Republic of Intellect

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When Elihu Smith arrived in New York City in 1793, having just turned 22, thirty to forty thousand inhabitants lived in the area below Canal Street, the triangular southern tip of the island of Manhattan. Smith came to the city on the front end of a wave of urbanization and immigration that would cause New York to grow exponentially throughout the next century. By the time of Smith’s death in 1798 the city’s population had doubled and it prepared to surpass Philadelphia as the new nation’s largest metropolis. Throughout the 1790s New York’s prominence among American ports rose at a steady pace; by 1797, it boasted America’s busiest harbor, and a merchant population that had been devastated in the wake of the Revolution, when Tory and Loyalist merchants had been forced to evacuate the city, was replenished by a new crop of importers and exporters who stood to benefit from ongoing conflicts between Britain and France, ending British regulations that had kept American traders out of the British West Indies.

The city Smith arrived in was still busy recovering from the ravages of the Revolution. Hundreds of burned-out buildings needed to be pulled down, and army barracks on the Battery replaced by an elm-shaded waterside walkway, “one of the most delightful walks, perhaps in the world,” one newspaper boasted. Fashionable houses lined
Broadway; closer to the docks, low wooden structures housed sailors and immigrants, worrisome to those like Smith who increasingly came to fear that poor ventilation and overcrowding helped generate epidemic fevers. The oldest of three children and only son of a small-town Connecticut physician, Elihu Smith had been Yale’s youngest graduate at age 15, in 1786. Too young to begin professional training, he spent two years at Timothy Dwight’s Greenfield Hill Academy before moving to Philadelphia in 1790 to study medicine under the eminent physician Benjamin Rush. After returning briefly to Connecticut, where he practiced medicine and socialized with the state’s self-styled literary elite, he set his sites on New York, like droves of other New Englanders, where he hoped to establish himself professionally.

If the town he found was densely packed, the social networks that facilitated Smith’s entry into urban social life—and allowed for the eventual emergence of the Friendly Club—were similarly tight. Smith stayed briefly with William and Elizabeth Woolsey, a young couple, both still in their twenties, who lived on Golden Hill Street (soon to be renamed John Street) in a neighborhood populated mostly by merchants. William Woolsey came from a prosperous Long Island merchant family; Elizabeth was the sister of Smith’s old teacher, Timothy Dwight, and his good friend, Theodore Dwight, who edited Hartford’s *Connecticut Courant*. Timothy Dwight, who would become president of Yale in 1795, was married to William Woolsey’s older sister, Mary, making Woolsey and the Dwights brothers-in-law twice over. With Theodore Dwight and another Connecticut friend, Richard Alsop, Smith had helped to produce a series of neoclassical political verses, printed in the Hartford *American Mercury* and later collected as *The Echo*.

The Dwight brothers most likely introduced Smith to the Woolseys and thereby eased his removal to New York. William Dunlap, another Dwight-Woolsey relation, also belonged to the social circle Smith entered. Dunlap had married William Woolsey’s sister “Nabby” in 1789; the couple lived on Queen Street (soon to be renamed Pine Street), a few blocks below Golden Hill, where Smith eventually took a room down the street from the Woolseys. Dunlap, like his brothers-in-law, was a merchant; he had inherited a glass and china shop from his father in 1791. Like Smith, he had ambitions as a poet; Smith had included two poems by Dunlap in *American Poems, Selected and Original*, which had been printed just before he left Connecticut. Dun-
lap’s real passions, though, were painting and playwriting. In the late 1780s his father had sent him to London to study painting with the American artist Benjamin West, though Dunlap abandoned his lessons and spent his three years there in theaters, taverns, and the New York Coffee House, a favorite with American expatriates. When his father finally called him home to New York, Dunlap returned to find the theaters reopened (they had been closed temporarily when the triumphant American colonists had turned British occupants and loyalists out of the city) and a “native” play, Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*, in the midst of a successful run. Within two years, New York’s Old American Company, which Dunlap would eventually manage, was staging Dunlap’s work. Sometime between the fall of 1793 and the fall of 1794, Smith, William Woolsey, and Dunlap, along with a handful of additional friends—most, like Smith, Connecticut natives and Yale graduates—founded the Friendly Club, which they conceived as a weekly literary conversation in a member’s home for the purpose of promoting general knowledge and refining their literary sensibilities.

New York City in the 1790s was not the United States’ leading intellectual center, if such a determination depends on the size and activity of public learned societies like Philadelphia’s American Philosophical Society or Boston’s American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Philadelphia remained the medical stronghold of the new nation, though Columbia faculty like Samuel Latham Mitchell, a Long Island native educated in Edinburgh, worked tirelessly to promote New York as an alternative training ground for physicians. Some historians have dealt harshly with New York’s performance: in a city where “population, commerce, industry, wealth, and geographic location might have led one to expect the development of an array of institutions for promoting knowledge rivaling or surpassing the achievements of Philadelphia, nothing of the kind occurred.” The presumed reasons include the devastation visited on the city during the Revolution, the shift of the national capital to Philadelphia and the state capital to Albany, and one reason club members themselves repeated frequently: “the eager cultivation & rapid increase of the arts of gain, & . . . the neglect of elegant & useful science, of the arts of genius, taste, & society.” Business boomed, the 33-year-old lawyer James Kent wrote to his brother in May of 1796. “But the Business Life of this City is very unfavorable to literary Pursuits which are the Source of all that is precious & happy.” Still, even Kent, who seems to have enjoyed urban life least of all the
club members, recognized some literary advantages of a vibrant port city: “My Library . . . swells very fast,” he added, noting that he had just purchased a new edition of Voltaire in 92 volumes. Other members were unabashedly enthusiastic about what New York offered. Even at the onset of the epidemic that would claim Smith’s life, William Johnson heckled Dunlap, confined to the countryside: “I commiserate your situation: so destitute of intellectual food: You had better leave a dull uninteresting country scene & join us. The Town is the only place for rational beings.” Writing on the same sheet, the bedridden Smith added news about their latest project: a newly formed Mineralogical Society that met in Mitchell’s offices at the college.

