In late January 1797, Elihu Smith returned to his hometown, Litchfield, Connecticut, for a visit to family and friends, in part to confront his rapidly developing notoriety as an “infidel.” The principal showdown on this point took place one evening in the parlor of U.S. Senator Uriah Tracy. With him were the senator’s wife, Susan Bull Tracy—Smith’s childhood teacher, now one of his most intimate friends and correspondents—and her three oldest children. The controversy stemmed most immediately from a forty-page letter Smith had written to another Connecticut friend, Theodore Dwight, in which he had candidly defended his loss of faith in Christianity—a courageous move, he believed, given Dwight’s stringent orthodoxy and the already audible rumblings of a holy war waged by Connecticut’s Standing Order ministers against “philosophy.” Led by Theodore’s brother, the new Yale College president Timothy Dwight, the campaign responded to the violence and godlessness of the French Revolution. The force of this counterrevolutionary response, Smith believed, had “deformed” his friends’ thinking; for their part, they worried for the state of Smith’s soul. Theodore had discussed Smith’s letter with mutual friends, including Mrs. Tracy, and had put it—or at least its contents—into circulation. Anticipating such an event, Smith carried with him that eve-
ning his original drafts of the letter, as composed and revised in his diary.¹

Not quite a week earlier, Smith had taken the mail stage from New York to New Haven and a one-horse sleigh from there to Litchfield, leaving him plenty of time to anticipate this performance. Five long days had passed before a chance arose to present his case to Mrs. Tracy. On the last night of his visit, after “various” conversation, he struck an orator’s pose, his diary open, the audience seated, as if he were reading to them from a new novel by Elizabeth Inchbald or Thomas Holcroft. He read for over an hour, first from Dwight’s confrontational letter, then from his response: a tortured history of faith lost and found and lost again, from his childhood education, through his early teenage years at Yale, and beyond, when he had studied at Timothy Dwight’s Greenfield Hill Academy. His best defense, he believed, would be to lay before Mrs. Tracy the entire correspondence, which he did, despite the children present and the entrance, during the reading, of two more adults. Smith believed himself motivated only by sincere disclosure: “I did not wish any to suppose I was driven to shew, what I would otherwise have concealed,” he wrote of the event in his diary, “but on the contrary, that I had a willingness & even a desire, to acquaint them with its contents.”²

But the scene as Smith recounts it still feels forced, anxious, and the risks incurred were high. Susan Tracy and Theodore Dwight were among his oldest friends; he had long worried what effects his disclosure of disbelief would have on Dwight in particular. (Tracy already knew his views, though by making them public he perhaps placed her character in question if she defended him.) He was even more concerned about his parents’ reactions.³ And despite protestations that he did not fear prosecution under Connecticut’s antiblasphemy laws, the prospect did haunt him. He discussed his predicament extensively with sympathetic club members and fellow doubters Dunlap and Brown. The former had his own religious tensions with his brothers-in-law the Dwights; the latter had spent several years caught up in religious arguments with his childhood Quaker friends.⁴ But Smith still “could not get it out of my head, till I had run over, in imagination, the manner in which such a prosecution would, probably be conducted; the part I should act; the conduct of my friends, & others; & the result of the whole. I think I do not fear it.”⁵ He cast himself as hero in a courtroom drama; in such an event he would emerge a martyr for the cause
of truth. But the mention of “my friends, & others” suggests that such martyrdom could not escape more intimate contexts.

This realization was magnified for Smith by the threat religious tension posed to the collegiality of the Friendly Club itself. While Smith had yet to describe the club, in his letter to the London Monthly Magazine, as containing a “diversity of sentiment,” which rather than “affect[ing] their friendship, has made them more active in investigation,”

6 the diary belies such idealism, as he worries that corroding relationships with early friends might spread to the minority of Friendly Club members who maintained conservative religious beliefs, William Walton Woolsey in particular. Woolsey, like his Dwight brothers-in-law, was a devout Christian and arch-Federalist who would help to bankroll early waves of New York evangelicalism in the nineteenth century. As Smith’s friendship with Theodore Dwight showed early trouble signs, Smith fretted that Woolsey, “less cordial towards me, than [he] has been wont to be,” might withdraw his intimacy as well: “I fear that his religious opinions will, eventually, estrange his heart entirely from me.”

7 As the diary bears out, religious differences did prove a hard test of many of Smith’s early friendships. The Dwights, Woolsey, Uriah Tracy, and Smith’s parents all manifest suspicions of the books and ideas that had proved so attractive to him and so many of his New York friends. A few weeks after Smith ended his Connecticut visit, Mrs. Tracy wrote to say that her husband, troubled by Smith’s intellectual direction, had forbidden her from reading a collection of Dissenting British sermons Smith had given her, a follow-up to the copy of William Godwin’s Enquiry Concerning Political Justice he had given her two years earlier. Though the senator continued to write Smith letters on political topics, Smith’s disavowal of his childhood faith precluded the former intimacy of their friendship, as Tracy feared that profligate reading or city life had imperiled his young friend’s eternal salvation. In the spring and summer of 1798, these concerns only intensified for Smith’s Connecticut friends, when word began to circulate—and to be taken quite seriously by many—that a conspiracy of Bavarian atheists had established Jacobin networks throughout Europe, masterminded the French Revolution, and now sought to seduce young Americans by infiltrating literary societies and Masonic lodges, thereby gaining control of government, voluntary associations, and the print public sphere.

8 Elihu Smith died only a few months into the Bavarian Illuminati scare,
but the test of his early friendships survived him; on his death the most pressing question in the minds of orthodox friends and family was, Did he die a deist?9

The scene in Uriah and Susan Tracy’s parlor indicates a host of forces that characterized literary, intellectual, and political cultures at the end of the eighteenth century. Recent political historians have shown convincingly that through the 1790s Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans cultivated increasingly different views on the nature and regulation of public expression, but Smith’s predicament also reveals ways in which such conflicts also reveal late-Enlightenment crises of epistemology and public intellectual authority as they raised questions about who had avenues to knowledge adequate to warrant the public’s trust.10

During the cultural conflicts of the late 1790s, the club’s Enlightenment ideals of unregulated conversation and scientific progress came under attack by Anglo-American cultural conservatives. In England, Edmund Burke, an early proponent of Illuminati conspiracy theories, asserted more generally that unrestrained conversation in radical societies had fomented sedition. In a move that resonated with some Federalist opinion on the issue of “self-created societies” and, later, the need for a Sedition Act, Britain’s government required debating societies to be licensed and outlawed discussion of religion and politics in such settings. Arguing against the Dissenting minister Joseph Priestley, who had championed free discussion as essential to scientific progress, Burke attacked Enlightenment science as authorizing new forms of licentiousness.11 During the Alien and Sedition and Bavarian Illuminati crises, similar debates took place in the United States, with “reading and debating societies” falling suspect for social conservatives. Some opponents of the Federalist antisedition measures complained that even “the taste for reading” had “declined” because of governmental pressure.12

Smith’s case suggests that the overwhelming emphasis some historians have placed on partisan divisions may obscure the relationship between the early republic’s public sphere and its knowledge cultures, whose boundaries were not national and whose most fiercely fought battles in the era cannot be simply reduced to partisan perspectives. These knowledge cultures included a range of emerging disciplinary and professional forms of knowledge production and dissemination—the traditional liberal professions of medicine, law, and the clergy—and also slowly gave rise, beginning in this period, to new categories of professional authors, magazine editors, and critical reviewers. In this
moment of professional consolidation, which one scholar memorably termed “the organization of American culture,” new forms of accreditation and professional association, which would ultimately result in the concentration of professional and social authority, initially generated significant tensions among professionals whose training and theory remained extraordinarily disparate. These new knowledge-producing professions competed internally and with one another for credibility with American audiences.

As Smith’s and his friends’ experiences bear out, debates about religious toleration, skepticism, and establishment all played roles in these conflicts that did not always align with partisan divisions and should not be underestimated in their own right. In the late eighteenth century, plebeian religious leaders posed one set of challenges to the ministerial elite. But religion was not simply at stake on the margins. The increasing professionalization of medicine and law in particular resulted in competition with ministers, who had long held a high place in colonial social hierarchies, particularly in New England. Certainly such contests were framed in partisan terms at the time, but many Jeffersonian ministers, like the eventual Friendly Club member Samuel Miller, were loath to let the Federalists claim the religious high ground, and some Federalist intellectuals, like Smith, were unwilling to let ministers monopolize morality. Taking seriously the peculiarly religious cast of the political and cultural conflicts of the late 1790s opens up an understanding of the ways in which faith and doubt facilitated not only competing epistemologies but also competition among the professions for intellectual authority in the new nation.

Friendly Club members framed these contests not in partisan terms but as a battle between “philosophers” and “religionists.” For them, as for their ministerial opponents, the stakes could not have been higher as these new intellectuals privileged rationalism over Christianity or called for religious toleration and an end to the traditional privileges of religious establishment. Friendly Club members’ engagements with these debates ranged from the most intimate contexts, as fault lines ran through friendships and families, to the most public, as they set about careers publishing in various intellectual and literary contexts. As in the German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s seminal account, the public sphere as club members understood it emerged first within the familial and friendly context of the bourgeois parlor before moving outward to include literary and political spheres.
If Smith’s crisis of faith and his religious friends’ reactions offer a fruitful context for understanding Anglo-American countersubversive discourse more broadly, these situations also relate to the issues at stake in Charles Brockden Brown’s novelistic debut, *Wieland; or the Transformation*, which he completed while living with club members in the summer of 1798 and saw to press as yellow fever began to break out that fall. To the extent that literary critics of the early republic have followed or paralleled the important work of new political historians, they have explored ways in which political partisanship affected literary publication in the period. In this context, Brown’s novels have themselves come to occupy a significant place in literary critical narratives of the emergence of an American public. But as with other Friendly Club productions, Brown’s novels have meanings that are lost when partisan contexts overshadow religious ones. Their prioritization of epistemology over politics indicates a cultural politics of knowledge in which debates over the place of religious authority in the public sphere circulated at times against the currents of partisan propagandizing.

For members of the Friendly Club cohort, more than control of the federal government was at stake in these struggles. They saw themselves as engaged in a competitive if sometimes covert struggle with their clerical associates for control of the circulation of moral and scientific knowledge in the republic of intellect. In their minds, partisan politics, as Smith had declared in the draft prospectus for *Proteus*, had “usurped that place” in American publications previously reserved for “communications” of a “permanently useful nature.” Smith’s generic history highlights his desire to keep inquiries into science, morals, and literature apart from the pressing concerns of popular politics and even European revolutions, events he saw as fleeting—and prone to promote faction—rather than revealing universal truths.

