Republic of Intellect

Waterman, Bryan

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Narratives, like the knowledge they convey, carry with them multiple histories, characterized by contingency. Accidents accumulate in the production of texts—people meet by chance, find a weatherworn pamphlet on the street, overhear a conversation in a stagecoach, receive an invitation to a club. People organize themselves on one principle but convey information about another. The first day of January 1801, by sheer coincidence, witnessed the production of two very different texts from members of the Friendly Club, if indeed the club still met in some configuration at that date. That New Year’s Day, Samuel Miller preached a sermon, probably at the Wall Street Presbyterian Church. He took as his topic a beginning: the commencement of a new century. Charles Brockden Brown, probably sitting at a desk at the Pine Street apartment he continued to share with William Johnson, wrote about an ending, in the preface to the bound edition of the third and final volume of the *Monthly Magazine, and American Review*. Regarding the sermon, “Some who heard it were pleased to express a wish that it might be published,” Miller later wrote. So he set to work adding notes and soliciting subscribers.

By the time he was finished with the “amplification,” however, three years had passed and the sermon had turned into two volumes totaling
over a thousand pages. Published as the misleadingly named *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, it would remain the work by which Miller would be best remembered, even after another half-century of continuously publishing sermons and theological debates. Brown, on the other hand, wrote in a mildly despairing tone about the difficulties of periodical publishing in America. For the next two years, under the title *American Review, and Literary Journal*, the monthly magazine the Friendly Club started would reduce to a quarterly. “[T]he commencement of another year, and a new century,” Brown wrote, “render this a fit time for such a change.”

Much had changed, in fact, since 1793, when Samuel Miller and Elihu Smith made their separate ways to New York. (Brown had stopped through that fall on his way back to fever-decimated Philadelphia from a trip to Connecticut to meet Smith’s friends.) The city’s population had nearly doubled. Fever had secured a place on the annual calendar. In 1793, until news of the Terror arrived that fall, many Americans still were optimistic about the promise of the French Revolution. By 1801 political partisanship had escalated to extraordinary proportions; the previous year’s presidential election—which Jefferson won on New York’s Republican vote—had exacerbated the culture wars launched by countersubversives in the late 1790s. The Illuminati scare refused to go away. Though Brown and Johnson and some of their friends still privately defended Wollstonecraft’s and Godwin’s ideas (if not their sexual liberalism), Congregationalist conservatives had clearly put anti-Jacobinism in cultural ascendancy, President Jefferson or no.

The ongoing controversies drew lines that were sometimes unexpected. In 1801, Miller, the sole clergyman in the club’s history, became embroiled in one of the late flurries in the Illuminati affair when, as he claimed, he sought to rescue Jedidiah Morse’s honor from accusations that he persisted in his alarmist paranoia even though he had received credible reports from Europe that the scare was illusory. In his letter to the New York–based, Jeffersonian newspaper the *American Citizen*, edited by James Cheetham, Miller declared that Morse was a man of integrity; nevertheless, “it has always appeared to me, that as he has given undue credit to the assertions of Robison and Barruel . . . with an indiscreet and excessive zeal; yet, as he is evidently innocent of the charge so confidently brought against him in this instance, his veracity ought to be so vindicated.” Morse’s friends chafed at the backhanded defense; the Reverend William Linn, whose daughter, Elizabeth, Brown
would soon court, wrote to Morse that he had tried to dissuade Miller from publishing his letter but found “it is in vain to remonstrate with a Democrat.”

The partisanship that dominated American newspapers also threatened friendships. Not quite a decade earlier Linn had written Morse an introductory letter of recommendation for a 24-year-old Miller, on his way to Boston during a tour of New England. Miller occasioned another political controversy when a letter he had written to a minister in New Haven, affirming that he “had much rather have [the deist] Mr. Jefferson President of the United States, than an aristocratic Christian,” was published in a newspaper without his knowledge. Although the club and its Monthly Magazine tried to remain above politics, and though the club’s mixed-sex circle was clearly made up of both Jeffersonian and Federalist young people, years later Dunlap would suggest that partisanship played the decisive role in the group’s “lingering death.”

It seems fair to suggest that partisanship—mapped onto international culture wars between “modern philosophers” and anti-Jacobins—also brought an end to the late-Enlightenment republic of intellect.