If New York’s intellectual environment did not have the prestige of Philadelphia and Boston institutions, this situation may, in fact, help to explain some of the city’s appeal to this group, as well as its members’ various successes. New York, rapidly growing, was a wide-open arena in which they could distinguish themselves in medicine, law, business, belles lettres, and publishing forms attached to the professions. Living outside the shadow of watchful parents and teachers, this circle of literary friends—many of whom eschewed their parents’ religious orthodoxy—enjoyed an exhilarating measure of independence. Their accomplishments belie the lamentations of historians for New York’s intellectual inactivity. Neither Boston nor Philadelphia could boast, in the 1790s, a publishing record as diverse or significant as the one Friendly Club members established in New York. Understanding that varied output requires a step back to consider the written and social forms that facilitated and supplemented these diverse publications: forms that emphasized the importance of intellectual association to the emergence of the first U.S. literature.

Varieties of Urban Association

In New York City in the 1790s, the public face of civic life was visible in clusters of male bodies that crisscrossed the city in one another’s company, attending meetings of groups with names like the Horanian Society, the Calliopanean Society, the Tammany Society, the Marine Society, and the Manumission Society. This “associational world”—the networks of relations that gave rise to a “deliberative public sphere”—was the world into which Friendly Club members were born. The century and especially the decade before their births witnessed exponential growth in the number and variety of such civic associations. Friendly
Club members belonged to a variety of organizations prior to and during the club's years of activity. As a teenager in Philadelphia, Charles Brockden Brown had helped to form a “Belles Lettres Club,” whose members hoped to trace “the relations, dependencies, and connections of the several parts of knowledge” as they jointly pursued “literary improvement.” Smith knew at least some of Brown’s group while he studied medicine in Philadelphia; on returning to Connecticut in 1791, he participated in a similar literary circle with other young “Hartford Wits.” Most Friendly Club members found their earliest models of intellectual association in student clubs at Yale; several of them had participated together in the Brothers in Unity, established for “the improvement of science and friendship.” Only James Kent had belonged to the rival Linonia Society, organized “for the promotion of Friendship and social Intercourse and for the Advancement of Literature.” Such clubs prepared elite young men to assume positions of leadership in communities, states, and the new nation’s government.

New Yorkers formed or joined a range of similar associations in the 1790s for several distinct reasons: intellectual development, especially literary and scientific (Calliopean, Horanian Literary, Belles Lettres, Uranian, Agricultural, Mineralogical); moral reform (Manumission, Emigrants); leisure, music, dining, or other gentlemanly amusement (Anacreontic, Sub Rosa, Belvedere); professional development and fellowship (Medical); financial insurance or commercial networking (Mechanics, Marine); evangelical (Missionary); the ostensible transmission of secret or mystical knowledge (Freemason, Black Friar); and patriotic, nationalistic, or partisan networking (Democratic-Republican, Tamymany). The following decade would witness continued diversification, including the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. Some but not all of these associations represented themselves in public—in newspaper notices, public society orations, parades, or entries in the new annual city directories.

Although voluntary societies served a variety of intellectual, civic, political, commercial, humanitarian, and leisure interests, and sometimes overlapped in their topical pursuits, their common claim to foster fraternal feeling often had pragmatic benefits that transcended specific concerns. Membership in one club often led fellows to seek membership together in another; groups in one city or country extended honorary memberships to individuals in distant places as a way to advertise the reach of their information networks and promote reputations be-
yond local settings. Smith, for example, was voted an honorary member of the Massachusetts Historical Society shortly before his death, a sign of his advancing national reputation as a medical writer and editor. Middling and elite groups depended on the networks of privilege that resulted; a short leap could carry those with sufficient privilege from membership in voluntary associations to the governing boards of hospitals, colleges, or churches, or to political office or appointment.

Publicly visible collectivity—what one historian, writing about a later period, calls “the performance of people in association”—facilitated the production of personal reputation in an urban civic culture. Spectacular parades of thousands of citizens marked a diverse range of occasions, from the imminent ratification of the Constitution in 1788 (a parade in which William Dunlap and Samuel Mitchell may have marched as members of Noah Webster’s short-lived Philological Society), to major events in the French Revolution, to annual Independence Day celebrations, to visits by or funerals of political or other civic leaders, including an extraordinary memorial march for George Washington in 1799. Often underwritten by city government and recounted in newspapers and broadsides, such spectacles of public association were not tableaux of the city’s actual demographics so much as they were highly scripted, semiofficial, and often partisan corporate self-representations.

Membership in the bar, the Congress, the Order of the Cincinnati, the militia, or any of the groups that collectively made up such parades helped define one’s public character. Over the course of the 1790s, the opportunities for such public association proliferated at an amazing rate. In 1788, the Philological Society was the only intellectual society to stake a public presence in a parade more specifically organized to celebrate “the various branches of mechanicks” and their contributions to ratification. In the New Year’s Eve 1799 procession to memorialize George Washington, affinity for workers was displayed by voluntary association rather than craft; elites were organized into merchant societies or the liberal professions. The groups to which one could belong formed a sort of continuum from governmental bodies and political parties to professional, vocational, or ethnic ones.

Through events like these, Friendly Club members and their contemporaries demonstrated that their places in civic society were structured not simply by individual station or reputation but by their positions in the multiple groups and networks of civic life. The expan-
siveness of one’s choices and the number of memberships one held signaled the privileges of social status. In the case of Washington’s parade, groups and individuals with varying degrees of autonomy also struggled to define themselves publicly and politically by association with the deceased. At the same time, such events upheld cultural hierarchies in details like “Twenty-four Girls, in White Robes, with White Surpluses and Turbans, Strewing Laurels during the Procession,” or, later in the parade, “The General’s Wife, in Mourning, Led by two black servants in complete mourning with white Turbans.” Elites used such symbolic choreography—bodies put into the service of more abstract social values—to throw into relief the more implicit symbolism of the group formations that made up the remainder of these parades, which served to reinforce networks and identities based on vocation, profession, and political standing.

The increasing numbers and diversity of associations, particularly but not limited to those with political emphases, made rights of assembly a topic of continual debate throughout the decade. Controversy stemmed from tensions between publicity and secrecy, between federation and faction, perhaps because contemporaries recognized in acts of spectacular association the ways in which such groups worked so powerfully to mediate public identities or provide the basis for collective determination. The exclusive nature of most fraternal organizations had long made clubs the subject of popular curiosity. Because secret societies like the Freemasons made some outsiders nervous, such groups made their existence known and advertised their civic utility in order to alleviate public anxieties about the secret knowledge they were said to transmit. Secret societies would come to generate an enormous amount of discussion during the Bavarian Illuminati scare at the turn of the century, but throughout the entire post-Revolutionary period debate raged over the question of who could assemble, for what purposes, and whether or not such groups needed state sanction.