If Smith’s Connecticut friends feared for his soul in the year that preceded his death, the religious skeptics among the Friendly Club feared the ability of the clerical elite to claim secret and superior knowledge as they equated all dissent with seditious conspiracy and generated images of an American public in peril. Even more dangerous, from the rationalists’ view, these countersubversives claimed divine authorization for their actions; their associate Jedidiah Morse, for example, felt compelled beginning in 1798 to publish his warning cries against the Illuminati because of the “public station” he held “under God” as a Massachusetts minister. Smith, Brown, Dunlap, and other club members
rejected such claims to divine sanction as dangerous. Smith’s rejection resulted in a protracted struggle to salvage his early friendships. In *Wieland*, Brown offered memorable illustrations of just how dangerous religious voices could be.

**Infidel Philosophers and Their Audiences: Elihu Smith’s Apostasy**

The simmering anxieties over the place of religion in public life, which would eventually boil over in the Illuminati scare, had literary dimensions that registered even in as intimate a context as Smith’s parlor reading and the account he made of it in his diary. The tension between Smith and his early friends over his departure from Christian orthodoxy threatened not only to end important friendships but also to topple entire literary structures as he understood them to function. His correspondence with Susan Tracy and Theodore Dwight, embedded in the diary alongside the account of Smith’s public reading of the long letter to Dwight, reveals fundamental characteristics of the literary culture that fostered the club’s other writing projects, including Brown’s novels, Dunlap’s plays, and Smith’s own miscellaneous compositions.

Smith’s parlor performance, correspondence, diary, and even his limited writing for the theater all reveal a fundamental concern with the audience’s response. The month prior to the events at the Tracy home, when Smith attended the first and only production of his opera, *Edwin and Angelina*, he obsessed about audience reactions. Scanning his fellow audience members as much as watching the performance of his play, Smith noted that “a fellow in the Gallery, was comfortably asleep; while Mrs. Brett [the lead actress] shed tears—the only ones, I suspect, which fell from any eyes, during that Scene.”¹⁹ A few months after the parlor reading at the Tracy home, in March 1797, he fretted as well over audience response to his letter to Dwight. Dunlap, recently returned from Connecticut, bore news that Theodore Dwight had continued to circulate his letter “to several friends: some condemn, some defend: [they] asked about my Opera,” Smith complained in his diary, “but not about me.”²⁰ The audiences for the letter were both more and less concrete than those for *Edwin and Angelina*. He had himself, by March 1797, read both his and Dwight’s letters to several New York friends, and he could anticipate individual responses to it perhaps better than he could predict a theater audience’s. He had sensed that this “important paper” would eventually become public in some form, and
even placed it at the head of a new volume of his memoirs, with the implication it would remain there as an introduction to his intellectual history once the memoirs were published. He could not, however, control how widely Dwight would circulate the letter without his permission.

Smith's comment on the scene at the Tracy home, that he “did not wish any to suppose I was driven to shew, what I would otherwise have concealed,” points to a particular audience problem in the period. Smith’s decision to proclaim his disbelief—and to do so at the hearth of a Christian home—suggests a measure of confidence in his sincerely spoken but carefully prepared text. The reading was intimate but calculated against the odds of convincing listeners, if not of his unorthodox positions, then of the purity of his motives for adopting them. His actions, though, betrayed an uncharacteristic failure of confidence in mutual inquiry. “I was especially desirous,” he writes of the encounter in his diary, “of acquainting Mrs. T with my sentiments, in a more methodic way than I could well do, in conversation.” The emphasis on a different method than the conversational model suggests different results: the aim of eighteenth-century oratory more broadly to make “the will of the auditor the instrument of [his or her] own surrender.” Smith’s parlor reading bridges the chasm between private self-examination and public performance of that examined self, a divide that characterized what one scholar calls the period’s “elocutionary revolution.”

Writing to Mrs. Tracy a month after the event, Smith “can not . . . think otherwise than that [she] preponderates on my side of the question.” Could his words have done other than “carry conviction to [her] mind”? Like his favorite author, William Godwin, Smith believed that “a sincere rational language would of itself be persuasive.” Yet as months passed and his correspondences grew increasingly strained, his confidence in sincere, artless, rational language waned a bit. His trips to Connecticut in January 1797 and the summer of 1798 can be understood as an acknowledgment of the limits of familiar letters, as he attempted through an intense social regimen to substitute his physical presence for the textual self-representation whose circulation and reception seemed increasingly out of his control.

Smith’s literary friendship with Theodore Dwight, in particular, seemed destined to suffer. As members of the younger wave of Hartford Wits, the two had collaborated earlier in the decade with Richard Alsop, Lemuel Hopkins, and Mason Fitch Cogswell on the anti-Jef-
fersonian, anti–French Revolution *Echo* poems, published in Connecticut newspapers. But by the middle of the decade, Smith’s declining faith in Christianity and his growing confidence in rationalism and human perfectibility began to outweigh his political affinities with such friends. Escalating partisan vitriol—especially when allied with claims to religious certainty—made Smith uncomfortable, just as his own movement away from Christianity greatly concerned his friends. Religious conservatives like the Ddwights, in one historian’s apt phrase, feared “a new breed of learned men was infiltrating Connecticut’s [and America’s] natural aristocracy.”Questions of faith aside, the prospect of losing someone like Smith, who had clear publishing ambitions in several fields, would have been regarded as a serious blow to the conservative Congregationalist cause.

Smith, in turn, also understood the failing friendships to be an enormous loss. He had likely made Theodore Dwight’s acquaintance in 1787 when, at age 15, just having graduated from Yale, Smith studied for two years with Theodore’s older brother until he was deemed old enough to enter on professional education. (Smith suspected, though, as he told Dwight in his long autobiographical letter, that his father had sent him to Timothy Dwight in hopes of winning him back to Christianity, after his undergraduate years at Yale had brought on his first crisis of faith.)

In 1791, after Smith had returned to Connecticut from a year of medical study in Philadelphia, he and Dwight renewed their friendship. In Smith’s letter to Dwight, his correspondent comes off by implication as a rather stodgy, aristocratic arch–Federalist, worried about Smith’s creeping democratic tendencies down to minor details of style and generic convention, such as his failure to use formal titles when addressing letters. But Smith deeply valued Dwight’s lighter side, his “love of everything, which promotes conviviality and merriment,” including his facility for punning. He initially hoped that Dwight’s willingness to confront him on his changing opinions signaled the persistence of his friendship: “He would not, he could not, have written thus, did he not love me.”

Susan Bull Tracy’s friendship was even older—and perhaps dearer—than Dwight’s. In a 1797 sketch of his childhood Smith composed in his diary, he recalled her (then “Miss Bull,” twelve years his senior) with an eroticized longing: he had been her “particular favorite, often admitted to sit on her lap, receive her caresses; & she uncommonly beautiful & engaging,” with “a voice wonderful in its sweetness & delicacy, of that
particular frame that it reaches irresistibly [sic] to the inmost recesses of sensibility, & moves it in uniform."  

His first mention of her in the extant diary hints at intrigue surrounding their relationship. During a fall 1795 visit to Litchfield, he made a long morning visit to Mrs. Tracy during which “she accounted to me for her long epistolary silence, & in [a] way which was equally unexpected & astonishing.” He learned that “unfounded malice” on the part of “one who is under the greatest obligations to us both” was to blame for her failure to write. The details he included in the diary were deliberately few. “This note is sufficient to preserve the facts in my memory,” he writes, “& I will spare myself the odious task of detailing them,” but he implies that someone has accused them of inappropriate intimacy in their friendship.  

Smith had, during that visit, left Mrs. Tracy with a copy of Godwin’s *Political Justice*, which he hoped would serve as the grounds for epistolary exchanges and perhaps even convert Mrs. Tracy to his brand of freethinking. Smith exulted, for similar reasons, in her warm reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, another work he admired as a cornerstone of what was just beginning to be called “the New Philosophy.” Smith had an unaffected regard for Susan Tracy’s mind. “An equal education would have placed Mrs. T. far before Miss Wollstonecraft,” he wrote in his diary during the 1795 visit. Whatever the reason their relationship inspired “malice” in some, the friendship—and the correspondence—seemed at this juncture poised to survive, and Smith felt he could “speak freely” with her about his views on “the foolishness of superstition,” his epithet for all religion.  

While Smith’s theories of friendship and sincerity influenced nearly every social and publishing project he undertook in the 1790s, his most careful statements on the subject emerge from his correspondence with Dwight and Tracy from 1796 to 1798. In early 1796, not quite three years after Smith had moved to New York, when he began to fear that Theodore Dwight’s friendship was waning, the potential damage to Smith’s theory of friendship loomed large. Confronting Dwight by letter, Smith asked how their correspondence had “fallen into this tardy, interrupted, & starved, kind of intercourse.” Making a similar inquiry of Susan Tracy later that year, he outlined his expectations of their exchanges. “[Y]our letters were my great encouragers,” he wrote, “by [their] ceaseless inquiries after more certain science & more blameless morals.” Her letters encouraged friendship; friendship was the foun-
dation of moral inquiry, the method for philosophical and scientific certainty, the antidote to intellectual or spiritual submission.

In another letter to Mrs. Tracy, written a year before his public airing in her parlor of the Dwight correspondence, he had framed his views on collaborative inquiry as a response to the increasing professionalization and disciplinarity of knowledge:

What! shall I implicitly receive an opinion for truth, & blindly practice what it directs because you [a lawyer, physician, priest] tell me it is truth? Shall I bow my reason to your authority, & tamely yield my faith to whatever you require? By what right do you assume the direction of my conscience? Shew me the patent by which you are commissioned, point me out it's author, and give me proof, unequivocal proof, that he is indeed it's author. You falter! You cannot do it? I know it. Your power is usurpation, & you are either deceivers, or deceived—or both.37

The cultural authorities who require blind obedience, he tells Mrs. Tracy, are “legions surround[ing] the temple of Truth; & often, while they seem to invite our approach, are preparing to circumvent, or entangle us in the labyrinths which their unhallowed hands have wrought in the majestic groves which environ it.” The image betrays his anxiety about religious authority in particular; professionalized clergy resemble pagan priests who transformed sacred groves into dense mazes to prevent sincere inquirers from getting at the truth. “I can see that what mankind have mistaken for the clear sky of truth, is no more than the mist of error; but tho’ I perceive & am convinced of the deception, it forms a cloud too thick for me to penetrate. It is thro’ the loopholes only, which the brisk breeze of discussion sometimes forms, that I can discern the celestial azure.” Smith apologizes a few lines later for this purple prose, but his point remains: truth cannot be trusted to arbitrary authority. It must be approached instead through “the brisk breeze of discussion.”38