Among Friendly Club members, Samuel Miller stands out as singular, in part for his combination of Jeffersonian politics and orthodox Christianity, and yet his two-volume Brief Retrospect not only offers significant insight into the dynamics of intellectual association the club represents but also offers additional explanations about the club’s collapse and a glimpse into the future at the world that would replace it. Embedded in its encyclopedic investigation of European and American arts and sciences of the century that had just closed, Miller leaves an implicit record of the contests the century had witnessed between competing forms of cultural and professional authority. Miller’s text also implicitly offers possible ways to understand the forces that called the club into existence and those that brought it to an end. Published only a decade after he arrived in New York City, Miller’s Brief Retrospect is an appropriate final testament to the group’s collaborative efforts to place American writing within a broader republic of intellect.

Miller came to New York in January of 1793 to accept a collegiate pastorate in the city’s three Presbyterian churches. He was 25 years old, two years older than Smith and Brown. He was examined, prior to taking his position as a licentiate, in Latin, Greek, geography, logic, rhetoric, natural philosophy, astronomy, moral philosophy, divinity, ecclesiastical history, and church government. (Such a broad knowledge base
suggests, perhaps, why he was particularly suited to write a work like the *Brief Retrospect.*) His ordination took place that summer. Before long, Miller had gained notice for the “air of literary refinement” that set him apart from the city’s other—most of them older—preachers. Miller’s son and biographer, himself a minister, later in the nineteenth century found fault with his father for having joined, during his New York years, “a literary club, which embraced some very doubtful characters, as the intimates of a clergyman,” and thought the *Brief Retrospect* itself was a sign that Samuel Miller “had not yet learned to give himself whole and rigorously . . . to his bare gospel work.”

Yet entry into the Friendly Club’s secular and mostly Federalist world did not come easy for a Jeffersonian minister of the gospel. Though he shared for years some ideas and social space with his future club members—Smith, Miller, and George M. Woolsey all became Manumission Society members at the same meeting in November 1793—he did not begin intimate association with the group until well after his brother Edward had moved to the city and assisted in founding the *Medical Repository.* (While Edward Miller and Samuel Mitchill had become regular visitors to the club around the founding of the medical journal, and Edward a regular member in April 1798, Samuel Miller was never even a visitor to the club until 5 May 1798, the first meeting after his brother became a full member.) By the end of that year, however, perhaps bound more tightly to the group by Smith’s death, Miller was enthusiastically at work promoting the projected *Monthly Magazine.* “[T]his is not an ordinary, nor a catch-penny, plan,” he assured Jedidiah Morse, seeking his assistance in gathering Massachusetts subscribers. The magazine’s editor, Miller wrote without naming Brown, was “a gentleman of undoubted learning and taste,” and would receive the support of “an association, which includes some of the first literary characters in the city.”

Like the *Monthly Magazine,* Miller’s *Brief Retrospect* acted out the principles of the republic of intellect in its inception and organization. Miller sent scores of letters across America and Europe—particularly to Scotland and Germany but also to English, Dutch, Swiss, and Swedish correspondents—soliciting information for the volume. He plied his friends’ brains on their pet subjects and for their professional knowledge. Edward Miller, in fact, wrote the bulk of the chapters on medical and scientific subjects but insisted that he not be listed as a coauthor. (In a largely flattering review of the book for his *Literary
Magazine, Brown notes that the “departments of physics and mathematics, evince a more careful and intelligent hand than the sections which belong to mere taste and fancy,” an almost clear signal that he was privy to the matter of joint authorship and perhaps a sign that he preferred Edward’s secularism to Samuel’s moralizing.)

The first two volumes constituted only the first part of Miller’s projected work. As “Part First,” they covered the century’s “Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature.” The two volumes included overviews and commentaries on eighteenth-century publications in the following categories: mechanical philosophy, chemical philosophy, natural history, medicine, geography, mathematics, navigation, agriculture, mechanic arts, fine arts, physiognomy, philosophy of the human mind, classic literature, Oriental literature, modern languages, philosophy of language, history, biography, romances and novels, poetry, literary journals, political journals, literary and scientific associations, encyclopedias, education, and “Nations Lately Become Literary” (including the United States). Each of these sections has several subsections. In addition to this overview of science, arts, and literature, Miller outlined but never completed three more parts to the Brief Retrospect: one each for theology, moral philosophy, and politics. The two volumes he did publish constitute a work of divided mindsets and moods, by turns optimistic about the scientific progress made during the eighteenth century and pessimistic about what Miller perceived as a decline in Christian belief. Though this element may stem from the book’s status as a jointly authored product, it also indicates Miller’s own conflicted attractions to Enlightenment thought and science on one hand and Calvinist theology on the other.