Histories of intellectual and literary culture in late-eighteenth-century New York—most of which highlight the Friendly Club because of its roster of prominent members—rarely differentiate between this group’s style of association and the range of other associations in the city. Representative of other private conversation circles, the Friendly Club stands apart from most forms of civic association in its privacy. Unlike Webster’s Philological Society of the late 1780s or the Calliopean Society of the 1790s—two groups with which the Friendly Club
has often been confused—Smith and his fellows did not cultivate a public reputation for their club during the years of its existence. It could not be found in city directories, and its members did not march under a banner in public parades. Although they joined more visible organizations together, Smith and his friends designed the Friendly Club as a haven from public life that would offer them a space for the unrestrained conversation they believed was required to discover moral and scientific truths about one another and the world they lived in. This freedom would ideally foster, protect, and even depend upon a diversity of sentiment—even on sensitive topics like religion and politics, which were taboo topics in many public societies.

As a group, Friendly Club members imagined themselves as inheritors of the Enlightenment republic of letters, which had ideally transcended politics and nationalism. Club members would not have considered their group to have much in common either with the city’s young Federalist groups or with the Democratic-Republican societies, which club member William Woolsey derided in a letter to a friend as attracting “the lowest order of mechanics, laborers, and draymen.” Nevertheless, the group believed that the truths discovered in their insular conversations would have social effects. Smith even argued to the Federalist editor Joseph Dennie, a fierce partisan and Anglophile, that natural science could supply an antidote to partisan strife, a belief he held even as some Federalists had begun to hold up Jefferson’s scientific interests as evidence of religious infidelity.

Smith’s confidence that the republic of intellect could remain above politics shines through in his decision to bring the Millers and Mitchill into Friendly Club activity in 1798, at the highpoint of national partisan tensions and despite the fact that William Woolsey privately “condemn’d” the Millers as democrats. When several Friendly Club members helped to found the Mineralogical Society in the summer of 1798, it was similarly characterized by its cosmopolitanism and bipartisanship (it included Solomon Simpson, a Jewish watchmaker and past president of the city’s Democratic-Republican society). The following year, Samuel Miller promoted the club’s literary-scientific Monthly Magazine, and American Review to the Massachusetts minister, geographer, and Federalist propagandist Jedidiah Morse as the project of a politically mixed group. In spite of its attempts to withdraw from public view and to eschew political controversy, the Friendly Club would be affected by partisan disputes. An account of the club written
years later by William Dunlap even suggests the club came to an end when partisan conflict at the turn of the century became insurmountable.\textsuperscript{33} Even so, Friendly Club alumni and others sought to preserve a learned culture in the city that was more patrician than partisan, as political opponents joined forces to found the New-York Historical Society and other intellectual institutions.\textsuperscript{34}

If these differences separated the Friendly Club from other associations in the era, its greatest commonality with the world of civic sociability lay in its overt emphasis on friendship. Like association more generally, friendship held specific meanings in relation to commercial society, politics, and Enlightenment intellectual culture.\textsuperscript{35} Commentators then and now have recognized ways in which friendship facilitated economic relations, provided a democratic model for political relations, and opened up networks for the dissemination of knowledge. Toward the turn of the century, new notions of “romantic friendship”—disinterested emotional relationships based on elective affinity—took the Enlightenment’s idealization of friendship and added a crucial dimension: an emotional economy in which true friendship was nearly as scarce as discussion of it was abundant.\textsuperscript{36} The difficulty of finding a true friend sent young people on searches for those sympathetic individuals who would fill that role. An emphasis on sympathy, affinity, and likeness made this form of romantic friendship predominantly (though not exclusively) a same-sex affair. To one male correspondent early in the decade, Charles Brockden Brown wrote: “Friendship is, perhaps, more pure but certainly not less violent than love. Between friends there must exist a perfect and entire similarity of disposition. . . . Soul must be knit unto Soul.”\textsuperscript{37} The relationship between the intense emotion of romantic friendship and Enlightenment modes of intellectual inquiry justified rituals of conversation, familiar correspondence, and club life itself. Such notions of friendship, club members believed, led not only to the production of self- and general understanding but also to several forms of writing used to record or display this new knowledge.

Conversation, Correspondence, Club: Accounting for Association in Smith’s Diary

This hybrid of Enlightenment scientific sensibility and romantic friendship emerges most clearly from Elihu Smith’s diary, the single most important source on the Friendly Club. Made up of six hard-backed notebooks of various sizes, comprising nearly four hundred thousand
words, the extant diary—whose title Smith constantly adjusted—begins with “Vol. III” on Smith’s 24th birthday, 4 September 1795. (Smith destroyed the first two volumes, embarrassed by their preoccupation with a failed romantic interest.) Smith’s notebooks are generically miscellaneous. They include diurnal entries; drafts of letters, essays, and poetry; notes on reading, including occasional transcriptions or translations; case histories from his medical practice; an unfinished utopia; genealogical narratives of himself and biographies of childhood friends; and a meticulous record of his “industry”: the number and size of pages he read and wrote each month (fig. 6). Much more than a record of individual consciousness, Smith’s diary serves as an account of public associations, private conversations, collective reading patterns and textual circulation; class privilege, political tensions, and literary ambition; public health, private opinion, literary and cultural institutions, and, not least, the importance of friendship itself to such undertakings. In a letter encouraging his sister Fanny to imitate his regular diary practice, Smith argued that “Journalizing” allows us to “obtain correct notions” as we attempt to “arrange our ideas on paper.” By so “recur[ring] to the pen,” he advises, “when we attempt to methodize, [we] shall discover what indeed we do know.” Conversation, correspondence, and club life all worked in similar ways. Like the club, Smith’s “diurnal duty” would provide a tool for self-understanding and a repository for tentative ideas, warm-up drills for public performances.