A few weeks after initially confronting Dwight about the state of their correspondence, Smith received a letter from his friend, confirming that a gap had developed in their sentiments. Smith’s omission of polite titles and failure to address his letters at the bottom rather than the top (as convention dictated) were taken by Dwight as signs of Smith’s growing democratic tendencies; unchecked, these small infidelities could lead to larger moral subversion. Smith did his best to convince his friend he meant no disrespect and “struggle[d] in vain to
give language to [his] sentiments of sorrow for your regrets, of love for your love, & of constancy for your constancy,” an apt description of his idealization of reciprocal friendship, even as it suggests a creeping failure of confidence in the ideal.39 A few weeks later, Dwight unexpectedly turned up in New York, allowing Smith over nearly a week to pass “several hours most pleasantly” in the “rare society of a long—& well-beloved friend.”40 Following Dwight’s return to Connecticut, Smith expressed relief that his friend had “lost none of his attachment to me,” but retained some anxiety that “his heart is, or will be, estranged from me—in consequence of the difference in our metaphysics,” since his friend “must regard with pain one who he apprehends is doomed to perdition.”41

Smith sought through his letters over the next several months to cement the friendship, perhaps anticipating the more forceful confrontation that would follow. While he had felt “sorrow[ful]” that Dwight had treated him, in earlier letters, as a “suspected person,” he still discovered, or thought that I discovered [during Dwight’s visit], in your eye, your voice, your manner, that tenderness which I felt in my own bosom, & which mutually constituted so large a portion of our happiness, & my spirits were calmed. Am I then deceived? Will you, can you, tell me I am not? I do not know whether I ought to estimate your friendship so lightly, but whether it be from the sense I entertain of your merits, or from the powerful effect of early associations, there is something in the idea of forfeiting your affection like the pain supposed to accompany the forcible separation of soul & body.42

Here Smith takes, in relation to Dwight, the same position of scrutiny with which he attempts, in the diary, to regard himself. Though their letters have occasioned misunderstanding, during Dwight’s stay in New York Smith had the opportunity to read body language rather than written words for signs of sympathy, a corporeal resonance with the “tenderness which I felt in my own bosom.” But uncertainty remained, and a tone of sincere desperation governs the letter, a note Smith would sound repeatedly for the duration of these correspondences.

Here, as elsewhere in his writing, Smith imposes medical metaphor and interpretation onto his theory of friendship. “[T]he powerful effect of early associations” is, for Smith, scientific principle, drawn from the association psychology of David Hartley, Erasmus Darwin, and others. The word “effect,” like the Lockeian term “impression” he uses so fre-
quently elsewhere, conveys his sense that an individual is never formed apart from the forces exerted by “associations.” To undermine this reality of human experience would inflict an amputation, “the forcible separation of soul & body.” In contrast to friendships entered into as adults, he argues, with “a spirit too temperate to have their dissolution inflict any deadly wound,” that those “associations [formed] in youth [which] grow & become consolidated with the increase of our mental powers & attainments, are, as it were, intertwined with our very existence: to rend them asunder is to annihilate our greatest joys.” Within this discourse of friendship, Smith articulates a natural history of self, a way to anatomize the series of associations that make up a human being.

The letter to Dwight, carefully revised and transcribed before Smith sent it, forms the heart of Smith’s diary as we receive it. In it Smith illustrates in detail his medical-literary theory of friendship, which comprises a mixture of rational self-justification and sentimental expression. Smith begins the letter by holding his ground, using the same plain salutation—“To Theodore Dwight”—that his friend had earlier found so offensive; but he also seeks to seduce his reader in the body of the letter by way of address (“my dear friend”) and flattery (“How much soever we may vary in opinion, I can never be insensible to the proofs of [your] uncommon friendship”). The language of friendship, even as it presents Smith as a particularly sensible friend, also scripts Dwight’s reader response into the letter itself. Smith further prepares Dwight for the difficult declarations that follow by affirming his standard of “sincerity & freedom”: “You will at least be convinced that I am honest; that I mean to think & act right, whatever you may believe concerning the real nature of my sentiments & conduct.” Motive makes up the crux of the matter; if epistemology divides them, Smith aims to preserve fraternity on the ground of sincerity. At the same time, Smith still seems to hope that the projection of sincerity, coupled with the language of rational authority, might compel his friend to recognize the reasonableness of the positions he has taken.

With these strategies in mind, Smith grounds his defense in what might be called scientific autobiography, a hybrid of the clinical histories he routinely drew from his patients and the long-standing tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography. He attempts, through this doubting pilgrim’s progress, to provide experiential justifications for his philosophy, to portray his disbelief as sincere, rational, and, moreover, a natural outgrowth of Christian ideals and his own initial efforts to defend
Christianity against its detractors. He expresses gratitude, for instance, for parents who taught him morality and virtue, but he resents their insistence that “the religion of Christ was the only foundation of morals.” This “misfortune” led him to abandon morality at Yale when older classmates convinced him that Christianity was false. In his limited “understanding,” he acquired “many foolish habits . . . and was preserved from others, probably, by my immature age alone.” Thus, when he was sent after graduation to Dwight’s Greenfield Hill Academy, he was a perfect candidate for regeneration at the hands of a sentimental father figure: “Was it strange, then, that the eloquence, the judgement, the understanding, the uncommon virtue, of Dr. Dwight—the address which he peculiarly possesses of attaching youth to him, the more than paternal kindness which he shewed me . . . should gain an easy conquest over opinions, hastily taken up, without reflection”? As a storyteller, Smith is an anatomist; he seeks to dissect and explain as he cuts through the tissue of anecdotes that have produced him.

In this self-analysis, Smith provides for Theodore Dwight not only a narrative of his childhood faith, doubt, and reconversion—the first half of the basic story he would tell and retell as he attempted to justify his disbelief to friends—but also a cause-and-effect account of this period of his life that differed from the one his friends and parents probably held. His “restoration to Christianity,” he argues, had less to do with spiritual regeneration than with “[t]he cares of Dr. Dwight.” Because this restoration also brought him back to “morality . . . founded on reason, as well as habit,” he sincerely owes Theodore’s brother thanks: “It is to [Dr. Dwight], more perhaps than to any other man, that I owe that love of virtue, which I now feel.” Such a flattering expression of gratitude (disclosing, perhaps, the guilt that must have come with turning his back on Dwight’s indoctrination) may have been less than heartening to Smith’s readers, however. Should not his conviction have been due more to Christ than to Dwight?

Attributing to Timothy Dwight his sense of reasonable virtue, and characterizing his first doubts as childish and immoral, Smith sets the stage for a defense of his current disbelief. In the letter’s second draft Smith inserts the crucial formulation: “In reasoning with me, Dr. Dwight taught me, also, to reason; & while he inspired virtuous resolutions & religious faith, he excited a spirit of inquiry, & a disposition to examine the foundations of that faith & the reasonableness of those resolutions.” This examination of Christianity’s foundations—inspired
by Timothy Dwight, not William Godwin—ultimately led him to see his religion as unreasonable and inconsistent with its own moral ideals. Could God be such an inefficient organizer, he wondered, to offer a plan of salvation that would save so little of his creation? “‘Strait is the way, and narrow is the road, which leadeth unto life eternal—and few there be that find it,’” he quotes. “Few there be, who find it! What must I think of a being who having infinite fore-knowledge, must have foreseen the fate of man; who had infinite power to prevent it, if he would—and yet would not?” God, possessing all knowledge—the wild-est Enlightenment fantasy—has failed to use it for the greatest good. A being who hordes knowledge for its own sake can claim neither moral authority nor Smith’s affection. Smith placed his faith instead in humanity’s capacity to direct its own progress.

In Smith’s autobiographical account, religion was to blame for its own undoing. In other words, he writes to his friend, “I had overrun belief, in striving to support it.” Reason, as taught by Dr. Dwight, was the method. This idea, the core of his defense to Dwight, bears similarities to a passage from Smith’s “Ode Written on Leaving the Place of My Nativity,” a poem published before he left Connecticut for Philadelphia and reprinted in the Gazette of the United States as part of the Ella-Birtha-Henry correspondence. In the poem he bids farewell to familiar Litchfield landmarks, then pauses at the local church building,

Where the mild Sabbath called my constant feet,
Still let me think how frequent on thy seat,
Deep-musing thought had found a heavenly home;
For there the Soul, when bigot rage was raised,
And fiery zeal threw crimson o’er the face;
Or when the vengeance of the Lord was praised,
And torture shook the tenements of grace,
Or priestly warmth upraised the rod,
Or Dulness nodded o’er the word of God;
Could look with mild complacency around;
And age where inborn worth was found,
Or goodness glowed upon the face of youth,
Or native innocency shone,
Or beauty softened on the lip of truth,
Or dove-like Pureness fixed her throne;
Could gaze content with fond delight,
Grow better at the sight,
Grateful would swell for what was given,
And rise, in glowing rapture up to heaven.47

As in his defensive letter to Dwight, here Christianity’s inconsistencies pointed him toward more correct principles. The passage stands out in his sentimental tribute to Litchfield for its tension between his “constant feet” (which bring him to meeting each Sabbath) and what turns out to be the ultimate source of the “Deep-musing thought [that] had found a heavenly home.”

Through the first three lines of the passage the speaker’s thought appears to be elicited by what he hears in church. The fourth line, however, changes the meaning of those that immediately precede it; the sermon, rather than enticing the poet to religious awakening, provokes disaffection through its “bigot rage.” Suddenly the “Still” that begins the second line means “contrary to” rather than “continuing to”: it undermines the “constant feet” (the habit of religious performance) rather than continuing the sentimental recollections that had so far formed the content of the poem. Or perhaps it shows his constancy to be rewarded by higher understanding. What he gains from attending church meetings is not spiritual insight or nourishment but “Deep-musing thought” provoked by the preacher’s ineptness, bigotry, and dullness. In contrast to a message of “torture” and fear of the “upraised . . . rod,” the poet sees innate beauty and perfectibility—“native innocency” and “inborn worth”—in the parishioners around him. From this passage emerges a sense that his dissatisfaction with religion grew, initially at least, out of religious conviction. Importantly, the final sentiment here is religious; when the “Soul” swells, it “rise[s] in glowing rapture up to heaven”—despite the sermon rather than as its result.

Later in his life, Smith’s disdain for unjust ministers would transform into disillusionment with the Christian God. But even after he came to repudiate the Bible and Christianity, he preserved the idea of a sacred textual canon, replacing the Bible with other sacred texts of sorts—Richardson’s oeuvre, for example: sacredness founded in a truth Smith could rationally comprehend. The move to replace the Bible with truer works was probably something Smith had discussed with Brown, who had used similar arguments when attacking Scripture in his letters to his and Smith’s Quaker friend, Joseph Bringhurst, the “Birtha” of their earlier poetic exchange: “I esteem [Richardson] inferior to none
that ever lived, as a teacher of virtue and the friend of mankind, but the founder of the Christian Religion,” Brown wrote in one letter, but when it came to the literal truth of biblical accounts, “Does not my reason compel me to give the preference to the performance of Richardson?” In Smith’s poetic tribute to Litchfield, God can still claim the poet’s heart as he leaves home (he says so in the poem’s final line), but he has already introduced a host of voices that compete for his allegiance: Science, Ambition, Fame, Knowledge and Learning, and others. These forces would ultimately push Smith from moderate to radical deism, from a person who “bow[s] with soul resigned” to a “Father of Heaven” (despite a faltering faith in the institutional church) into someone who rejects that Heavenly Father on several moral grounds.