A collaborative effort, the Brief Retrospect involved former Friendly Club members in various ways. In addition to Edward Miller’s significant contributions, Miller consulted Charles Brockden Brown on several subjects and likely received feedback from others. He circulated proof sheets among a wide circle of friends and acquaintances and incorporated major changes or corrections as “Additional Notes.” Productions by club members also receive special notice in the text.

Miller did not simply catalog, he canonized. Of the Medical Repository he commented that its founding, “from the peculiar circumstances of our country, may be considered as an important event in noting the successive steps of medical improvement in the United States.” In addition to providing “a most useful vehicle for conveying to the public
a knowledge of every improvement in the science of medicine,” the
Repository “furnishes at once very reputable specimens of the learn-
ing, talents and zeal of many American physicians,” a near conflation
of natural knowledge with the reputation of those who assemble it.11
Mitchill receives special praise for his “inquiries concerning the nature
and constitution of pestilential fluids.”12 And in the midst of a section
on novels and romances that would become infamous as an antifi-
tion screed (“Never was the literary world so deluged with the frivo-
Ious effusions of ignorance and vanity” as in the century just closed),
Miller praises Charles Brockden Brown as producing the first Ameri-
can fiction “deserving respectful notice.” Miller sees, in Brown’s “several
productions, a vigorous imagination, a creative fancy, strong powers
of description, and great command, and, in general, great felicity of
language.” Although Miller’s discussion of drama evinces a surprising
familiarity with a range of dramatic writing, the chapter’s antitheatrical
prejudice almost certainly precludes the possibility of Dunlap’s input.
(As Miller reassures pious readers in a footnote, “[T]he author takes
for granted that no reader will consider him as expressing an opinion
favourable to theatrical amusements.”)13

Such reactionary moments aside, Miller’s Retrospect wears its En-
lightenment origins on its sleeve. As Brown wrote in his review of the
final product, the book itself stands unmistakably as a product of the
era it takes as its subject: “One of the most remarkable improve-
ments of the last century is the practice of reducing the whole body of human
knowledge into a comprehensive and systematic order.” In doing so,
Miller was surprisingly catholic. Though he does not hesitate in several
places to pronounce disapproval on the thinkers under discussion
(he deals particularly harshly with Mary Wollstonecraft), he also makes
a point, from the beginning, that “[a] man who is a bad Christian may
be a very excellent mathematician, astronomer, or chemist; and one
who denies and blasphemes the Saviour may write profoundly and
instructively on some branches of science highly interesting to man-
dom.”14 The very subtitle of the work, in highlighting “Revolutions and
Improvements,” takes up two terms most conservative Christians and
anti-Jacobins had come to regard as anathema, and the volumes’ overall
celebration of science runs sharply counter to the assault of several Fed-
eralist orators and ministers on science as a handmaiden of Jeffersonian
infidelity.

If Miller’s Brief Retrospect reflects the Enlightenment orientation
the club sought to preserve, it also marks that culture’s eclipse. In his
dedication to his political hero, John Dickinson of Delaware, Miller
makes it plain that he “contemplate[s] every department of human af-
fairs through the medium of Christian principles,” and so he attempts
less to let the ideas he collects compete with one another for preemi-
nence than he aims to refract the previous century’s thinking through
his particularly Presbyterian lens. In doing so he counters the dominant
movement among club members during the 1790s to combat clerical
authority with a morality founded on reason and scientific principle.
Miller, by contrast, feels that science, in spite of the progress made in
the previous century, “must ever fall short of those extravagant expecta-
tions which, founded in the ignorance of human nature, and discarding
the dictates of experience, cannot avoid proceeding in error, and ending
in disappointment.” As one intellectual historian notes, Miller’s book
offers a rejoinder to the progressive arguments for perfectibility that
ran through Condorcet’s *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of
the Human Mind* (1794), which had so energized Smith and other club
members in the year after it was published. “One cannot equate [scien-
tific] progress with moral progress,” Miller argues over and over.15

