Now that Julia Ward Howe’s *Hermaphrodite* has been recovered, how should we reread the words for which she became famous, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”? What, in turn, is the legacy of Howe’s writing, across genres, for contemporary America? Juxtaposing “Battle Hymn of the Republic” with *The Hermaphrodite*, this Afterword offers a brief commentary on the dissonance between these works and on their resonances in American culture today. Written some fifteen years apart, novel and poem seem to exist in different worlds. It is not only that the startling and incomplete fragments of the manuscript that we now call *The Hermaphrodite* (ca. 1847) were unpublished in Howe’s lifetime, while the poem “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862) was featured in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then, adapted into song, became the rallying cry of the Union army. More fundamentally, the novel and poem—which I will abbreviate as *Her* and “Hymn”—offer very different visions of embodiment, nationalism, and vision. At the same time, I will suggest, these works implicitly complicate and transform each other, suggesting new ways of seeing the tensions in Howe’s America as well as the battles of today’s republic.

“Hymn” establishes a world of absolutes, at once religious, political, and visual. The five stanzas of the poem move from the assertion that “Mine eyes
have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” to the exhortation, “As [Christ] died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” Motored by Christian faith, the movement of the poem is relentlessly forward; each stanza ends with “God, His Truth,” or “His day” “marching on.” This piety is grounded, in turn, on visual certitude. “Mine eyes have seen the glory” is only the first of several assertions based on vision, including “I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps” and “I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.” Throughout, the speaker of the poem stresses the confidence of vision, whether seeing or reading, and whether in the present (“can read”) or in the past and, simultaneously, the prophetic future (“have seen”). The words “Northern” and “Union” do not appear, but a poem entitled “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written during the first year of the Civil War and published in the most well-known of Northern literary institutions, unambiguously affiliates itself with the Union cause. “Hymn” offers a Christian vision tied to a political view, and a political view grounded in viewing itself.

This foundational faith in visibility is underscored by Howe’s later account, in her memoirs, of the origin of the poem:

I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. . . . [W]ith a sudden effort, I sprang out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pen which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper. I had learned to do this when, on previous occasions, attacks of versification had visited me in the night, and I feared to have recourse to a light lest I should wake the baby, who slept near me. I was always obliged to decipher my scrawl before another night should intervene, as it was only legible while the matter was fresh in my mind. (Howe, Rem 275)

The passage narrates the genesis of “Hymn” as a series of visual challenges and triumphs. The room is dim, and Howe must write without being able to see her words, but she triumphantly overcomes these impediments: she can see the words in her mind and then, for a crucial day afterward, read them on the page. The poem’s visibility increased with its publication placement: the entire front page of the February 1862 Atlantic. From an author who must write “without looking at the paper,” the poem was reproduced in print on many pieces of paper, “legible” to a wide readership. Finally, in its transmission into song, the “Hymn” became so well known that it presumably no longer needed to be legible on the page at all.
This passage also suggests the extent to which vision, for Howe, was intertwined with gender. Although the gender of the poem’s spectator is not named, Howe was particularly concerned with the role of women during wartime. When the Civil War began, she lamented that “I could not leave my nursery to follow the march of our armies” (Howe, Rem 273). But the origin story of “Hymn” remedies this distance. The mother who literally stays in the dark so as not “to wake the baby”—one of Howe’s six children—nonetheless finds a form of military service in poetry, waging “attacks of versification . . . in the night” with “an old stump of a pen,” a phrase that suggests both an aging weapon and a post-battle war wound. The resulting poem was so effective that it made women supremely powerful in, rather than disempowered from, the waging of war. Howe’s success, which echoes that of Harriet Beecher Stowe a decade earlier, linked little women to great wars; allegedly, upon first hearing the “Hymn,” Lincoln was so enthralled that he called out, “Sing it again” (quoted in Venet 96). In her postwar career, Howe was an original sponsor of “Mother’s Day,” and she situated motherhood as the moral foundation for political activism. In her origin story of “Hymn,” the mind’s eye of the mother makes a song so powerful that the American commander-in-chief—like a child delighted by a lullaby—asks to have it repeated.