The argument that he “had overrun belief, in striving to support it” consolidates Smith’s narrative in a nutshell. His disbelief has less to do with attacking Christianity, he argues, than with his sincere initial attempts to defend it rationally. At this point he must address one of Dwight’s gravest concerns, that his “belief in the perfectibility of man” was based on an unwise allegiance to William Godwin. Smith must demonstrate that his belief in human perfectibility—which is linked closely, he admits, to his disbelief in Christianity—results from his own careful reasoning rather than from British radicalism. “[T]hese few lines,” he assures Dwight, contain “the mental progress of seven or eight years.” He had not quit praying in Jesus’ name, he writes, until he was “entirely satisfied that this name had no superior efficacy over any other.” His “morning & evening devotions” gave way only gradually to a belief in perfectibility, an “obnoxious doctrine,” he facetiously tells Dwight, which is quite easily explained:

Man is an animal formed with certain capacities. These are not unlimited—for then he would cease to be Man. But they are improvable; & that in two ways—first by culture or exercise; & secondly, by an hereditary propagation, to a certain degree, of that culture: there can be no doubt that the child of a native of Connecticut is born with a greater aptitude to receive minute impressions, than a child of one of the stupid inhabitants of Labrador. When we read the history of man, we must be sensible that he has undergone a gradual refinement of manners, & acquired, gradually an amazing fund of ideas & consequent powers, which he had not at first. We have every reason, therefore, which our knowledge of his capacities, & of his history, can offer, for believing
that he will continue to improve: or, in other words, that he is likely to approach still more towards perfection. This capacity for progressive advancement towards excellence, is denominated *perfectibility*—which, you will observe neither implies that man will ever become *perfect*, nor that he is not vicious & weak, & imperfect, *now*. . . . Those who admit that man is a perfectible animal, mean that he is an animal susceptible of all the improvement consistent with human nature.\textsuperscript{49} 

This portion of the letter’s first draft captures a number of points on which he and Dwight would agree, as well as a major blind spot on Smith’s part. The ethnocentricity of his Connecticut chauvinism, first of all, forms the heart of their shared notion of natural aristocracy. Smith’s belief in perfectibility does not suggest that all men are created equal, a point he does not bother to reconcile with his typical Lockean psychology. Some souls—those born in Connecticut (apparently, to Smith, the apex of white humanity)—are a few steps ahead in the game. This view made men like Theodore and Timothy Dwight (and Smith, too) uneasy about democracy, but Smith reassures his friend that his endorsement of perfectibility was not a vote for social leveling. What Smith seems consistently to miss, however, is the gulf that separates him from his friend on questions of epistemology and human nature. For Dwight, human nature was far from perfectible; it required redemption, by Christ, from its depraved state. Smith claims to know what he does about human nature by reading “the history of man.” Only one Book, by contrast, is necessary for Dwight to arrive at his certainty about human nature, a book Smith rejects as inconsistent and immoral.

Smith counters Dwight’s accusation that he has ridiculed Christianity with a lesson in comparative religion. His approach here anticipates but also differs sharply from the nineteenth-century comparativists who would follow; his ethnocentrism is more unabashed, and his failure of faith in Christianity does not lead to the liberal “natural theology” of later generations of doubters. Rather, Smith turns the tables on his friend and charges Dwight with having spoken lightly of other faiths. Theodore does not “hesitate to express [his] contempt,” for example, for “all the idle stories of Mahomet” or other religious traditions:

Thousands, millions of people, fall down before a stock, a stone, a leek, an onion; place the most implicit confidence in the wondrous transmigrations of Vishnou, the rainbows that surrounded the infant nose
of Tohi, and the earthly immortality of Teshor Lama; & thousands, & millions of men, perhaps, repose all their hopes of happiness, present & to come, on these incredible fictions, & would consent to martyrdom in their support. Yet you do not hesitate to load these tales with every epithet of scorn, & to regard the wretches who believe them, with compassion, or horror, or disgust.

Though Smith insists that he does not place Christianity on the same level as onion worship, the implication remains; but rather than chastising his friend for insensitivity, he unexpectedly uses the implication to argue that Dwight’s ridicule reveals a mindset he and Smith share: “We both refuse to assent to what appears absurd in our eyes; tho’ millions receive it as sacred and divine.” Bringing it even closer to home (“[H]ave [you] never made Deism the subject of your ridicule?”), Smith claims a right to his friend’s polite respect, no matter how much Dwight may think Smith to be mistaken. It cannot be “proper,” he concludes, to assert a surety of one’s own belief “with scorn, with ridicule . . . & when a native of Egypt should be with us, I do not think we should act either justly or politely, to speak contemptuously of his humble adoration of the leek.”

Smith’s final tactic in the letter returns to what has remained, for the most part, implicit in his defense: that moral inquiry ought to be open ended, that whatever knowledge emerges from sincere investigation requires adoption into one’s system of thinking, regardless of the consequences. His growing belief in perfectibility, he wrote earlier in the letter, eventually proved “hostile to the dogmas” of Christianity: “The Atonement, Regeneration, Election, the Fall, Original Sin, &c. &c. all fell before it in orderly succession.” The logical extension of this idea, he realizes, will test his friendships: “If I discover what is Truth—is it not a rational act of mine, which has for it’s [sic] object the illumination of mankind? Nay, is it not incumbent on me to remove, as far as in me lies, every obstacle in the way of men towards happiness? And if Religion be an obstacle—to remove religion?” Smith revised this passage to make it even more forceful: he will “expose the nakedness & insufficiency of Religion, to strip her of all her delusive ornaments, point out her hitherto concealed deformities, compare her with the lovely & unsophisticated form of Truth, & hold her up to the temperate regard, & for the rational dereliction; of undeceived and reforming man.”
Over the course of the letter, Smith sets aside his method of correspondence as friendly inquiry and uses his discourse of friendship both to demand his friend’s tolerance and to gain the moral upper ground. By professing his friendship, he sets an expectation for his friend to do the same, regardless of their divergence of opinion. Smith brings this strategy to its fullest use in the letter’s conclusion, where he usurps Dwight’s position as a mourner for lost sheep: “To you, my friend, I am bound by a thousand ties: your very errors strengthen my attachment . . . [but] I can not but lament that you have not attained to clearer views of the foundation of morality, & to a more consistent notion of it’s injunctions.” The rhetorical move also allows him to offer Dwight a model for toleration, valuing friendship over religious difference. Only if Dwight follows his example will friendship remain a method for collaborative inquiry; otherwise their differences will not provoke further knowledge, even if Smith hopes they will continue to facilitate “attachment.”

The results of Smith’s letter and its public performance were not at all what he hoped they would be. In response to Uriah Tracy’s objection to Joseph Fawcett’s Godwinian sermons, which Smith had left to circulate among his Litchfield friends, Smith wrote Susan Tracy a careful response, drafting it over five days in February. “I can not but compassionate your situation,” he wrote, “but, in sincerity I must regard that of another, as still more pitiable. He must, indeed, be wretched, who fears inquiry; who so doubts the soundness of his faith as to tremble at every opposition.”

Senator Tracy’s function as a rival in the narrative Smith creates here becomes explicit—and borders on impropriety, since Smith criticizes a husband to his wife, comparing Tracy to the Dey of Algiers, a popular figure for sexual and political tyranny in the name of religion. Smith’s unrestraint on this point, he claims, derives from his philosophical creed: “[N]o censor can restrain the operations of intellect. He who possesses the undisturbed faculty of thought, may well deride the pigmy violence of a thousand Omars. Yet, I say not this from any indignation I bear against Mr. T. on this occasion. My only emotion is regret: and more on his account, than on yours.” The move to expose his true feelings becomes a dominant trope of the letter. “I have, no longer, any personal reason for concealing any letter which I have written to you,” he writes. “You once requested my leave to impart the contents of certain of my communications to Mr. T.: I was foolish enough, at
that time, to have objections. They have long since vanished. Hereafter, I would willingly have the world my confidant.” Showing Mr. Tracy their correspondence might actually “remov[e] any unpleasant doubt that may sometimes overcast his mind” about Smith’s friendship with his wife, if sincerity and truth-telling had the moral force he believed them to possess. “Why will you not so far imitate my example . . . as to make me the depositary of your sentiments?” he writes. “Indeed, have I not a right to claim this act of confidence from you?” The plea for intimacy is blunt, drawing on the language of legal rights more than intimate disclosure. He stakes a similar claim by making himself and Mrs. Tracy a “we”—uniting them regardless of the course she plans the friendship to take.

Six months pass in the diary, and his claim is still unfilled. In August he wrote her again, the “interrupt[jion] of our correspondence” having called her friendship into question. Rather than discussing the dynamics of intimate exposure, as in his last letter, he dwelled now on silence. He had earlier written to her “with a freedom & sincerity calculated to display, at once, the depth & disinterestedness of my friendship,” but his letter had met only “that afflicting silence, so destructive of all the advantages of friendship, so threatening to its very existence.” What other than silence could be more threatening to someone whose very sense of self depended on friendly communication? He throws out possible motives for her failure to write: an offense taken by his interfering in her family affairs, or a “fear of improper inferences; inferences unjust to me and cruel to you; to be drawn from the continuance of our correspondence,” or perhaps she has even been “induced to change [her] opinion of my character & principles.”

The letter suggests Smith’s desperate attempt to salvage a friendship he knows has been damaged; his ideal of free and open communication as a sign of sincerity and intimacy has backfired, and as the friendship fails, so have the forms of communication on which it depended. He comes close to blaming his disbelief as the source of the fracture but reminds her that rationalism does not numb sensibility: “The armor of that philosophy I cherish is not such ‘thick-ribbed steel’ as to repel the attacks of a fortune so malignant. I have not cherished a firmness so adamantine that I can behold all the tendered & long-cherished sympathies of life perish around me unmoved, or undismayed. . . . The meanest worm writhes under the foot that tramples on it.”

When, a few months later, Uriah Tracy passed through New York to
Philadelphia, he stopped to deliver letters from Smith’s parents. “Our conversation . . . but glanced on [Tracy’s] family,” Smith writes. “Never have I heard a syllable, directly or indirectly, from Mrs. Tracy, since my last letter. My correspondence there is, I fear, at an end. Our friendship, too, I fear. . . . If this winter pass without a line from her . . . I must relinquish my hopes of a renewal of our correspondence—and strive to forget our friendship.” 57 He would also have to reconsider his views on friendship’s moral force as escalating cultural struggles over truth, public expression, and literary culture would put him at even greater odds with these friends.