In so doing, Miller both counters the optimism that marks his
brother’s sections on science and foreshadows some important cultural
developments of the nineteenth century. If the social authority of the
elite clergy began its decline in the late eighteenth century, a more de-
mocratized religious authority—not the authority of philosophers or
scientists—would prevail in the nineteenth. The “Second Great Awak-
ening,” already rumbling in parts of the country, would occupy much of
the country through the 1830s.16 The Revolutionary generation would
prove the last to be able to put candidates forward whose religious
skepticism was unabashed. Far from Elihu Smith’s dream for exposing
the “amazing & disgustful collection of absurdity” that makes up “all
religions,” Miller’s book presages the subordination of science to Chris-
tianity that would characterize much of the coming century.

The *Brief Retrospect* may have taken as a departure point the begin-
ning of a new century, but Miller also filled the book with a variety of
endings. The book’s “Recapitulation” in particular reveals an effort to
contain the intellectual speculation the previous century had unleashed
by enumerating several defining characteristics. The eighteenth cen-
tury, Miller concludes, was “pre-eminently an age” of many things: the
age of free inquiry, physical science, economical science, experiment,
revolutions in science, printing, books, the unprecedented diffusion of knowledge, superficial learning, taste and refinement, infidel philosophy, Christian science, translations, literary honors, and finally, it was the age of literary and scientific intercourse, facilitated, he wrote, by a “republic of letters” both transnational and commercial. As in the rest of the book, Miller here waxes utopian and dystopian all at once. The members of this republic are a “highly favored generation” that has seen “improvements in science, which their fathers, a century ago, would have anticipated with astonishment, or pronounced altogether impossible,” but they have also witnessed—and in some cases contributed to—“some degrading retrocessions in human knowledge” and been subjected to “the noisy pretensions of false philosophy.” In summarizing the achievements and dangerous tendencies of the previous century as characteristics of an era now closed, Miller leaves himself free to set out a new agenda for his readers: “Philosophers of the Nineteenth Century!” he thunders. “[Y]our predecessors of the past age have bequeathed to you an immeasurable mass of both good and evil.” Their job is to discern one from the other and thereby contribute to “that substantial advancement in knowledge which the enlightened and benevolent mind anticipates with a glow of delight.”

The peculiar blend of voices in Miller’s book bears witness to the notion that texts have histories marked by accident. This conceptualization itself bears some similarity to the eighteenth-century preoccupation with “association,” in both principal meanings of the term: the voluntary association of individuals in civil society and the association of ideas, the foundational notion of much eighteenth-century philosophy of mind. At the end of the century, though, association psychology led most Friendly Club members not to contemplations of contingency but to notions of necessity. Ideas combine, they believed, not as the result of accidental encounters but along a predestined course; for these necessitarians, the knowledge that results from this combination is as progressive as it is inevitable. By the 1820s, association, in both senses, took on nationalist dimensions that were only apparent in very nascent forms in Miller’s book. The nation-state replaced friendly circles and informational networks as the milieu from which important associations were supposed to derive. And so, although the conversation circle endured as an important site of literary production, the transnational Enlightenment republic of letters met an end of sorts and nationalist literary traditions emerged full force on both sides of the Atlantic.
By contrast, Brown’s despair at the difficulties in editing the *Monthly Magazine* reveals the limitations of any nationalist intentions the group may have had. True, they had aimed to shape American audiences and ask for their support as subscribers. But they had also aimed to represent the new nation in larger intellectual arenas. The task had proved difficult for two main reasons, Brown believed: first, all “patronage” was “voluntary and unsolicited”; and second, the population of a single city was insufficient to generate the subscribers needed to defray the printing costs and subsidize the editorial work. Although the magazine survived for a few years reduced to a quarterly, the group probably did not survive the partisan warfare that peaked in 1800. (The account in Margaret Bayard’s letters ends in the fall of 1800, when she moves with her new husband to the new capital in the District of Columbia. Sources are sparse after that.)