The diary offered Smith a place to account for the club’s industry as well as his own. On a Sunday morning in September 1795, Smith penned in the first pages of “Vol. III” a detailed, if frustrated, narrative of the Friendly Club’s development. Searching for the cause of the club’s recent and repeated failure to meet on the designated Saturday evenings, Smith begins the history by listing the club’s original ten members, a network based largely on marital relations and Connecticut origins: William Dunlap, William and George Woolsey, Prosper Wetmore, Horace, Seth, and William Johnson, Thomas Mumford, Smith himself, and Lynde Catlin. Beginning at the end of this list, Smith attempts as he writes to sort out the reasons so many of these friends had not lived up to his expectations of club life: Catlin married, and the “cat-ish fondness’ of his wife, & perhaps, his own indifference” separated him from his friends; Seth Johnson suffered poor health and traveled for business; Mumford moved; others were too unpunctual to be dependable. New members James Kent and Charles Adams, like
George Woolsey, were more regular, but the core membership consisted of “W.W. Woolsey, W. Dunlap, W. Johnson, & Smith, [who] have been punctual, with scarcely any exception, when in Town,” and whose “absence must, materially, affect the meetings of the Club.”

A catalog of inactivity and indolence, Smith’s diary entry imagines specific forces—commerce, illness, and especially marriage—as inimical to the club’s industry. The previous evening, with four members absent on business and the rest undependable, neither Smith nor others knew where to assemble. Even if they had met, the entry makes plain the double-edged effects of limited membership; while Smith, with characteristic secretarial skill, can account for every member, present or absent, on a given night, he is also aware that the failure of even a few members to attend can prevent a necessary quorum not because of bylaws but required by the demands of conversation itself.

Conversation was the club’s raison d’être, its organizing principle, and Smith used his diary in part to record and evaluate the broad-ranging discussions he conducted with these and other friends. In club members’ understanding, “conversation” meant something more than mere talking; it was what made the cardinal virtue “industry” possible. Throughout his diary Smith scrutinizes strangers’ speech—just as physiognomists did faces—as a means of discerning character. He also classifies even the most casual of conversations using a pseudo-Linnaean vocabulary. In order for conversation to deserve its name, it had to be frank, spirited, and directed toward detecting and eliminating error or conveying useful information. It could be sharply focused or “general” and still be “efficacious” or to one’s “advantage.” It could be “pleasant,” even “ingenious,” and still be “desultory.” It had to be “sufficiently consistent,” however, “to admit of character, or denomination.”

The Friendly Club defined itself by conversational style rather than formulating a constitution or set of rules. Friendly Club conversations aimed for three goals. In one of the earliest retrospectives on the club, William Dunlap recalled the first of these, what he called “unshackled intellectual intercourse”: “All form was rejected by the ‘friendly club,’ and but one rule adopted, which was that the member who had the pleasure of receiving his friends at his house, should read a passage from some author, by way of leading conversation into such a channel as might turn the thoughts of the company to literary discussion or critical investigation.” This single rule makes plain the second defin-
ing characteristic of the club’s conversational aims: its subordination of conversational pleasure to scientific or critical ends.

An article titled “On Conversation,” from the group’s Monthly Magazine, and American Review for July 1800, sets forth the third conversation goal these members shared: principles of politeness could not be allowed to frustrate conversation’s best effects. “If my companion be wrong in thinking me in error, and in thinking me self-confutable,” the author of this essay argues, “let the truth show itself upon experiment. Let him take his own way, and, by putting questions, as many as his wishes, finally detect his own folly.” The article contrasts such conversational “philosophers” with “polite men”; if a person asks friends to question erroneous beliefs, or insists, even, that fundamental terms (like “conversation” itself) be defined clearly, that person would risk violating the rules of polite society, which constitute, in the writer’s view, “merely the art of pleasing, directly, by soothing the vanity or banqueting the passions of others, or, indirectly, by avoiding accusation, and helping others to conceal their incapacity or ignorance.”46 Whereas “politeness,” earlier in the century, had characterized the “free conversation” of gentlemen’s clubs, here the term connotes all that is false and constraining, something to set aside among true friends.47 Conversation that was frank rather than polite facilitated and even embodied the club’s ideals of friendship and collectivity; it provided the ritual through which individuals were bound in corrective mutual improvement and the production of knowledge.

The Friendly Club’s preferred mode of conversation depended on virtuous participants. When the early member Prosper Wetmore became entangled in shady business transactions in the winter of 1795, the club voted to revoke his membership. His continued presence, they determined, was itself inimical to the openness and sincerity they desired. When, “much to our regret,” he attended the meeting on 19 December of that year, “[c]onversation was heavy—& the evening on the whole, unpleasant.”48 To be morally useful, Smith and his fellows believed, conversation required extraordinary discipline and seriousness. In one diary entry, Smith found “fault” with himself and his friends for allowing “gaiety & frolic” to “give a looseness to [their] conversation” and resolved “to put an end to this, in myself; & to attempt to check it, in others.” This was not to take the pleasure out of conversation; Smith found one female friend’s highly refined conversation “an Entertainment still superior” to a good evening at the theater.49
Ideal conversation depended not only on discipline but also on superior information, the sort garnered from wide-ranging reading, various professional activities, and correspondence that allowed members to interact with other trusted observers. Smith used these standards to evaluate club meetings in general as well as individual interactions. At one particularly profitable meeting, for example, Kent read aloud, “with great marks of satisfaction,” a set of letters William Dunlap had received that day from the British writers William Godwin and Thomas Holcroft. The same night’s discussion included William Johnson’s reading of “Gibbon’s character of Mahomet” and an extract from “St. Pierre’s Theory of Tides,” and Smith was called on to read an original poem he had just completed by request for a mixed-sex meeting of the Anacreontic Society. At another meeting, Johnson’s reading of a selection by Hume “excited comments on various modes, & on the best mode, of Reading. Each read, in turn—we criticized—& with some improvement, & much diversion.” Following this they compared “the excellence, evidence, & spirit of different Religions—& on the proper conclusions to be drawn from a decided preference to either.” Information, comparison, evaluation, improvement: these were conversation’s—and the club’s—ideal ends.

In contrast to such lively discussions, Smith laments club nights when discourse does not move beyond the “politics of the day,” when “trivial talk [is] not worthy the name of conversation.” As harsh in his judgment as he was idealistic in his standards, he lamented on another occasion, when political discussion made for “pitifully rambling & uninstructive” conversation, that he and his fellow club members “do not give a higher and efficient character to this little association, which certainly is not wanting in capacity & information, & ought to be devoted to something better than mere amusements.” Sated with the day’s news, “one yawned, another stretched himself, a third dozed, & all were stupid.”

