to estimate them properly.” They will offer, presumably because more current and regularly updated, “a species of information which no books can furnish.” 31

Smith’s efforts to establish this correspondence help to clarify the Friendly Club’s nature and social functions. Smith emphasizes that the club’s diversity of occupation and sentiment helps to produce a “concurrence in the facts themselves,” pointing to the Enlightenment ideal of “departmentalizing” the processes of knowledge collection as a means of increasing efficiency and comprehensiveness. He intended such efforts to consolidate both knowledge and the social authority to convey it, and to position him and his friends as men of observation and information. At the same time such language signals what I label a protodisciplinary knowledge culture—one that recognizes the need to subdivide knowledge production and has begun to do so by attaching specialized knowledge to different professional enterprises. The club,
as Smith describes it, plays a very specific function in this nostalgic effort to bring together various “investigations” and “communications” in an Edenic state of universal knowledge. That specific function had to do with friendship. Ideally, any tensions that may have arisen from the diversity of religious, moral, and political opinion would be counteracted by the friendly bonds that provided the rationale for gathering in the first place.

The cultural politics of association were not always so irenic. Collective distinction had its shadowy sides. “Animated by the example, assistance, & social exertion of others, there are no heights of science too arduous for me to attempt to surmount,” Smith wrote in the preface to one volume of his diary, only to follow that sentiment with a “survey” of the “busy multitude” surrounding him: people “little thoughtful of knowledge & reputation but as instruments to acquire [wealth],” “too lazy to inquire,” and, perhaps most damning of all, “busy in oppressing others, from whose humiliation they expect distinction.” If circles of influence were bound by friendship’s energies, many Americans in the late eighteenth century sometimes worried they were being left outside the associations that really mattered or that others had united in conspiracies against them. Other dangers followed closely on the age’s encomia to friendship. Unbridled conversation, even between friends, could breed licentiousness or encourage infidelity. It could, furthermore, disclose differences that posed significant challenges to friends of varying politics or opinions. If Smith and most club members aligned their literary energies with unrestraint and free inquiry, they were less unified in their opinions regarding propriety in mixed-sex conversation. If the Friendly Club came into existence as part of a broad cultural celebration of civic association, by century’s end there were many who eyed assembly suspiciously and wished to police its limits.

My account of the Friendly Club and the forgotten literary and intellectual structures it represents falls into two parts. Part 1 considers the varieties and meanings of friendship and voluntary association in the late-eighteenth-century city: highly gendered social forms that were commonplace if, at times, controversial. These chapters seek to situate the Friendly Club within its contemporary discourses of friendship and association (chapter 1), including anxiety about secret or exclusive associations (chapter 2), and questions about proper modes of conversation in mixed-sex society (chapter 3). Part 2 identifies and examines specific examples of what I call the “knowledge industries” in which
club members participated. As an example of such institutional fields of knowledge production I examine James Kent’s performances in the lecture hall, courtroom, and most importantly in print (treated here in a brief prelude to part 2), followed by discussions of Dunlap’s ambitions for and management of the theater (chapter 4) and Brown’s fever novel *Arthur Mervyn*, which emerged alongside his clubmates’ *Medical Repository* in the midst of fierce debates over the sources and treatment of the disease (chapter 5). As institutions of the public sphere, these knowledge industries depended in various ways on the style of intellectual fellowship the club afforded its members, and they all contributed to the group’s ultimate goal of generating social authority and effecting social change by collecting and disseminating moral and scientific knowledge. Together these chapters represent the first effort to make collective sense of this group’s diverse output, and in doing so to account for the full vitality and variety of early U.S. writing.

In some ways, *Republic of Intellect* treats subjects that did not yet exist. It is about New York City before it was the preeminent American metropolis; about American literature before any such tradition had fully cohered; about the disciplining of knowledge and the formation of professional identities before knowledge was disciplinary and modern professional identities fully formed. It examines a group of young men, most of whom would go on, in their adult lives, to dominate the fields in which they practiced, yet I write about a period of their lives that preceded their eventual fame and, in some cases, their most significant contributions to American culture. In part, *Republic of Intellect* tells how New York became the city it is; how American literature came to distinguish itself; how knowledge came to be controlled by expert professionals; how a handful of prominent Americans moved toward their eventual fame. But it tells a larger cultural history as well, for more than any similar group in the new United States, the Friendly Club was situated at the generic, geographical, and professional crossroads of American society and at the primary point of entry and exit for transmissions within a transatlantic intellectual culture. Before his early death, Elihu Smith, in his careful record of social and intellectual life in New York, anticipated correctly that his diary would be useful to a future readership, precisely because it would open up a world of association in its preservation of “the characters of my friends—of their friends—finally, of all those distinguished personages, with whom, accident, or design have made me acquainted.” Republic of *Intellect* aims to deliver on that promise.
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