The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary;

or, a Labor History of the Non-Producing Classes

Michael Zakim

Walt Whitman printed an insolent picture of himself on the frontispiece of the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855. It was a declassé portrait of urban insouciance and cheap clothes that marked the poet, in the words of the New York Tribune's critic, as one of that "exemplary class of society … irreverently styled 'loafers.'" In fact, Whitman was quite explicit about his identity as a loafer: "I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass," he wrote at the beginning of the poem that later became known as "Song of Myself." It was one of those rhetorical provocations that gave his poetics such cultural resonance, as Whitman conspicuously sought to turn the tables on a favorite expression of moral censure employed by the better classes at mid-century.[1]

In fact, the age abounded in loafers. There were literary loafers, Yankee loafers, French loafers, genteel loafers, common loafers, and country loafers, among others, the latter observed by Nathaniel Hawthorne at the Brighton Cattle Fair "wait[ing] for some friend to invite them to drink." Nevertheless, loaferism was most essentially a metropolitan phenomenon, haunting the city's sidewalks, wharves, museums, and parks, and serving as a ready epithet for anyone needing to hurl an insult. The young New York conservative George Templeton Strong thus ascribed the worst tendencies of democracy, "so called," to the loafer, while the Southern Literary Messenger accused him of no less than advocating "the sublime doctrine of social equality." Loafers were known for cursing without shame and for smoking cigars. They cared little for the law and exhibited a marked disregard for

[1] The Tribune's critic was Charles Dana. New York Tribune, July 23, 1855; Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), 28. See, too, the attack on Whitman in Maximilian Schele De Vere, Americanisms; the English of the New world (1872), 141. Whitman had reportedly been fired from the Aurora for "loaferism." Hans Bergmann, God in the Street: New York Writing from the Penny Press to Melville (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 79.

public life in general. They were eccentric, if not impudent, in their personal habits. They had a weakness for billiards and bar-rooms and were maddeningly self-satisfied, if not philosophically reclusive. And they wore stand up collars that were, more often than not, covered in stains.[2]

The flood of invective was not without an underlying logic. The loafer's presence in American conversation – the wide currency given to accusations of personal indolence – testified to an emerging labor problem that affected all classes of society. The Ladies Companion observed in an essay devoted to the subject in 1837 that "the only real employment intended for man was to eat and sleep, and the Loafer's principle and practice on the matter, were in unison." The loafer, in fact, had become a cultural icon for the industrial age. "This peculiarly American word," Bartlett reported in his 1848 Dictionary of Americanisms, "has been gradually growing into extensive use during the last twenty years." Indeed, as someone "whose aim is to get through the world with as little energy as possible," the loafer offered a conscious rebuke to the ambitious, striving, self-perfecting tendencies of the day. At the same time, he also represented the acme of ambition and progress. The New-York Daily Times explained this conundrum in yet another essay on the subject: "In a barbarous state of society loafers were, without doubt, scarce; in fact, their very existence is doubtful." This was in contrast to the present day, when their numbers "increase with hundred-fold rapidity beneath the benignant influence of

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[2] Green Peas, Picked from the Patch of Invisible Green Esq. (New York: Livermore & Rudd), 309; Asa Greene, A Glance at New York (New York, 1837), 87-8; William Knight Northall, Life and Recollections of Yankee Hill (New York: W.F. Burgess, 1850), 84-6; James W. Redfield, Comparative Physiognomy (1852), 194-6; American Phrenological Journal, vol. 17 (1853), 2; Hawthorne quoted in Clement Eaton, ed., The Leaven of Democracy; the Growth of the Democratic Spirit in the Time of Jackson (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 125; George W. Whitehouse, "Journal of a trip to Boston, New York & Albany, July 1844" (New York Public Library Special Collections), 8; New York Herald, July 15, 1841; Ladies Companion, September, 1837; George Templeton Strong, The Diary of George Templeton Strong: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849, Allan Nevins, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), Nov 5, 1838; Samuel Roberts Wells, How to do Business: a Pocket Manual of Practical Affairs (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1857), 117.