By contrast, The Hermaphrodite offers far less unified accounts of embodiment, gender, and vision. The novel’s focus on ambiguities stands in stark contrast to the certitudes that organize “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” “I know not how an impartial judge would have decided the doubtful question of my being” (Howe, H 4), laments Laurence at the outset, and on another occasion, declares, “I am no man, no woman, nothing” (Howe, H 22). Such comments inaugurate a narrative of ambiguity that never approaches—indeed could not imagine—the forward-moving certitude of an idea like “His truth is marching on.”

As for the organizing axis of vision in “Hymn,” it is shattered in Her into partial, occluded, and frightening accounts of viewing. The word “hermaphrodite” is introduced into the novel when Laurence, still in his initial identification as a young man, overhears two people describing him: “Do you not see a striking resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese?” (Howe, H 16). This reference is probably to the Greek statue known as “The Sleeping Hermaphrodite,” and it functions, as Renée Bergland shows elsewhere in this volume, as one of many important references to sculpture in the novel. These references, in turn, are frequently linked to instances of occluded vision, from the installation of “The Sleeping Hermaphrodite”—it was turned to the wall, precluding a clear view of the genitals—to sculptures of Laura Bridgman, the blind and deaf woman whom Howe’s husband,
Samuel Gridley Howe, famously taught to read and write. In the novel, the reference to “the lovely hermaphrodite” prompts a profound crisis of identity, which Laurence represents as a crisis of vision: “I hurried hither and thither to escape the scrutiny of mocking spectres, who, all unseen, were yet present to me, and with hideous laughter followed me everywhere” (Howe, H 17). In her origin story for “Hymn” in the Reminiscences, Howe established a nighttime setting but drained it of its gothic potential; here, by contrast, the figure of the “hermaphrodite” prompts a gothic vocabulary in which the narrator cannot see the “mocking spectres” but is nonetheless subject to their “scrutiny.”

When Laurence does see, sight brings horror: “The boy . . . led me to a mirror that hung upon the wall. I was terrified at my own appearance . . . I looked a woman” (Howe, H 51). The horror of self-scrutiny extends to other women: “I could not bear the sight of a woman. . . . The presence even of the maid occasioned in me that feeling of faintness and malaise which is felt by some individuals at the approach of a cat” (Howe, H 68). This misogyny recedes when, later in the novel, Laurence dresses as a woman and reflects sympathetically that “women . . . are very naturally glad now and then to throw off their chains with their petticoats, and to assume for a time the right to go where they please, and the power of doing as they please” (Howe, H 131). But the languages of visual fear and fracture remain until the end. Feverish, the narrator sees “vivid glowing spectres” and then awakens to a trance in which “My eyes became rigidly fixed upon a single point of vision” (Howe, H 197). This language looks toward “Hymn,” but while the speaker of the poem knows that “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” the protagonist of Her has feverish, secular visions filled with “vivid glowing spectres.”

When we juxtapose “Hymn” and Her, then, we get two extremely different texts: one organizing the unambiguous path of the body politic and one fragmentedly narrating a story of bodily ambiguity; one focused on visual certitude and one on plots in which things either cannot be seen or are not what they seem. These contrasts translate, in turn, into divergent political legacies. Affiliated with the Union cause, “Hymn” became, after the war, synecdochal for “the republic” as a reconstructed whole and has often continued to be sung in a nationalist frame. For example, in September 2001, “Hymn” was played in the official national memorial service to the victims of 9/11. Then-president George W. Bush presided at this service, and Howe’s metaphors are continuous with the language of patriotism, both religious and militaristic, that he employed to describe the nation. In this case, a language exhorting violence was used to mourn the victims of violence, an irony noticed by some
at the time. One commentator decried the use of a song “urging... Christians to fight and kill” for a memorial service, while another wrote polemically, “Today, if voiced by Islam, we would plainly call [“Battle Hymn of the Republic”] a Jihad and denounce and condemn it as uncivilized” (Easterbrook, Bray).

As these comments underscore, Howe’s “Hymn” was strikingly congruent with the rhetoric of the war that Bush would subsequently launch against Iraq. The continuity between “Hymn” and Iraq War rhetoric inheres not only in the shared rhetoric of a self-righteously militaristic America, but also in their shared vocabulary of visibility. The Bush White House consistently focused on seeing what it wanted to see, from a connection between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein to the presence of dangerous weapons in Iraq. The logic of visual certainty that prompted “Mine eyes have seen the glory” reappeared in the official commitment to seeing weapons of mass destruction that were not, in fact, there. “Hymn,” as one scholar has summarized, is “a warrior’s cry and call to arms. Its vivid portrait of sacred violence captures how Americans fight wars, from the minie balls of the Civil War to the shock and awe of Iraq” (Tierney). Julia Ward Howe herself later became a peace activist; she is surely not responsible for the specific uses to which her song has been put. Nonetheless, her hymn has resonated in the decade since 9/11 with an American militarism whose rhetoric is authorized, as was hers, by religious and visual certitude.