The Illuminati Crisis and Public Intellectual Authority
To Uriah Tracy, and to Timothy and Theodore Dwight, Smith must have seemed living proof of the dangers “infidel Philosophers” posed to young American intellectuals, a reminder, perhaps, of their former friend Joel Barlow, who now, living in Europe, was reputed to have renounced Christianity and joined in with French revolutionaries. Timothy Dwight, from the moment he took control of Yale in 1795, saw himself as engaged in a battle for the souls of his pupils and had already spent years resisting first the spread of Unitarianism and then what he considered the leveling effects of the French Revolution and the philosophical writing that provided its underpinnings. Federalist opposition to “self-created” Democratic-Republican societies also helped to predispose cultural and political conservatives to believe claims, beginning in 1797 and 1798, that the French Revolution had been the result of plots laid by the Bavarian Illuminati. From 1798 through the early 1800s, Federalist newspaper publishers and clergymen spent an extraordinary amount of print space and time at the pulpit warning their listeners and readers against the conspiracy.

Scholars have long viewed the Illuminati scare as an important episode in early American history, primarily as it illustrates the extremes of the partisan divisions that preceded and followed Jefferson’s election in 1800. 58 But the incident went beyond American politics. A transatlantic affair, it was made possible, in fact, by intellectual networks through which books, bodies, correspondence, and criticism crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean. The actual Illuminati emerged from struggles between clergy and university professors during the European Enlightenment. Founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, a law professor at the Jesuit-controlled University of Ingolstadt, the Illuminati sought to infiltrate
and assert control over the government, thereby wresting the school and other public institutions free from clerical control. In the early 1780s the secret society expanded to around 3,000 members, mostly by converting Masonic lodges to its purposes. In the late 1780s, the Bavarian government published a stash of papers it had seized in an effort to stamp out secret societies in general and the Illuminati in particular. The governmental crackdown and exposé put a quick end to the order, but the threat of the group’s secret survival has fueled conservative conspiracy theories from the 1780s to the present.

The late 1790s witnessed the major thrust of an international anti-Illuminati crusade, which came in response to the bloody excesses of the French Revolution. An exiled French Jesuit, the Abbé Augustin Barruel, who had already written a book about the persecution of the priesthood during the Revolution, published in 1797 and 1798 a four-volume exposé of the Illuminati that assigned the group direct responsibility for France’s political turmoil. Barruel was preceded, for American readers, by John Robison, a professor of natural history at Edinburgh—with whom Samuel Mitchell had been personally acquainted during his education there—who in 1797 published his *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. Both authors took up Edmund Burke’s claim that midcentury philosophes had conspired to bring about the popular uprising; according to Barruel and Robison, these thinkers, ultimately through the agency of Masons and the Illuminati, were not only responsible for the overthrow of religion and government in France but also for conspiring to infiltrate and seize control of all the governments in the world, including the fledgling one in the United States.

The American campaign against the Bavarian Illuminati was driven by close associates of the Friendly Club. The campaign’s most forceful voice belonged to Jedidiah Morse, a 37-year-old clergyman from Massachusetts on whose behalf Smith and Johnson had testified in a copyright case involving his *American Geography*. Morse in turn served as an informal New England agent for the *Medical Repository* and would also be called on, in 1799, to help promote the *Monthly Magazine, and American Review*. Second only to Morse among anti-Illuminati crusaders were Timothy and Theodore Dwight. Other Congregationalist clergymen and Federalist politicians and propagandists throughout New England spent the spring and summer of 1798 delivering alarmist
oration and sermons, many of which were immediately sent to print and distributed throughout the country.

Historians typically date the campaign’s beginning to a Fast Day sermon Morse preached on 9 May 1798, in his hometown of Charlestown, Massachusetts; his jeremiads built on Timothy Dwight’s two forceful sermons at Yale the previous fall, published as The Nature, and Danger, of Infidel Philosophy. On 4 July 1798, Theodore Dwight thundered against the Illuminati at a Federalist Independence Day oration in Hartford while his brother did the same in New Haven. All three described in graphic terms various dangers the Illuminati posed. Timothy Dwight focused on the role played by his old imagined nemesis, Voltaire. Morse targeted the Freemasons. As the nation approached the presidential elections that would result in Jefferson’s “Revolution of 1800,” Theodore Dwight in particular attempted to attach the rhetoric and claims of the anti-Illuminati crusade to a political assault not only on Jefferson’s party but on the vice president himself. He did so by imagining himself an Illuminatus. “If I were about to make proselytes to illuminism in the United States,” Dwight told his Hartford audience, “I should in the first place apply to Thomas Jefferson, Albert Gallatin, and their political associates.”

While Smith shared his friends’ Federalist politics to the last, to the point of calling Jefferson, in a letter to a Federalist friend, “jacobinical almost to lunacy,” the Dwights’ growing tendency at the end of the decade to conflate Jeffersonians, Jacobins, deists, and atheists must have unsettled him.

During the summer of 1798, the climax of Smith’s two-year stand-off with Dwight coincided not only with the onset of the Illuminati conspiracy scare but also with Brown’s return to New York, where he completed and published Wieland and began drafting its sequel, Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist, works that have often been read by critics in relation to the political turmoil of 1798. The Friendly Club’s encounter with the conspiracy theories began prior to Jedidiah Morse’s Fast Day sermon in May; months earlier, on New Year’s Day, Smith took notes in his diary on the appendix to a recent volume of the British Monthly Review, which had included excerpts from Barruel’s multivolume exposé of the Illuminati. Smith responded skeptically and at length. He questioned Barruel’s knowledge “concerning the highest order of Freemasons.” How could he have such knowledge without being one? If he had been one, Smith believed “he could not have exposed their secrets.” Other questions abounded: why would Masons participate in an
atheistic campaign, when Smith had always assumed that they were “friendly to Xtianity”\textsuperscript{64}.

William Dunlap also encountered anti-Illuminati propaganda prior to the publication of Morse’s Fast Day sermon. On a visit to Dobson’s booksellers in Philadelphia in April 1798, Dunlap looked through Robison’s volume and pronounced it “at least a curious book” before meeting Brown for tea, where they may have had occasion to discuss what Dunlap had read.\textsuperscript{65} From the start, then, club members engaged with these theories in a transatlantic context of countersubversive discourse, anti-Jacobinism in particular; religion, not national partisan politics, was key to their reading, as several of their favorite British Jacobin writers had been—or would soon be—dragged into the fray.

Through the summer of 1798, as Smith traveled through Connecticut to shore up the damage caused by his disclosures to Dwight, the Illuminati dominated conversations as well as Federalist oratory. Smith first picked up a copy of Robison’s \textit{Proofs of a Conspiracy} at his father’s house. Upon returning to New York, where he found that Brown had arrived in his absence, Smith read through parts of Timothy Dwight’s \textit{The Nature, and Danger of Infidel Philosophy}, to which he refers in his diary as “Two Sermons.” A few days later, Morse delivered to Smith in person a printed copy of his anti-Illuminati Fast Day sermon. By late July, after Brown, Smith, and Johnson carried on “a long conversation, chiefly on a suitable catastrophe” for \textit{Wieland} (for which they were already correcting page proofs of early chapters), Smith had finished reading Robison’s book along with Theodore Dwight’s Independence Day oration.\textsuperscript{66} The proximity to Brown’s scene of composition was fortuitous; Dunlap noted in an early August diary entry that Brown was already working on \textit{Wieland’s} sequel, in which he had “taken up the schemes of the Illuminati.”\textsuperscript{67}

The friends’ responses to their countersubversive associates reveal much about key conflicts for intellectual authority in the new nation’s public sphere. Some opponents—even staunch Federalists like the New Hampshire editor Joseph Dennie, one of Smith’s many correspondents—criticized the clergy for bringing politics to the pulpit.\textsuperscript{68} From the perspective of people like the Dwights and Morse, however, religion was the central issue in public life, and politics was simply one arena they saw as especially vulnerable to the influence of infidelity. Although Smith left less in his diary than he had about Barruel to
indicate how he read the Morse and Dwight pamphlets or responded to their authors in person, Dunlap was more forthcoming and suggests that for him religion was the central issue. In early August, Dunlap received gift copies of Timothy Dwight’s two “Sermons against Infidels” (*Nature, and Danger*), along with Theodore Dwight’s Independence Day oration. Dunlap had long expressed concern privately over an emotional distance from his brothers-in-law over religion and politics. In May 1798, when Dunlap first read *Nature, and Danger*, he regarded the sermons as “an intertemperate farrago of falsehood and abuse.” When he finished reading Robison’s book in early August, he judged it “a strange mixture of knowledge & prejudice, truth & error, and another proof of the avidity with which we make every circumstance bend to the favourite System.” His response to Robison included his exasperation at the “perseverance” with which “these religionists believe or pretend to believe the necessary connection between Religion & morality: with what impudence [they] inculcate that without Religion a man cannot be virtuous.” Though he maintained a polite face to the Dwights in person, Dunlap set to work on responses to the orations and on a satirical novel he called *The Anti-Jacobin*, whose title character was a Francophobic minister modeled on his brother-in-law. It was one thing to harbor such sentiments in private. It was another thing altogether to take them public, though Brown, Smith, and Dunlap had all long contemplated, as Smith put it in his letter to Theodore, how best to “expose the nakedness & insufficiency of Religion.” To promote their philosophical positions they chose the novel and the stage as vehicles, already favorite targets of their ministerial friends. For Timothy Dwight, not only were these literary forms morally dangerous, they were the very opposite of masculine intellectual labor: “When the utmost labor of boys is bounded by history, biography and the pamphlets of the day, girls sink down to songs, novels and plays.” In Smith’s position, in spite of his sincere respect for his former teacher, the clergy had for too long exercised its own stranglehold on the public sphere by pretending to speak with the voice of God, a voice he did not believe interfered in human affairs. Brown, Smith, Dunlap, and Johnson, who ironically appropriated from Dwight the moniker “infidel philosophers” and appreciated the humorous deflation of religion in Thomas Paine’s infamous *Age of Reason*, conceived of literary professionalism as the province of moral observers like themselves, which
placed them in direct competition with religious authorities. As Smith had put it to Mrs. Tracy, clerical exhalations produced a “mist of error” that could only be dispersed by spirited and unrestrained conversation.75

The conflict boiled down to epistemological difference. Smith’s premium on discussion helps explain his attitudes toward claims of divine authority. In an article titled “Prayer,” composed in his diary on his 25th birthday—only a few months before he would write his manifesto to Dwight—Smith explains that, convinced of the “falsity of Christianity,” he had along the way “ceased to employ the name of Christ” in his prayers. Later, satisfied with the deist doctrine that “the Supreme Being” did not intervene in human affairs, he stopped “petitioning” God for favors and simply offered “praise & thanksgiving.” Tempted to quit praying altogether, he continued to praise God for some months “because I would be satisfied of the reasonableness of discontinuing it, before I should actually” do so. The passage ends with a birthday resolution: “[P]eriodical exercise of this kind is inconsistent with the notions I entertain of the structure & constitution of the Universe, & henceforth I am resolved to discontinue it.” Prayer ultimately becomes unacceptable for Smith; not only does God apparently not hear prayer, but more importantly he does not speak in return. To someone for whom inquiry depends on the “brisk breeze of discussion,” such a being was of no use.