Its decline notwithstanding, the club clearly had learned the lesson that print culture and professional reputation were useful allies in their efforts to disseminate knowledge. Print would continue to play decisive roles in each member’s life: Brown, after returning to Philadelphia in 1801, would edit two more periodicals and author political pamphlets until his death in 1810. Dunlap would issue, during the first and second decades of the new century, a collected edition of his plays and translations. He wrote biographies—including the first one of Brown—briefly edited a magazine, and later in the century authored a series of histories in which he highlighted his own and other club members’ roles in the founding of American literature. Edward Miller and Samuel Mitchell continued to edit the *Medical Repository*, which gained the distinction of being the longest-running American periodical of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After Edward Miller’s death in 1812, Samuel collected and published a volume of his brother’s medical works. Samuel Miller himself became one of the most prolific of former club members. Abandoning the subsequent volumes of the *Retrospect*, he took up pastoral writing as well as denominational polemics, including several contributions to fierce pamphlet wars in the first decade of the century on the comparative legitimacy of Presbyterian and Episcopalian ordination. He left New York to help found the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1813, and by the time of his death in 1850 he had over three hundred titles to his name. William Johnson and James Kent, through the first decades of the new century, were an indefatigable team in turning out volumes of printed legal deci-
sions. “Johnson’s Reports” numbered thirty volumes. Kent, who secured his influence and fame by publishing his *Commentaries* in the 1820s and ’30s, dedicated his monumental work to Johnson in honor of their long-standing intellectual partnership.

Though this proliferation of texts must have been due in some measure to the youthful, utopian energy generated by the Friendly Club, the publications these men issued in later years—some of them all the way to the middle of the nineteenth century—belong to different intellectual cultures than the one they had shared in the 1790s. These new ways of thinking, however, were outgrowths, rather than rejections, of the group’s Enlightenment ideals. By the 1830s, literary and scientific cultures had largely separated from one another. Moreover, within the newly separate literary and scientific circles alike, fissures began to emerge between amateurs and professionals. Younger men who had been professionally trained as physicians or scientists scorned older models of intellectual culture in which science was a leisure pursuit.19 “Amateur” authorship (a phrase that does not quite capture the club’s character or intentions) gradually gave way, in a technologically advancing, market-driven print culture, to the new culture of professionalism. But the bibliography of works by former Friendly Club members indicates that professional pursuits had dominated their publishing endeavors from the last decade of the eighteenth century on. Rather than putting their literary energies to the service of philosophical and scientific principles that transcended disciplinary and professional frameworks, their nineteenth-century endeavors were more closely aligned with the emergence of disciplinary and professional thinking. The lawyers wrote about law, ministers about religion, scientists and physicians about science and medicine. The only member who had persisted in plying his trade as an author or artist, William Dunlap, wrote long histories of the arts and the theater. Samuel Mitchell continued his existence as a literary and scientific Renaissance man, but he was clearly the remnant of an older order.

Even New York’s civic culture began to segregate along professional lines. Early in the nineteenth century, former Friendly Club members were instrumental in founding civic organizations that drew men of a variety of professions to public association: the New-York Historical Society (1804) and the Literary and Philosophical Society (1814), for example. Smaller, private literary associations comparable to the Friendly Club existed through the nineteenth century, of course. William Dun-
lap and James Kent both belonged to the Bread and Cheese Club, one such group organized by James Fenimore Cooper in the 1820s. But with rare exceptions, nineteenth-century clubs were designed more for leisure and fellowship than for the aggressive pursuit of collaborative publishing projects.

And yet something of the old order remained. In the first years of the 1800s, when Samuel Miller divided human knowledge into discrete categories, it made perfect sense for him to group “Science, Arts, and Literature” in one category. If, as the century progressed, literature and science became increasingly separate pursuits, some aspects of the Friendly Club’s world demonstrated an extraordinary persistence: their confidence that imaginative fiction can convey moral truths (“the truths of the human heart,” in Hawthorne’s famous phrase), or the ambition for encyclopedic collection (lovingly upheld and parodied all at once in a work like Melville’s *Moby-Dick*). Even Emerson’s *Nature* was prompted not by a walk in the woods but a trip to the Jardin de Plantes in Paris, with its carefully classified collections. Even transcendental insight, it seems, begins with associations in a materialist world. Friendly Club members shared with following generations the confidence that narrative forms can serve to make sense of—and to shape—the world of associations we inhabit.
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