Conversely, the contemporary political resonances of Her seem very different. The period in which Howe drafted The Hermaphrodite was one in which this figure was undergoing a shift in its cultural construction, from being condemned as a demonic “monster” to being scrutinized as a medical problem. Hermaphrodites were increasingly seen as the purview of doctors, who codified this figure, later in the century, in punitive ways related to the simultaneous codification of “the homosexual.” In the twentieth century, people identified as hermaphrodites were often subjected to surgery whose goal was to produce normatively heterosexual as well as sexed persons. Since the early 1990s, however, there has been a radical challenge to this approach, with the emergence of a new identity-politics movement. Rejecting the term “hermaphrodite,” individuals who identify as “intersex” speak for themselves, and they reject being seen as corporeal problems to which there are inevitably surgical solutions. Alice Domurat Dreger characterizes this transformation as “intersex in the age of ethics,” while Cheryl Chase, founder of the Intersex Society of North America, reclaims the older term in the form of “hermaphrodites with attitude.” This political movement continues to develop—in the last few years, the term “intersex” has itself been challenged—but the political
and ethical resistance to the long-standing demonization of the hermaphrodite remains firm.³

In this context, Howe’s novel offers an early expression of this resistance, particularly in its focus on the theme of vision. Historically, the movement to identify and then surgically “fix” hermaphrodites was closely tied to visual technologies. Their bodies were sketched, exhibited, and, especially, photographed in a variety of dehumanizing ways: for example, sometimes the genitals of intersexed people were photographed, with hands that held the genitals for maximum display clearly visible in the photograph; sometimes bodies were photographed naked, with a black band obscuring the eyes, a tactic that was presumably intended to protect anonymity but that made it impossible for the person to gaze back.⁴ These photographs were, in turn, part of a continuum of coercive one-way gazes on “extraordinary bodies” in nineteenth-century America, from the commodified voyeurism of the freak show to the triumphant pedagogy of illumination—close to home for Julia Ward Howe—whereby Dr. Samuel Howe made visible, reshaped, and displayed the mind and soul of his blind female student, Laura Bridgman.⁵ Julia Ward Howe’s Her captures the violations imposed by vision for the extraordinary body of the intersexed person, rendering those violations in the vocabulary of monstrosity: “[Emma] saw [my] bearded lip and earnest brow, but she saw also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and rounded bosom . . . [and] she murmured: ‘monster!’” (Howe, H 19). The novel’s gothic language recognizes that to the intersexed person, vision may be violence. In its critique of the policing power of the gaze of others, the novel as a whole looks toward an era in which persons termed hermaphrodites would be the self-represented and self-voiced subjects of their own stories.

One political path from Howe’s writing, then, seems to lead to Iraq and another to intersex—or, to put it another way, one seems to lead to the militarism of a fixed body politic and another to the radicalism of a movement for unfixed bodies. But this dichotomy is too sharp, for several reasons. One is that Howe’s novel does not address itself to intersex as a lived experience; its concern is in the figure of the hermaphrodite as literary metaphor, trope, or conceit. The use of the hermaphrodite as a literary metaphor has its own history and its own contemporary popularity. The best-known contemporary literary hermaphrodite is the protagonist of Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel Middlesex, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 and was selected by Oprah Winfrey for her book club in 2007. This novel uses its intersexed woman protagonist as a metaphor for other themes, such as the changeable fate of the immigrant in America. The protagonist is less an intersexed person than a male novelist’s idea of a woman with a twist, as Eugenides himself has sug-
gested: “I don’t think women are mysterious, or at least I don’t want them to be. That was the whole ‘Star Trek’ idea behind my ‘hermaphroditic’ narrator in the first place. To go where no man has gone before” (quoted in Garner 26). This remark reduces intersexed person to “‘hermaphroditic’ narrator,” and both to a flippant exercise of science-fiction exploration in which the goal is “to go”—to boldly go, in the famous split infinitive of *Star Trek*—“where no man has gone before.” If the violations of surgery are no longer seen as automatic for intersex in the age of ethics, then these remarks suggest the continuing need for novelists to rethink the ethics of representation, intersexual and otherwise, in their fiction.⁶