Talking Dogs and the Public Sphere: Publicity, Conspiracy, and Religious Voices in Brown’s First Fictions

Smith’s portrait of a silent and possibly nonexistent God anticipates the premise for Wieland, Brown’s first published novel, in which a stranger named Carwin enters the Wieland family’s rural Pennsylvania family circle and supplants its conversation, unbeknownst to them, with an impersonation of God’s voice. And to disastrous effect: the group hears a series of mysterious voices that culminates in young Theodore Wieland’s conviction that God has commanded him to murder his wife, children, and sister in Abrahamic acts of sacrifice. (He succeeds in all but the last before he becomes convinced of his deception and kills himself.) When modern critics consider Brown’s hints in Wieland and in its unfinished sequel that Carwin, the villainous ventriloquist, is a proselyte to a secret society that resembles the Bavarian Illuminati, the typical response has been to read the novel as aligned with countersubversives like the Dwights.76
The connection, on closer examination, is not so easy to make. Brown never used the term “Illuminati” in his novels; readers who posit him as a countersubversive often rely on a more explicit connection between Carwin and the group drawn in Dunlap’s diary. In the year of the Alien and Sedition acts, these critics suggest, Brown offered his debut novel as a Federalist brief on the dangers of alien influence; what Carwin has done to the young Wieland family, infidels and aliens may do to the new nation. Another common critical approach exploits the personal link between Brown and the Federalist clergy. One of the most frequent claims critics have made about the Friendly Club, in fact, is that its members were responsible for perceived reactionary elements of Brown’s fiction and for what biographers describe as his turn from intellectual radicalism to cultural and political conservatism.

Even critics careful to distinguish between political pamphleteering and novel writing draw biographical conclusions regarding Brown’s apparent anxieties “about Enlightenment rationalism, foreign infiltration, ‘artistic’ and marketplace duplicities, and American vulnerability.”

But if Friendly Club sources reveal a deeply entrenched skepticism among most of this group toward the Illuminati conspiracy theories, and suggest furthermore that religion, not politics, was the group’s chief concern, how should we understand Brown’s engagement with the conspiracy scare? Smith’s and Dunlap’s diaries and correspondence reveal an abundance of evidence to confute claims that the Friendly Club was “largely a Federalist group with ties to New Haven orthodoxy, united in nothing so strongly as their hatred for the French Revolution and Jacobin rationalism.” Once we recognize that what most united the club’s inner circle—Smith, Brown, Dunlap, and Johnson in particular—was not an antipathy toward Jacobins or Jeffersonians but a shared derision of established Christianity, we can begin to recognize ways in which this skepticism fuels Brown’s *Wieland* and haunts his entire novelistic career in significant ways. From this vantage point, *Wieland*, a cornerstone of the early American literary canon, stands not as a warning cry against the breakdown of civic authority but as a dramatic illustration of the reasons that religious voices should be suspect sources of knowledge.

*Wieland* stands as a warning against the desire for “sensible intercourse” with God; its incomplete sequel, which describes Carwin’s earlier proselytization by an Illuminati-like secret society, makes a broader warning still; it sets forth a theory of publicity that reveals how
both works engage contemporary debates over public intellectual authority. In *Memoirs of Carwin*, which tells the ventriloquist’s life story leading up to the events recounted in *Wieland*, Brown suggests how publics are conceived and, like those who long to hear God’s voice, are often deceived. Although critics tend to treat the two works separately, the terms of the sequel’s discussion of publicity are useful for recognizing the religious content and context of Brown’s fictional debut.

From the first of his *Memoirs*, Carwin stands as a rather compelling emblem of publicity. Three episodes illustrate different ways in which Carwin allegorizes the public sphere. The first comes prior to his original discovery of his talent for ventriloquism. While hiking in a canyon one day, singing a “rude ditty,” Carwin elicits an unexpected response:

> After finishing the strain, I paused. In a few seconds a voice as I then imagined, uttered the same cry from the point of a rock some hundred feet behind me; the same words, with equal distinctness and deliberation, and in the same tone, appeared to be spoken. I was startled by this incident, and cast a fearful glance behind, to discover by whom it was uttered. . . . The speaker, however, was concealed from my view. . . . A few seconds, in like manner, elapsed, when my ditty was again rehearsed, with a no less perfect imitation, in a different quarter. . . . To this quarter I eagerly turned my eyes, but no one was visible. . . . Five times was this ditty successively repeated, at intervals nearly equal, always from a new quarter, and with little abatement of its original distinctness and force.83

The episode can be read as a publication fantasy; Carwin’s voice, behaving like a printed text, enters circulation, leaves his body behind, and reconstitutes him as an audience member as it moves without him, constantly returning from various quarters. This characterization of the experience of disembodied publicity draws on the same trope Smith and his Hartford Wit associates used when they circulated their anonymous neo-Augustan political satires under the title *The Echo*.84 In both cases, the figure suggests an audience that has sent its own voice into circulation, a circle of audience-author relations typical not only of republican print generally but of the type of magazine publishing the friends would conduct through the first decade of the nineteenth century.85

In Carwin’s case, as seen in a second episode he narrates, the circle of author-audience relations quickly became one in which he delighted in possessing a “superior power” over his audience. Leaving Western
Pennsylvania for Philadelphia in search of education, young Carwin successfully tricks a group of his friends into thinking that his “favourite Spaniel,” Damon, can utter “clearly distinguished English words.”

He prefaces the talking dog trick—which has nothing to do, of course, with the dog’s training or skill—with a more aboveboard routine, as he has taught his pet to respond to “simple monosyllables” and to “comprehend my gestures.” “If I crossed my hands on my breast,” Carwin explains, “he understood the signal and laid down behind me.” This part of the performance, in which Damon played a legitimate part, still aimed to deceive, because the means by which Carwin manipulated the dog’s behavior were not apparent to the audience. “[T]o a stranger [his actions] would appear indifferent or casual,” Carwin explains, “[and] it was easy to produce a belief that the animal’s knowledge was much greater than in truth, it was.” If Carwin exposes himself to his implied auditor (unidentified, but intimately familiar, we are given to believe, with the events of *Wieland*), the scene itself illustrates the creation of credulity; Damon’s audience “separated lost in wonder, but perfectly convinced by the evidence that had been produced.”

Here, too, Carwin can be seen as an allegory of the republican print sphere; there he sits, a member of the audience, responsible for yet also disconnected from the disembodied voice that successfully claims the audience’s belief. Building on a long tradition of reading Carwin as reflecting various attitudes toward American authorship, one recent critic writes that “authorship itself is ventriloquism writ large.” Like Carwin, “the author extricates his voice from the physical limitations of the body and the psychosocial contours of his personality and usurps the voices of others in the interests of fabricating a plot.”

In this scenario, however, unlike some others Carwin orchestrates, his voice does not come out of thin air; it has simply taken possession of an unwitting spaniel. The voice does not, strictly speaking, pretend as it did repeatedly in *Wieland* to be disembodied; it just pretends to come from someone else’s body. Significantly, Damon’s first utterance is an argument for “the dignity of his species and capacity of intellectual improvement,” a shrewd implication that those who speak in the voice of “the people” actually stage an elaborate form of political theater. Playing on his audience’s superstitions or gullibility for his own amusement or benefit, Carwin serves less as an emblem of republican publicity than as a warning about insider manipulations of “the public.”

A third instance from the *Memoirs* more clearly relates to the events...
in *Wieland*. At one point Carwin considers feigning a voice from heaven and manipulating his aunt into altering her will in his favor. Although he does not follow through on the plot, at this crucial juncture a character named Ludloe enters the story. Carwin’s pursuer and accuser at the end of *Wieland*, Ludloe figures in the prequel as both a paternal benefactor and as a member of a secret association that conspires to establish a one-world government. As a literary narrative Carwin’s *Memoirs* really gains momentum not in these early rehearsals of Carwin’s ventriloquial mischief—not even when his dog tricks threaten, as in this third instance, to roll over into God tricks. Rather, as Ludloe presses him to confess the origins of his secret skill, Carwin comes to the realization that he is close to giving away his deepest secret. The vocal and verbal talents that confirm Carwin’s sense of superiority and his deepest sense of identity become instead a source of vulnerability and paranoia. The secret of his “biloquism,” the one secret he keeps from Ludloe, the one that had “modelled” his “character” and that reads easily as an emblem of the public sphere, leads only to insecurity at having peeked behind publicity’s screen. Carwin’s knowledge of how publics work leaves him always looking over his shoulder. The tricks he has pulled on others, he worries, are bound to return and do him in.91

Carwin’s refusal to tell Ludloe about his secret skill (about which his implied auditor and the reading audience are already aware) keeps the story interesting. The reader, for whom Carwin’s confidant is a surrogate, should identify vicariously with Carwin’s anxiety. Rhetorically, Brown implies, a half-disclosed secret generates interest and authority.92 This fact suggests a relationship between reading audiences and the disclosure of secret knowledge, crucial to understanding Carwin and early American literary culture alike. In the proliferating information economy of the eighteenth century, an advertisement that one possesses secret knowledge grants the bearer superiority, as young Carwin realized, and the transmission of the secret facilitates an imagined author-audience transaction that establishes an imagined intimacy between author and audience. The trick is to gain the reader’s confidence by making it seem as if one possesses exclusive information.

If in Carwin’s *Memoirs* Brown delineates the manipulation of audience paranoia, in *Wieland* he had already outlined the disastrous effects of linking claims to divine sanction and confidence in the supernatural with such aspirations for social authority. Brown structures *Wieland* on a series of religious pretensions, mishaps, and misunderstandings, be-
ginning with the elder Wieland’s discovery of a pamphlet, “written by one of the . . . Albigenses, or French Protestants,” which lays out “the doctrine of the sect of Camisards.” This book sets him on the path of religious fanaticism that results first in his emigration to North America and ultimately to his death, when he apparently bursts into flames while praying. These early moments in the Wieland family history offer two important insights into the novel’s ultimate attitude toward religion. First, Brown’s choice of religious orientation for the patriarch of this ill-fated family—a line running from the Camisards to the Albigenses, representing centuries of religious extremism—sets the stage for the novel’s later extended attention to the intervention of good and evil spirits.93 Second, Brown suggests that the elder Wieland’s predisposition to religious delusion—and his spontaneous combustion—may both have medical explanations. When he stumbled onto the fateful pamphlet, his “mind was in a state peculiarly fitted for the reception of devotional sentiments” (that is, he was young, poor, and depressed).