Taken together, such entries offer a coherent theory of friendship’s relationship to reputation and to scientific observation. Smith’s desire to make himself “the subject of inquiry” provided another primary motivation for keeping his diary and participating in club life. “What is of more importance, to man, that the knowlege [sic] of man?” Smith asks in the introduction to the diary’s earliest volume—one he eventually destroyed, preserving only the preface: “What [is] so useful to an individual, as an acquaintance with himself?” Such an undertaking
required empirical investigation, he believed, a “science” by which “our own hearts” might be “discover[ed]” and “our actual character” brought “before the penetrating eyes of our own understandings.” Such precision could only come by “composing an actual history of himself.”

The forms by which the poet-physician mediates his self-performance are both literary and scientific as he places himself on the dissecting table of his own mind and wields a historian’s pen like a scalpel.

This scientific process of self-inquiry becomes collaborative performance not only in conversation—or even in Smith’s decision to include friends’ biographies in his diary—but also in the social uses to which he put the diary even as he produced it. Contrary to modern assumptions about the privacy of the diary form, Smith and friends often read aloud from their journals to one another, especially after long separations.

In such ways, their diaries did not simply trace individual intellectual progress but also aimed to “stimulate abler men to investigation.” For Smith the relationship between individual and collective identities was the key to “investigation” itself—the search for founding principles of self and society, morality and science. Such principles are clear in the title he eventually assigned to the diary: “Memoirs: or Notices concerning the Life, Studies, Opinions, and Friends, of E.H. Smith.” The term “Friends” may stand out to twenty-first-century readers who have been taught to think of the diary, like the novel, as a form of writing closely aligned with the emergence of modern liberal individualism.

But Smith clearly indicated that his diary was to be less an individual record than a group portrait. “To those into whose hands my papers may come, when I cease to exist, they will be valuable,” he wrote in the preface to one volume, “for my connections in many instances, have been with those, who either have been, or promise to be, in some good measure, distinguished actors in the scene around me.”

In entries like these, conversation and correspondence provide the social practices fundamental to ascertaining “undiscovered truth.” If the diary records ways in which Smith used conversation both to evaluate character and to further friendship and inquiry, it places equal emphasis on correspondence. Smith “design[ed]” in late 1795 to “preserve copies” of his correspondence in the diary in part to index “my own mind,” making it possible to aid “the treasures of memory, the riches of reflection,” but also to “exhibit . . . a view of my business, feelings, sentiments, the condition of my friends, & occasionally, perhaps, the history of former periods.”

The diary owes much of its bulk to the
letters Smith drafted in its pages, and the same reasons that led Smith and others like him to valorize conversation and diary keeping underlay Smith’s sense that scientific and moral inquiry depended on familiar correspondence. “Letters are designed as substitutes for conversation,” he wrote to Idea Strong, a female friend from his childhood, and “may be considered as analogous to the intercourse of neighbors” or to “partnerships & marriages” and as such “ought to be engaged in with some caution, & much meditation.” From mutual improvement of the immediate authors (“the acquisition of knowledge & virtue”) they would extend their benefits to “advance human happiness” in general. Letters between friends, Smith suggests, could even reveal to their authors the laws by which the world and its inhabitants operated. Public utility and personal pleasure are, for him, interdependent, as Smith engages his correspondent in an activity that will cultivate the ability to “discern our failings, & correct them.”

Smith’s scientific ambitions for his familiar correspondence are evident in such passages. “Shall we not, mutually,” Smith wrote to another friend,

by becoming reciprocally admitted into the very inmost soul, each of the other, be better & more enabled, to draw forth the latest [latent?] qualities which lurk there unimproved & perhaps unknown, & bring them out to day, & cultivate them into useful importance? Can cold, irrelevant, & generalized communications, do this? Have they the genial warmth necessary to stimulate the slumbering germ of benevolence, foster it’s slowly unfolding bust, support it’s feeble stalk, & expand it’s fragrant blossoms to bless and beautify the world? . . . This can only be hoped from unfolding the interior of the heart. And this letters should do.

Delineating generic conventions for correspondence, Smith seeks here to win his reader, a friend who had complained about Smith’s demands for self-disclosure, using language that draws both on the sentimental excess of the culture of sensibility and the language of scientific husbandry. Two aspects of the theory Smith sets forth in passages like these deserve careful notice. First, though the process of self-examination as Smith describes it may seem simply to secularize Puritan forms of self-scrutiny (which also gave rise to diary forms like the one he used), a crucial difference exists: religious forms of self-examination begin with a fixed understanding of ideal selfhood—the individual’s place
in divine order as revealed by Scripture—whereas Smith’s is a process of
discovery, of inquiries into unknown aspects of one’s own character as
well as into other regions of the natural world. Second, Smith attempts
a model of friendly and collaborative inquiry—both into knowledge of
the self and into the surrounding natural world—that privileges dif-
ference over likeness. Differences in individual temper, Smith argued,
allow for greater profit in collaborative inquiry.

This model puts friendship not simply in the service of science
but also promotes the intimacy on which publicly useful collabora-
tions must be founded. Friends discover knowledge in the external
and in one another’s “very inmost soul[s].” The vocabulary of scientific
husbandry (“slumbering germ,” “feeble stalk,” “fragrant blossoms”) re-
minds us that with many of his correspondents Smith exchanged literal
information about the natural world, comparing and classifying plants
and birds and soils found in various parts of the United States; but here
hearts unfold like flowers, and the “undiscovered truths” he inquires
after are deeply personal. With this friend, Smith takes the position of
the teacher, as he often does with reluctant correspondents—proselytes
to his method of understanding self and world—but he also makes a
plea for his friend to help him “draw forth” parts of himself to which he
might not have access on his own. Correspondence, like conversation,
constitutes a collaborative method for self-knowledge as well as for the
utilitarian production and distribution of knowledge.

Club members worked in several literary forms that depended on
and facilitated friendly collaboration. Smith’s diary-bound letters stand
as one of the most obvious examples. He apparently planned to publish
them at some point, along with the rest of his memoirs; he kept them
in his diary, he explained to his friend Theodore Dwight, because they
contained a “history” of “the state of my mind, & progress of my stud-
ies.” Letters circulated among small networks of friends, though they
sometimes aimed to prompt correspondents to public action and publi-
cation. Such friendly forms of communication had long been idealized
in Enlightenment science and mercantile contexts as essential to the
dissemination of news and useful information and to the progress of
scientific knowledge.