Howe did not, of course, make such proto-*Star Trek* claims. Her is self-conscious in stressing the hermaphrodite as an artistic representation, as in the introductory reference to the sculptural “‘hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese.’”⁷ There was, moreover, no public community of intersexed individuals at the time for her to ignore in writing her novel, as Eugenides did in writing his. But like Eugenides, she too participates in a tradition of viewing the figure of the hermaphrodite from outside, rather than inside, and as figure, rather than ground. It seems important, in bringing Howe’s hermaphrodite up to the age of intersex, to register the distance—and potentially the tension—between Howe’s novel and the lived experience of ambiguously sexed persons in the era in which she wrote, as well as today.

At the same time, it is possible to bring Howe’s “Hymn” closer to a tradition of political dissent. Howe was an abolitionist, and “Hymn” was written in opposition to slavery, as in the line “As [Christ] died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” The song, moreover, combined the lyrics of Howe’s poem with the melody of “John Brown’s Body,” a song whose commemoration of the radical antislavery activist intrinsically evoked racial struggle. The song’s link to this struggle has been recovered in a variety of ways, most famously in Martin Luther King’s 1965 speech, “Our God is Marching On.” Dr. King ended this speech by directly quoting the opening verse of “Hymn,” as an answer to his famous question “How long? Not long, ’cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Moving forward by looking back, King turned Howe into “How long,” and adapted the idea of truth “marching on” to the civil rights activists literally walking, that week, from Montgomery to Selma.⁸

There is also a more unfixed cultural history of “Hymn,” one in which its words are subjected to the radical revisions of parody. The “Hymn” has been rewritten many times. For example, Mark Twain parodied it to express his opposition to U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. His version, entitled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic (Brought Down to Date),” begins:
Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword;  
He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger’s wealth is stored;  
He has loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored;  
His lust is marching on. (Twain 474)

Twain uses Howe’s “Hymn” to condemn U.S. imperialism as capitalist greed; military intervention is a matter of “Sword” and “stranger’s wealth,” its “lust” for money and power.9 Elsewhere in the parody, Twain reinforces this critique by changing the refrain to “Lo, Greed is marching on,” and he ends, “As Christ died to make men holy, let men die to make us rich— / Our god is marching on.” The force of the parody derives not only from the overt irreverence of Twain’s content, but also, in formal terms, by his inversions of Howe’s well-known rhythms. The echo of “Lord” in “Sword,” for example, deepens Twain’s critique of militarism as a form of blasphemy, while “orgy” gains in satirical force from its shocking resemblance to “glory.”

Not all parodies of “Hymn” have such identifiably radical goals. For example, one version of the schoolchild’s parody of “Hymn” begins, “My eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school: / We have tortured every teacher, we have broken every rule. / We have thrown away our homework and we hanged the principal. / Our school is burning down.” The anti-authoritarian fantasies of this parody are playful, but they may seem chilling in a twenty-first century world after Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other American episodes of gun violence committed by young people in school settings. Another version of this child’s parody makes its gunplay more disturbingly explicit: “Glory, glory hallelujah, / Teacher hit me with a ruler. / I met her at the door / With a loaded .44 / And she ain’t my teacher no more.”10 Whatever their divergent political effects, however, parodies of “Hymn” suggest the effectiveness of inverting a song so grounded in certitude thematically and so well-known formally. Parody, suggests Linda Hutcheon, is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (Hutcheon 6). Parodies of “Hymn” imitate through ironic inversion, strengthening as they transform the terms and cadences of Howe’s text.

These parodic vocabularies seem distant from the world of Howe. But we may see several aspects of The Hermaphrodite, I suggest, as contributing to the destabilization of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” effected more overtly in parodies. The grafting of Howe’s lyrics onto the melody of “John Brown’s Body” itself effects a form of gender duality: a song about the dead body of a male radical—“John Brown’s body lies a-moulderin’ in the grave”—becomes the live body, and especially the seeing eyes, of the viewer who is at least poten-
tially female. The earlier novel thus supplies a name—“hermaphrodite”—for the combination of male and female bodies inscribed in the form of the song.