Reflecting on her father’s devotion and his death, Clara poses two means of explaining these events: “Was this the penalty of disobedience? [T]his the stroke of an invisible hand? Is it a fresh proof that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs[?]” Or were there natural explanations: “the irregular expansion of the fluid that imparts warmth to our blood, caused by the fatigue of the preceding day, or flowing, by established laws, from the condition of his thoughts?” Here Brown tips his hand toward the latter, citing Italian medical journals with accounts of similar cases; later he cites Erasmus Darwin’s discussion of “mania” in his medical compendium Zoonomia, the first volume of which Samuel Mitchill had prepared in 1796 for American publication. Darwin’s volume includes a discussion of Mania Spes Religiosa (or “superstitious hope”), including accounts of people who hear disembodied voices calling them to repentance. Darwin classifies mania in general as “increased actions of the organs of sense.” Both generations of Wielands appear to have been so diseased.94

If Memoirs of Carwin warns about the mechanics of public delusion, Wieland argues that a “superstitious hope” in supernatural beings and divine intervention may predispose some to grave error, if not mental disorder. The most concentrated evidence for this reading comes in the novel’s climax, when Theodore Wieland, who has already butchered his young family at what he understood to be a divine command, attempts next to murder his sister, Clara, before he finally commits suicide by
plunging a penknife into his neck. Just prior to this sensational scene, Carwin spends nearly two chapters defending himself against the implication that he has unleashed this violence. He does so by carefully retelling everything Clara, the novel’s principal narrator, has already recounted. When Carwin comes to the part of his story where Clara herself, while sleepwalking, nearly falls over the edge of a cliff, he reveals to Clara that he was in fact her savior; he prevented her plunge by “break[ing] [her] slumbers” with a “powerful monosyllable” repeated twice: “hold! hold!” He chose this word, he explains, in part for literary effect, as it is the “mode in which heaven is said by the poet to interfere for the prevention of crimes.” An asterisked footnote quotes the relevant lines from Shakespeare (“—Peeps through the blanket of the dark, and cries/ Hold! Hold!”), and Carwin moves forward with his self-defense.95

Whether we are to read the footnote as placed there by Clara (a sign of the rigor with which she has tried to make sense of the story she is simultaneously narrating and recovering from) or by Brown (a sign of his own literary acumen) the quotation from Shakespeare reveals a set of concentric circles, layers of quotation, that when peeled back reveal the novel’s preoccupation with religious experience and ecclesiastical authority in the production of the early American public sphere. At the outermost ring of these circles, Brown narrates Clara’s voice, and one of them provides the authoritative footnote. Clara in turn narrates Carwin’s voice. Carwin quotes Shakespeare. Shakespeare gives voice to Lady Macbeth, nervous about Duncan’s pending murder and afraid that God will intervene to prevent it. The layers of quotation within quotation most obviously emphasize the similarities between ventriloquism and authorship, resemblances many critics have recognized as significant. And yet more is at stake here, for at the core of these concentric rings of quotations, occupying the innermost circle, there is no original or originating authorial voice at all, certainly no heavenly interference, as Lady Macbeth had feared, but rather the paranoia of a fictional character who imagines how an intervening God might stage “the prevention of crimes.” In Shakespeare’s play, of course, God fails to intervene, and the murder goes off as planned. Similarly, in Brown’s novel the heavens remain silent and readers are left with an open question regarding Carwin’s complicity. Whether or not Carwin cast the voice that Theodore Wieland took to be God’s, a family has been sacrificed. There was no ram caught in the Wieland family’s thicket.
The concentric set of voices in this passage crystallizes *Wieland’s* religious dilemma: will God intervene in human affairs, either to inspire such Abrahamic human sacrifice or to prevent horrific murder in his name? A majority of the novel’s characters desire either to be subjected to or to wield the authoritative force of an interventionist God. Theodore wants to see and hear one; Clara believes herself protected by one; Carwin impersonates one; and, in the passage just discussed, Lady Macbeth fears one, as did the senior Wieland. The editorial footnote—which by generic definition exists to provide authoritative commentary—offers an appropriate rejoinder to such a quest. If God won’t intervene, the note seems to suggest, then Shakespeare will, or perhaps Erasmus Darwin will, as the novel pits literary-historical parallels and medical explanations for Wieland’s behavior against his own religious understandings. The authoritative footnotes replace—displace, perhaps—the voice of God. In *Wieland*, a deist conception prevails of a God a lot like Carwin, who admits to having “rashly set in motion a machine, over whose progress [he] ha[s] no controul.” Clara speculates, as she begins to narrate the novel, that the “Deity . . . has chosen his path [and] admits no recal.” Her desire for intervention, like Theodore’s, has been disappointed, but the violent nature of their joint disappointments suggests that the novel offers a warning as much as it stakes out a theological position. In providing what Brown called, in the preface, “some important branches of the moral constitution of man,” *Wieland* argues against the utility—and for the dangers—of faith in divine intervention, and offers pointed parodies of Calvinist Christianity and Quakerism alike in its illustrations.

Carwin, as one historian has convincingly shown, belongs to a tradition of ventriloquists who, unmasked, expose the pretensions of religious authority. They act, that is, as Enlightenment figures of demystification. But Carwin does even more. He stands for what one recent public sphere theorist calls “publicity’s secret,” and does so by commenting not so much on the actual Illuminati conspiracy but on the means by which shrewd narrators like John Robison, Jedidiah Morse, or the Dwight brothers sought to capitalize on fears of conspiracy by claiming secret knowledge. Other satires of the countersubversives worked in similar ways. John Cosens Ogden, an Episcopalian rector in New Hampshire, authored a widely reprinted pamphlet in which he turned the tables and accused Dwight and Morse themselves of being the true secret combination of conspirators. The “New England Illu-
minati,“ his pamphlet proclaimed with mock seriousness, was a secret cabal “designed to increase the power and influence of the clergy.” Like Brown, Ogden opposed the countersubversive clergy primarily on religious, not political, grounds. Like Dwight, Ogden decried infidelity, but he also argued that Connecticut’s establishment laws had authorized an “ecclesiastical state, ruled by the President of the College, as a Monarch.”99 In “tak[ing] up the schemes of the Illuminati,” as Dunlap wrote, Brown similarly critiqued the countersubversives and outlined a competition among different kinds of intellectuals over newly significant knowledge industries, the management of public information, and representations of public opinion.

Countersubversives may have been particularly disposed to paranoia about the Illuminati’s alleged invasion of America precisely because, as long-standing power and information brokers, they understood the ways in which “the public” was often a representation conceived in secret and put into circulation.100 In this light, the Illuminati scare has a literary context within the transnational republic of intellect, particularly as the circulation of printed sermons and orations, correspondence, and journalistic criticism all reveals struggles to define a public sphere that encompassed but was not limited to the partisan press of the American 1790s. Conservative intellectuals described the Illuminati, for this reason, as attempting to gain control of the engines of intellectual and literary culture.

This strand of the anti-Illuminati fears was stressed most by Timothy Dwight, though Robison had laid the groundwork. In Proofs of a Conspiracy he had printed a letter purportedly written by one of the order’s leaders, which included a declaration that the Illuminati aimed to “acquire the direction of education—of church management—of the professorial chair, and of the pulpit. We must bring our opinions into fashion by every art—spread them among the people by the help of young writers. . . . We must take care that our writers be well puffed, and that the Reviewers do not depreciate them; therefore we must endeavor by every mean[s] to gain over the Reviewers and Journalists . . . [and] the booksellers, who in time will see that it is their interest to side with us.”101 The letter demonstrates an acute awareness of the ability of interested parties to manipulate the institutional bases of the public sphere. Another purported Illuminati document in Robison’s book similarly posited “[a] Literary Society [as] the most proper form for the introduction of our Order into any state where we are yet strangers.”102
Seated as Yale’s president, Dwight was extremely anxious to influence literary culture, especially as it affected the Christian indoctrination of young people in the new nation. In The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, his 1798 Independence Day sermon, he declared his belief that infidels had already penetrated “every place of power and trust, and [insinuated themselves] into every literary, political, and Friendly society.” Following Barruel and Robison, he framed the battle with Jacobin and Illuminati conspirators as a battle for literary eminence in which Voltaire—who had long been Dwight’s imagined foe and was also Barruel’s special target—plotted to make himself a literary celebrity by controlling the international flow of printed information.

In an 1801 sermon (a late statement in the debates, though Dwight apparently never lost his conviction of the conspiracy’s existence) Dwight again emphasized the Illuminati’s monopolization of the public sphere: infidel writings “have assumed every form, and treated every subject of thought. From the lofty philosophical discourse it has descended through all the intervening gradations to the news-paper paragraph; from the sermon to the catechism; from regular history to the anecdote; from the epic poem to the song; and from formal satire to the jest of the buffoon.” The hierarchical catalog includes high and low genres intended for audiences of elite, middling, and lower classes. And yet, the problem goes beyond the circulation of dangerous printed matter, in spite of his conviction that the Illuminati had successfully infiltrated all media and placed a stranglehold on all genres. Dwight worried even more about the effects of face-to-face “action and influence,” a sign of the distrust bred by the ways in which the conception of a monolithic “public” could conceal secret movements and behind-the-scenes machinations, an explicit vote of no confidence in an anonymous republican print sphere. Brown’s analysis of the public sphere, though it stemmed from a different set of concerns, suggested the sources for Dwight’s particularly suspicious subjectivity, the fate of those who know that publics are imaginary relationships generated through representations and that they can be manipulated by powerful interests behind the screen.