The correspondence preserved in Smith’s diary bore an intimate
relation not only to “the progress of knowledge” but also to Smith’s
belief in human perfectibility, the doctrine that most set him apart
as a “philosopher” from his religiously orthodox friends. Self-knowledge, a prerequisite to general knowledge, was collaborative in nature, and bit by bit, virtuous human beings could push one another toward moral perfection through such inquiry. “Have I a fault?” Smith asked another correspondent. “Does my friend know it? & will he not strive [to] correct it? Have I penetrated, in a new direction, into the region of undiscovered truth? & shall I not impart, of the fruit of my discoveries, to my friend?” Smith’s confidence in such “penetrat[ions]” saturates his diurnal entries and correspondence alike. In some passages he even converses with himself, as in this instance of his tendency to berate himself for indolence: “Shall I ever do better? Poh! What a question is that for one who believes in the perfectibility of man! . . . There is such a thing as Volition, you know. Yes, & I know how feebly it is exerted, where it ought to be rapid & penetrating as the lightnings.”

The Friendly Club’s communal reading practices were designed to foster such “rapid & penetrating” conversation, as is evident from Smith’s account of “[a] very well-spent evening” with the club in late 1797, with Johnson, Smith, and William Woolsey present, and Edward Miller a visitor:

Whether Smith composed such an entry after the fact or, acting in a secretarial role, jotted notes as the meeting was in progress, the entry highlights the interplay between communal reading and conversation, as well as the multiple meanings of “association” at play in the gathering: both the association of individuals requisite to conduct such a wide-ranging exchange of opinions and information, and the “association of ideas,” itself a concept fundamental to the philosophical and psychological models club members valued most. Association psychology held that ideas were perceptions that emerged in response to nervous vibrations in the brain, and that “whatever renews the vibration, renews also the perception.” Hence ideas left corporal markers on the body, material thought-maps that could be retraced and patterns that could be replicated. Smith’s account of the club’s conversation seeks to chart such routes. Club members took such principles from earlier thinkers like David Hartley as well as from contemporaries like Joseph Priestley, William Godwin, and Erasmus Darwin. If association psychology underlay the entire eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, it also explains the enduring celebration of friendly association. One of self-examination’s chief ends rested in recognizing the impressions left by associations—friendships and early associations in particular—that helped to make up one’s character.

From Association to Publication: Friendship and Literary Collaboration

In the fall of 1795, both Smith and the Friendly Club had come to crisis moments in their respective histories. Low on funds, Smith contemplated the unhappy prospect of returning to Connecticut. If he were to stay in the city, he needed some means of support in addition to the meager funds provided by his private medical practice. To forestall such an occurrence, the club’s “capacity & information” would have to be directed more effectively than it had been toward print media. Recently he and Johnson had discussed with Noah Webster the possibility of taking editorial control of Webster’s newspaper, the Minerva. Smith also considered opening a bookstore. The most ambitious publishing project he and his friends had so far plotted, though, was “a Periodical Paper; somewhat on the plan of the Spectator,” the famous London daily edited early in the century by Addison and Steele. The Spectator had famously represented itself as being in part the product of a gentlemen’s conversation club. Such a paper, he felt, would allow
club members to serve as special observers of metropolitan manners and current events, but their view would extend as well to the whole natural world.

With the introduction of new members between 1795 and 1798, the club not only maintained a successful conversation circle but also secured its place in two centuries of the city’s historiography. It would do so in large part because the new members who replaced the lackluster founders were all writers of one sort or another, as opposed to the group of merchants they displaced. In the fall of 1795 neither the group’s collective output nor its members’ individual reputations were particularly substantive: Smith had collaborated with Connecticut friends on satirical political poetry, published other occasional newspaper verse, and edited *American Poems*, though none of the projects had his name attached; Dunlap had seen a small handful of his plays staged; Charles Adams was the vice president’s son, but his law practice was not particularly distinguished. Nor was William Johnson’s. James Kent perhaps had the most prominent reputation of any Friendly Club member, as Columbia’s first professor of law, but his initial series of lectures had not been particularly successful. The others—the Woolseys, Wetmore, and the remaining Johnson brothers—were merchants.71 More than any of their projected intellectual endeavors, what made this group of friends most visible at this point in its history was its members’ participation as officers—Smith himself was the secretary—of the city’s Manumission Society and African Free School.72

In stepping up collaborative publishing endeavors after 1795, the group had multiple options open to them. Several eighteenth-century literary genres depended on sociable forms similar to theirs. Familiar and public correspondence carried news, scientific reports, queries, and answers between individuals and scientific societies, as the “epistolary genre became the dominant medium for creating an active and interactive reading public” in this period.73 Magazines, often advertised as published “by a society of gentlemen,” frequently carried items in epistolary form, creating for readers a sense of privileged information. Correspondence between learned societies laid the groundwork for more formal published “transactions” and established networks of intellectual authority.

Society orations, a genre in which several club members participated and published, also emerged from the world of civic association. In their oral form, typically delivered at regular meetings or anniversary
celebrations, such addresses offered the opportunity for individual men to appear in public, to declare association with others who were also socially powerful, and to demonstrate a degree of learning and oratorical ability. Following the address, society officers would appoint an official committee to visit the speaker and request that the oration be published (fig. 7). These rituals served both to protect the speaker from accusations of self-promotion and to publicize one’s membership in a larger society by printing the names of the Committee on Publication. Reciprocally, a prominent speaker could confirm the group’s collective sense of self-importance.74

More than most contemporary private circles, the Friendly Club learned the value of coming together to promote publishing endeavors. Unlike some other groups, the club did not translate its club practice into literary sketches, as did some Calliopeans in their serial for the New-York Magazine, “The Club” and “The Drone.” Nothing in the voluminous archive left behind by Friendly Club members resembles the most famous representation of club life from eighteenth-century America, the mock epic History of the Tuesday Club, written in Baltimore at midcentury. No Friendly Club counterpart exists for Dunlap’s satirical portrait of the earlier Philological Society in his unpublished play Cottgrisingwolds, which poked fun both at individuals and at the formalities that dominated society meetings. Rather, Friendly Club members’ individual and collective literary aims were both more civically oriented and more ambitious than those of most earlier or contemporary conversation circles.75

Prior to the Friendly Club’s existence, its future members had published more poetry than any other genre. In the years immediately following the American Revolution, an international demand for American cultural productions had enabled some Americans to craft celebrity identities as public poets. The Connecticut native Joel Barlow, for instance, seventeen years older than Smith and a member of the original circle of Hartford Wits with Smith’s former teacher Timothy Dwight, secured subscription lists for an epic poem of America that included the king of France.76 Though they never attempted a poem on the scale of Barlow’s Vision of Columbus, several future Friendly Club members, including Smith, Brown, Dunlap, Mitchell, and sometime member Richard Alsop, all found an outlet for their early writing in newspaper poetry, a genre and print form particularly suited to facilitating literary friendships. Poems in newsprint were easy to clip or transcribe in
order to send them to friends or to keep in commonplace books. The bulk of the poems Smith anthologized in *American Poems, Selected and Original* had originally been published in newspapers in Philadelphia, New York, Hartford, and Boston. Poetry could be easily reproduced and provided useful fodder for social conversation and debate. Poetic exchanges in particular seemed an ideal form for cultivating friendly sentiment, useful information, and moral action.