The hermaphrodite theme also has strong symbolic connections to the idea of parody. Contemporary cultural theory links the performance of gender to the operations of parody, but there are also more historically grounded ways to make this connection as well. In 1840s America, hermaphrodites were associated not only with monstrosity and medical error but with duplicity; the person whose gender could not be read reliably was an exaggerated version of that paradigmatically untrustworthy figure, the confidence man (Reis 30–36). To the extent that others are puzzled, deceived, or misled by Laurence, the novel enters into the terrain of the confidence man. In this context, *The Hermaphrodite* is representative of the uncertainties and shiftiness of the new republic; it is closer to Twain’s later parody than Howe’s own piety.

Finally, although *The Hermaphrodite* has a vaguely European setting, when America does appear in the novel, it does so in a way that disorients the straightforward coordinates of “Hymn.” Late in the novel, Count Berto’s sister, Nina, who has gone insane missing her lover, Gaetano, fantasizes to Laurence that Gaetano is exploring North America. “‘He is on the Mississippi today,’ she would say, or on another occasion: ‘something tells me that he is this moment looking on the Niagara’” (Howe, H 138). Nina locates herself in this fantasy, telling Laurence, “‘I have made the whole journey with him . . . do you not see our bark canoe, and the Canadian guides?’” (Howe, H 139). In such passages, Howe represents a blurry North America, topographically organized by features like rivers, rather than the political borders of the United States. Like the speaker of “Hymn,” Nina sees this space clearly, but her visual certitude is born not of piety but of madness; this is a world in which a woman asks, “do you not see our bark canoe[?]” rather than declaring, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Gaetano is “marching on,” but his march is unmoored from either piety or logic: “‘She has, apparently, no knowledge of external facts, no thought beyond the dream life in which she dwells, with her phantom lover’” (Howe, H 140). This is America as “dream life,” a psychic space without fixed meanings, subject to constant, lovesick reinvention.

Like parodies of “Hymn,” then, these passages from *Her* engage in ironic inversions of America. To put it another way, as a predecessor of “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *The Hermaphrodite* offers its own anticipatory parody. In this as in other ways, *Her* points us toward the complexity of “Hymn” of Howe, and of the republic for which Julia Ward Howe has come to stand. The question of how to view Howe now, after *The Hermaphrodite,* remains
open. Its answers will be inseparable from the unfolding exploration of what the body and the body politic were like in Howe's era, as well as of how they are—and will be—in ours.

Notes

1. The poem first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. It was published without a named author but quickly became identified with Howe. For discussions of the poem and song, see Grant 136–39; Nudelman 165–68; Randall, “A Censorship of Forgetting”; Williams, *IH* 207–12; Ziegler 97–100; and Faith Barrett, “To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave”: *American Poetry and the Civil War* (U Massachusetts Pr, forthcoming).


3. Dreger, *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*; Chase, “Hermaphrodites with Attitude.” The term “intersex” has been supplanted, for some, by “Disorders of Sex Development” (DSD); for recent discussions of the term and other intersex political issues, see Morland, ed., *Intersex and After* and Holmes, ed., *Critical Intersex*. On the history of the figure of the hermaphrodite and of intersex, see Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, and Reis.

4. On photographs that included hands, see Dreger, *Hermaphrodites* 51–78; on photographs with eyes blocked out, see Sharon E. Preves 68–72.

5. On freak shows, see Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery* (1996), and Adams; on Bridgman, see Bergland, “Cold Stone: Sex and Sculpture in *The Hermaphrodite*” (in this volume), and Freeberg.

6. For a critique of *Middlesex*, see Rachel Carroll. For a more positive assessment, see Dreger and Herndon, “Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement” 207.

7. For a discussion of the symbolic dimensions of the hermaphrodite in this image, and in the work’s title, see Luciano’s essay in this volume, “Unrealized: The Queer Time of *The Hermaphrodite*.”


9. On Twain’s anti-imperialism, see Kaplan 51–91.

10. Both versions are included in Sherman and Weisskop 103, 104.

11. For analyses of the relationship between the two songs, see Nudelman 165–68 and Randall.

12. For a complementary discussion of the imagery of America in the novel, see Klimasmith’s essay in this volume, “‘Never the Half of Another’: Figuring and Foreclosing Marriage in *The Hermaphrodite*.”
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