The Ghost of Elihu Hubbard Smith in Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*
audiences to think rationally. The failures of Smith’s correspondences with Dwight and Tracy altered Smith’s philosophy of friendship and his belief in the necessary force of sincerity. In contrast to what he had written Theodore Dwight earlier about the importance of early associations, Smith wrote in the summer of 1797 to another Connecticut friend, Sally Pierce, that “we are not to expect a great deal from early-formed friendships, as such; & that, therefore, we ought not, greatly, to regret them.” Those who abandon us “are ordinary minds” and must be replaced by “superior” ones. If early friendships could not endure, he had earlier written to Mrs. Tracy, they must be considered part of the “sacrifice” required by earnest inquiry, however painful such separations may be.107

The realities of Smith’s personal and professional life—the absorption of his intellectual energies in promoting his own medical journal, Brown’s fictional career, and Dunlap’s theatrical enterprise (which occasionally offered him a venue for his own literary productions)—increasingly made it plain that he enjoyed greater sympathy with Brown, Dunlap, and his roommate William Johnson than he did with his old Connecticut friends. In August 1796, as the tension with Dwight was increasing, Smith scraped together enough money to visit Dunlap at his summer home in Perth Amboy, where Brown would arrive from Philadelphia. One morning, after reading an edition of the London Monthly Review, Smith joined his two friends for a country walk. They searched out a “three-partile Tree, emblem of our friendship, which we discovered, & made our own, last year.” Here their impulse to transpose natural history onto their friendships comes through vividly. “We had some doubt which stock belonged to each,” he writes. “For each of us had fixed upon his own. We readily agreed that the slenderest one, & which grew in the middle, must be Charles’s; & after many examinations, the reason of size determined me that the westermost must be mine. This proves to be the fact.”108

Smith renders friendship as natural and as factual as a tree, but as uncommon as one with three trunks. As an emblem it serves to remind them that their lives are intertwined, their friendships symbiotic. By discovering it they make it their own. As it grows, it will continue to signify the friendships that grow as well, as well as the support each trunk offers the others. (Brown, apparently, needed the most support.) The language of “examination” lends scientific self-importance to their sentimental musing and self-examination. Dunlap, Brown, and Smith,
along with William Johnson, formed a group within the Friendly Club whose opinions most resembled one another’s. They nicknamed themselves “infidel philosophers,” poking fun at the Dwights. They chided one another when literary allusions in their letters borrowed too heavily on “the Vulgar cant of the religionists.”

These were the friends with whom the adult Smith chose to cast his creative lot; to a large degree they replaced his earlier creative dependence on Hartford’s Wits, though Smith continued to obsess about losing Dwight’s and Tracy’s friendships. Then, just before Smith was to visit Connecticut in June 1798, Mrs. Tracy broke her long silence in response to a brief letter he had ventured. “I am reinstated in all her friendship,” Smith writes in the diary. Though he is “sorry to find her converted, by the French Revolution, to Christianity,” he resolves not to “unsettle her faith,” to leave her this “intellectual opium. . . . She will still be one of the most excellent of women.” Smith’s summer visit to Connecticut included calls on upwards of 150 people in less than three weeks. Smith could not have known that his death was only weeks away; he more likely feared that the erosion of his friendships might spread.

On his first morning in Litchfield he spent “nearly the whole forenoon” at “Mrs. Tracy’s. This was the renovation of ancient pleasures, augmented by the presence, & intelligent conversation of her daughters, who are now old enough to contribute to the delights of confidential intercourse.” Did the “confidential intercourse” center on their friendship, his lack of faith, his opinions of Senator Tracy’s decision to control his wife’s reading habits? He does not say. During his few days in Litchfield before and after a quick trip to Hartford, where he spent time with Theodore Dwight, he had tea with Mrs. Tracy several times and read to her one afternoon from the moderately feminist newspaper essays of Brown’s friend Frances Paxton, as well as some of Brown’s own Philadelphia newspaper sketches, “much to her gratification.” This performance was a scaling back from the evening over a year earlier, when he had read for more than an hour from his correspondence with Dwight; it was less personal, more appropriate, the sort of thing he might have done in any mixed-sex setting with less intimate friends. Three days before Smith returned to New York, he and a friend drank tea again with Mrs. Tracy, and then she silently slips from his story. He makes no mention of letters written to or received from her during the two and a half months before his diary ends.
The friendship with Dwight appears to have entered a similar stalemate. The diary’s last letter to Dwight, written within a few days of the final letter to Mrs. Tracy, is filled with the now-familiar pleas for friendship to be rekindled. “We have loved each other, Theodore, long & tenderly,” Smith writes. “Let not our friendship be lost or impaired!” He calls on Dwight, the older of the two, to take a station of seniority and, if nothing else, to seek to rescue his younger friend from error: “If erring, expostulate, reason with, at least engage me. . . . Do not forget me.” Assuming his favorite part as a moral scientist he seeks to “expos[e] the cause” of their lapsed correspondence, but the symptoms are the same as they have been: the “difference of sentiment, on certain subjects, now, I fear, confirmed between us.” While the “difference ought not to affect our friendship,” it obviously has. The time he spends socially with Dwight during a visit to New York the following spring goes uncommented upon, as does their brief time together during Smith’s trip to Connecticut that summer, when Theodore was preparing his Independence Day oration in which he would denounce the Illuminati. They apparently played polite social roles, but their correspondence, if not their friendship, had ended. Following the Connecticut visit, Smith busied himself with getting Brown’s *Wieland* to press. Dwight, like Mrs. Tracy, disappears from the diary.

Just two months later, Smith was dead. In late September, several days after Johnson and Brown had arrived in Perth Amboy from New York, Dunlap noted in his journal that Johnson had received a letter from Tracey & others at Litchfield partly commissioned by Smiths parents to return thanks & make enquiries. Tracey in a postscript [*sic*] to Horace Johnson [William’s brother] says ‘Did Smith die a Diest [*sic*]? if you require, the answer shall be kept secret.’ It appears that Mr and Mrs S. are anxious on this subject: Johnson is now happy that he can say nothing in answer, for our beloved friend was seized so violently that he was in a stupor until death, scarcely speaking & then but when roused from his sleep to answer some question[,] which done he slept again. The inquiry would likely have irritated Smith (as it did his friends). It reveals the firmness of his orthodox friends’ and family’s faith and the incommensurability of their epistemological positions, a metaphysical problem with effects that were all too tangible. Smith left literary dilemmas behind as well, as his friends began to contemplate how to
assemble his “memoirs”—presumably including his diary—for publication.\textsuperscript{115}

We do not know precisely why Smith’s fellow club members failed to complete such an intimate and potentially important project. (His diaries remained unpublished until 1973.) The situation resurfaced the following summer, though, in Brown’s fourth published novel, \textit{Edgar Huntly}. Although critics long overlooked the possibility, Brown may have used a sequence in the book to alleviate the Smith family’s worries. The novel opens with the titular narrator grieving the early death of a close friend and before long includes a seemingly disconnected anecdote about publishing that friend’s memoirs. Huntly is visited in a dream by his dead friend Waldegrave, who conveys “inquietude and anger” over a promise Huntly has not kept: to copy Waldegrave’s memoirs for his sister, Mary, to whom Huntly narrates the novel and to whom he is engaged to be married. Or, Huntly wonders, has the ghost appeared to warn him \textit{against} such a transcription and semipublication? Waldegrave had, while alive, enjoined Huntly to secrecy regarding their correspondence, which contained frank discussions of their mutual rejection of Christianity. He had later, “within [a caring teacher’s] sphere of religious influence,” “resumed the faith,” and sought to reconvert Huntly as well, though only in person and not on paper. Huntly refuses to destroy the letters in part because he still holds the materialist philosophical views they once shared but also because the letters testify to the “moral pre-eminence” of Waldegrave’s “short but busy life.” But Huntly worries that Mary will not be able to withstand the onslaught against Christianity her brother’s letters contain, and, he notes, “to take [the letters] out of their present connection and arrangement, would be to mutilate and deform them.”\textsuperscript{116}

The question of whether or not to censor his friend’s memoirs for Mary’s use is overshadowed by Huntly’s discovery that the papers have been stolen, in what turns out to be an arbitrary plot device. It matters more that this digression on Waldegrave’s “intellectual history” exists at all. To Smith and Brown’s social circle and to Smith’s broader networks of friends and family, the parallels between Smith and Waldegrave would have been obvious. It recapitulated, if revised, the autobiographical narrative Smith had written in his long letter to Dwight. Like Waldegrave, Smith had lost his faith, then regained it under the influence of a skilled teacher. But Brown revises Smith’s story in crucial ways; Smith lost his faith young at Yale, recovered it at Dwight’s acad-
emy, then lost it again in a mature and considered way that brooked, in Smith's own view, no return. In Brown's revision, the angst that fills Smith's diary on this subject, especially in his correspondence with Dwight and Tracy, has vanished like the apparition in Huntly's bedroom.

In Waldegrave's ghost, Brown offers a figure of anxieties over publication and reminds us of the ways in which Smith's correspondence with Dwight and Tracy reveals crucial aspects of the literary culture of the early republic. Smith's letters, part of his diary, intended for eventual publication as his memoirs, defy easy generic categorization (they are, after all, simultaneously letters, diary entries, and drafts of potentially public memoirs) and thus complicate usual divisions between public and private in relation to these forms. Even as letters addressed to individual readers, they encompass larger audiences. He communicated them in a variety of other settings (in Mrs. Tracy's parlor as well as to intimates in New York; or circulated by Dwight among Connecticut friends). These semipublic disseminations of Smith's autobiographical statements were risky given the generally negative response to his religious transformations and the broader cultural tensions at play over issues of religion, rationalism, and religious authority. The results illustrate the difficulty, at the end of the century, of separating the literary from the political public spheres, the experimental, examined, and sincere self from the performed.

Moreover, the consequences of Smith's attempt to articulate his deism have even larger literary and political ramifications. While most accounts of the eighteenth-century public sphere have followed Habermas's description of the "audience-oriented subjectivity" produced by letters, diaries, and parlor conversation—modes of representation shaped to maximize audience approval—Smith's experience illustrates the costs incurred when the audience simply would not embrace the performance. So considered it reminds us of the very human struggles elided by ideal-typical accounts of the subjectivity produced by the emergence of a modern public sphere.117

Edgar Huntly's dilemma over Waldegrave's letters differs from the one confronting Brown and his friends with Smith's memoirs. Edgar plans only to transcribe them for Mary Waldegrave's use; they would, in other words, be "privately published." Brown and company initially intended a broader publication, in print, of Smith's papers. Although Brown is notorious for undertaking projects he never completed, it is
tempting to read his portrait of Waldegrave as a fictional case against publishing Smith’s memoirs. Edgar Huntly’s composition coincided with a visit to Connecticut made by Brown and Johnson in the summer of 1799, where they visited several of Smith’s former friends and possibly his family. Did the family ask them not to publish? Did the friends make the decision on their own, as Huntly does in Brown’s novel? Or, in the context of increasing public resentment toward infidel philosophers like themselves, intensified by the escalating anti-Illuminati campaign, did they hesitate to mar their friend’s memory by associating him with ideas even less politically tenable among his peers than they had been before? After 1800, Federalist-Congregationalist partisans like Timothy Dwight largely succeeded in cementing the association between deism and the threat of Jacobin subversion. Deists among founding-era Federalists kept their disbelief private, for the most part, or eventually experienced reconversion along with others during the heightened religiosity of the 1820s and 1830s. The utopian fires that fueled rationalist philosophers early in the 1790s had largely gone out; in spite of the Federalists’ feeling of defeat in 1800, the crisis of intellectual authority they had encouraged did not end in the secularists’ favor.