Such a poetic correspondence may actually have been responsible for introducing Elihu Smith to Charles Brockden Brown in Philadelphia in 1791. The poetic exchange that scholars have long called the “Ella-Birtha-Henry” correspondence, though it predates the formation of the Friendly Club itself, stands as the earliest literary collaboration between people who would become core club members. It also illustrates a mode of collaborative publication that both prefigures and contrasts the types of projects the club would take up later in the decade. A detailed consideration of the exchange, then, reveals one model of friendship’s relation to collaborative literary production in the period. Made up of thirty-two poems in two Philadelphia newspapers between February and August 1791, the correspondence consisted of poems addressed back and forth between Elihu Smith (Ella), Charles Brockden Brown (Henry), and one of Brown’s Quaker friends, Joseph Bringhurst (Birtha). The *Gazette of the United States* for 20 April 1791, two months into the exchange, and just before Henry began to contribute, carried a note in which its editor, John Fenno, “acknowledges with gratitude the favors he ha[d] received from his poetical correspondents ELLA and BIRTHA,” who “would do honor to any miscellany whatever. The readers of the *Gazette* have doubtless been pleased, and their pleasure will be heightened to surprise, when they are informed that ELLA is but a youth of 17” and that “[t]he authors are unknown to each other.” (The claim about Ella’s age is off slightly; Smith was 19, though he had composed some of the poems years earlier.) Fenno assumes that part of the appeal of these poems will be the mystery of the poets’ identities as their anonymous exchange unfolds.

The series began on 23 February 1791 with a poem in which Ella characterized his poetic persona: “The Volunteer Laureat, An Ode; for the Birth-Day of the President of the United States.” Framing his poetry from the outset as filling a civic duty, Ella subordinates his genius to the voice of the nation. With the next few poems he publishes, however, Ella’s mode shifts abruptly, from the political to the parlor
romance. The Gazette’s readers learn that these sonnets, published ten days apart, are “Sent to Miss —— ——, with a Braid of Hair” and to “Mrs. —— ——, with a Song,” signaling the poems’ place in polite society as well as political landscapes. In the second of these poems addressed to anonymous women, Ella calls on “[s]ome kindred genius” to “awake the trembling lyre, / And give to far posterity his [Ella’s, presumably] praise.” The call for a kindred poet to sing his praises drew a response almost immediately; “Birtha” offered the Gazette a poem titled, simply, “To Ella.” It begins by soliciting Ella to produce more poetry: “Strike, Strike again thy silver-sounding lyre/Ella, thou darling of the God of verse.” Two poems later, Ella takes the bait and writes an ode in which he calls Birtha’s voice the “voice of Truth” and expresses gratification at being asked to produce more poetry (“Deep from my soul the grateful sighs arise”).

The slippage between an occasional masculine pronoun and feminine pseudonyms suggests, perhaps, a similar tendency in friendly literary correspondence to slip back and forth between romantic friendship and homoerotic attachments. In the exchange now fully underway, “Friendship, trembling o’er the strings,/Breathes on the lyre unutterable things,” and the poets’ effusions become increasingly interdependent. “See my soul, in fancy rise,” Ella finishes the ode, “BIRTHA, seraph, opes the skies.” Birtha returns the compliment in his next offering, using the same image: “Borne on the undulating breeze,/Thy heaven-taught Notes my Spirit seize,/And waft it to the sky.” This poem is dated in Delaware on 10 April, apparently following Bringhurst’s move there from Philadelphia; for the authors (and the readers who imagine them), the poetic exchange now closes geographical gaps, building on Fenno’s image of two young poets who do not share physical proximity.

Brown’s contributions as Henry first appeared not in Fenno’s paper but in Benjamin Franklin Bache’s General Advertiser, and Political, Commercial and Literary Journal, a daily paper made up primarily of shipping announcements and advertising, political news (from a partisan perspective opposite to Fenno’s), correspondence on the theater, and original and selected poetry and anecdotes. Most of the poetry featured in Bache’s paper was occasional verse and doggerel copied from London, New York, or Boston papers, some with pseudonyms or initials. In early April Bache reprinted, from the Gazette, Ella’s poem titled “ODE. To Birtha.” This poem generated a response from Brown (as Henry), who had published poetry in the General Advertiser beginning
the previous fall. On 25 April, Bache printed Henry’s “Sonnet Written after hearing a Song sung by three Sisters,” in which Henry makes reference to “Ella’s lays” and implies that the sisters’ song was, in fact, Smith’s newspaper poetry set to music. Quickly reprinted by Fenno in the Gazette, the poem inaugurated the three-way correspondence.

Henry’s poem, like Ella’s and Birtha’s exchange-in-progress, illustrates one of the chief points to be made about this style of poetry, known in the 1790s as Della Cruscan verse: the way in which its self-referentiality focuses primarily on authorizing the production of more verse. Ella’s original poems provoked Birtha’s response, which called forth a return from Ella. Similarly, in Henry’s “Sonnet,” Ella’s poetry has provoked the sisters’ song, which provokes Henry’s poem. Before long Henry’s attention has been turned to the praise of the other two poets themselves. When Ella, Birtha, and Henry called on one another to strike again the lyre, they emphasized the importance of this early Romantic poetry to the cultivation not only of their mutual identities as public poets but also of a form of sensibility they and others saw as fundamental to moral order and intellectual commerce.

The Ella-Birtha-Henry correspondence served as a training ground for later projects with the Friendly Club that would channel the fraternal feeling generated by such writing into more ambitious and socially useful directions, the search for scientific truth in particular. For example, the connection underlies the club’s 1798 American edition of Erasmus Darwin’s long scientific poem The Botanic Garden, which Smith prefaced with a Della Cruscan poetic epistle to the author (who has inspired this “kindred spirit to strike the sacred lyre”). Smith’s dedicatory poem recounts a history of print technology’s effects on scientific improvement, culminating in a “proud column” raised to “bear inscribed, immortal, DARWIN’s name.” The performance of poetic sympathy—like the American reprinting of Darwin’s scientific poem itself—aims not only to disseminate Darwin’s art and thought but also to secure transatlantic reputation as poet-scientists for the American editors as well.

By the middle of the 1790s, Smith and friends had turned from poetry to magazine writing and editing to secure their fame and harness their utilitarian energies. Although the Medical Repository would be the most successful publishing venture launched by club members, as early as 1795 Smith projected a literary magazine called Proteus, an idea that would eventually be realized by his friends in 1799 as the Monthly Mag-
azine, and American Review. Smith’s early prospectus for the magazine suggests the club’s belief that a magazine entirely “devoted to the entertaining & useful performances, relative to the Arts & Sciences” would usefully contrast American newspapers, which had become dominated by politics.  

Smith framed the need for such a magazine within a history of American “News-Papers” and “Journals.” The traditional dearth of “Literary Journals” in America, he writes, had been long compensated for by “the peculiar excellence of our News-Papers,” which appealed, in their “superior cheapness” and “frequent impression” to the ideal American reader: “the enlightened, inquisitive, & frugal yeomanry of the United States.” However, the debates over the Constitution, followed by ongoing news of the French Revolution, had transformed newspapers from economically affordable transmitters of “elegant & useful communications” into political scandal sheets concerned with nothing but “public contests & private intrigues.” Even the most trivial contemporary events and political debates had “usurped” newsprint, banishing “communications of a less interesting, but more permanently useful nature.”  

The club’s projected publication would call the bluff, Smith suggested, on what is really interesting and to whom. Smith acknowledged that newspapers “contain everything to gratify the eager curiosity of the politician” but complained they have “nothing to satisfy the more temperate appetite of the scholar, the philosopher, or the man of literary leisure.” Worse, they offered nothing to reading women, who had been completely excluded from national politics. Smith called on men who understood the connection between “knowledge” and the “liberty,” “virtue,” “tranquility & happiness of a nation,” to join their efforts to take control of American publishing outlets.

Part of the problem for American publications, as Smith described it, rested with the audience. American citizens cared less about reading than about money and baser forms of amusement, in spite of the fact that they enjoyed the most democratic educational opportunities in human history. The type of publication such an audience needed, then, was precisely the opposite of what American newspapers offered. Smith envisioned a publication devoted entirely to “literary & scientific entertainment,” something that would free educated professionals of the burden of having to conduct extensive research outside their profession in order to gain further knowledge. But his ideal magazine would be important to writers as well as to potential readers: “As literature is
not a profession in this country, it is true, that few can devote themselves to the composition of considerable works; yet, among those who have cultivated the sciences, with any success, there are scarcely any, who do not, at times, divert themselves by lighter compositions, or by writing on detached parts of those sciences to the study of which they have especially attended.”

In other words, Americans did not lack authors—for “considerable” or “lighter” works—so much as they needed a “repository” to collect and arrange what had already been written. Providing such a forum for useful information would be a public service, even as it would create a reading public. Smith imagines these future readers, even those not inclined to serious study, gleaning information and rational amusement from articles designed to be brief: “To these the man of business can recur, while he waits for an expected guest, lingers at an ill-attended appointment, or patiently submits to the operations of his hair-dresser. From these, even the self-complacent beau, & the fashionable fair-one, may catch an unexpected ray of knowledge, while they sip their morning coffee, or their evening tea.” In editing this “Manual of Science & of Conversation,” the editors expected “assistance from their friends” and from gentlemen observers from different parts of the United States to convey local information, an aspiration Smith would renew in the *Medical Repository* a few years later.

Like his diary and like the Friendly Club itself, the magazine Smith described would above all emphasize collaborative processes of intimacy, inquiry, and authorship. When the club’s *Monthly Magazine* emerged at the end of the decade, with Brown at the helm, members consistently represented it as an effort undertaken by friends. “There is a *Society or club* of about 10 gentlemen,” Samuel Miller wrote to Jedidiah Morse, soliciting his support, “who meet once a week, to consult about the Magazine, & concert plans to make up its contents & to promote its interests.” Brown highlighted friendship’s energies even more directly in a letter to one of his brothers. “Eight of my friends here, men in the highest degree respectable for literature and influence,” he wrote, “have urged me so vehemently to undertake the project of a magazine, and promised their contributions and assistance to its success, that I have written and published proposals.” He added that the club’s energetic support was key: “The influence of my friends, and their unexpected and uncommon zeal, inspire me with a courage which I should be unable to derive from any other quarter.”
By the point at which Brown wrote these descriptions of the club’s role in producing the *Monthly Magazine*, he had established himself as a novelist, and club members had worked together to promote other endeavors, including Dunlap’s new theater, James Kent’s Columbia law lectures, and the *Medical Repository*. Members hoped that their individual successes would translate into collective visibility. Considering the effects of Brown’s potentially controversial novels on his friends’ reputations, Smith exclaimed on one occasion, “What different sentiments will [his writing] excite! And how much rancour, & misrepresentation must he encounter! And not he alone, but all those who are united to him, by the ties of friendship, & bonds of resembling opinions.” Although he seems to express some ambivalence here—the tide of public opinion could turn against them, after all—Smith ultimately trusts “that we shall put forth the conductors of virtue, & turn aside, or disarm the lightnings of superstitious fury” as they improved, rather than compromised, their reputations and established themselves as their generation’s intellectual leaders.99

This is the history the club members worked together to realize and created for themselves in retrospect. Three decades after the club ended, in his *History of the American Theatre* (1832), Dunlap forged a literary history that featured his early friends’ contributions to American literature and to his own early career. Brown, Johnson, and Smith, he writes, were his closest friends among the “band of pioneers” of New York’s literary culture. “To such men” were his own “dramas . . . read and submitted.”100 Dunlap’s account, which echoes his discussion of the group in his 1815 biography of Brown, furthers a practice of tracing literary history through particular friendships, an act that also served to secure his place—and the places of his friends—in a canon of American letters.