civilization." Loafing, it consistently followed, was no less than "the consummation of all industry."[3]

"The real employment intended for man" had become an open question in the age of capital. That was why the talking classes fretted incessantly about Americans becoming "impatient of hard work out of doors" in these years. And that was why Henry Ward Beecher opened his Seven Lectures to Young Men with a sermon on "Industry and Idleness" that warned of a "pestilent sediment" forming under society's foundations, a class of sluggards who preferred to sleep rather than wield a plough. Beecher's rhetoric was characteristic of a common trope concerning the ruinous effects of ease and opulence in an era when commercial striving seemed to have infected everyone. Even Hunt's Merchant's Magazine expressed apprehension over the ethical fallout from such ambition: "The lottery of life has begun; live to-day, and let wealth or bankruptcy come to-morrow." The problem was especially acute in America since the plough was not just a tool of subsistence but was supposed to lay the groundwork for the republican social order in general. William Petty had explained that "Labour is the Father and active principle of Wealth, as Lands are the Mother," a pithy seventeenth century formulation of the patriarchal marriage of land and labor that served as "*the whole basis of national freedom*," as Noah Webster italicized its importance a hundred years later, "the very *soul of a republic*." It followed that the patriotic zeal with which Americans had protected "the HARD EARNED FRUITS OF OUR LABOUR" against British corruption during the nation's founding struggle was no rhetorical flourish but a practical fact of civic life.[4]

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[3] Ladies Companion, September, 1837; John Russell Bartlett, Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases, Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 209; Hunt's Merchants' Magazine, vol. 17, 441; New-York Daily Times, Dec 10, 1852.

[4] Henry Ward Beecher, Lectures to young Men (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1846), 15-48; Debby Applegate, "Henry Ward Beecher and the 'Great Middle Class:' Mass-Marketed Intimacy and Middle-Class Identity," in Bledstein, Burton J. and Robert D. Johnston, eds., The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class (New York: Routledge, 2001); Clifford E. Clark Jr., "The Changing Nature of Protestantism in Mid-nineteenth Century America: Henry Ward Beecher's Seven

The ideological importance of working one's own land lost none of its centrality even after industrial capital began pulling labor off the farm. Political opponents who clashed bitterly over the tariff, paper money, and government's role in economic development all agreed that the earth was the source of wealth and, as such, the mainstay of social intercourse. When S.G. Goodrich, author and publisher of the widely-read and pedagogically-relentless Peter Parley series of children's books, observed that "demagogism and democracy, dyspepsia and transcendentalism, vegetarianism and spiritualism" had reached epidemic proportions among the educated classes at mid-century, he prescribed a return to "the habits of other days, in which ministers, judges and governors wrought occasionally in the field." Such older, better habits, Horace Bushnell also explained, were recommended precisely because they stood apart from commercial impulses, rooted as they were "in family, character, piety, and intelligence." Working the land thus became solace, if not exactly a solution, to the complications of industrial life, an "asylum … from the bankrupts of trade," as Emerson characteristically chimed in as well. This is why it was so important for farmers to "keep their boys at home," Ralph R. Phelps exhorted his audience at the Hartford County Agricultural Society in 1843. They would otherwise run off like "loafers" in pursuit of a clerkship, a trade, or the "pedler's trunk." Parents needed to convince their sons of what was apparently no longer a self-evident truth, namely, that productive toil was an honorable and worthy undertaking.[5]

Lectures to Young Men," Journal of American History, vol. 57, no. 4 (March 1971), 839; Hunt's, "Passages in the Life of a Merchant," vol. 18, 506; Eric Roll, A History of Economic Thought (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 104-6; Gregory S. Alexander, Commodity and Propriety: Competing Visions of Property in American Legal Thought, 1776-1970 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 35-41; James L. Huston, Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth Distribution (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 3-10, 14-5, 31, 42-5, 52, 130, 162-4.

[5] Paul K. Conkin, Prophets of Prosperity: America's First Political Economists (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 52-7, 83-6; S.G. Goodrich, Recollections of a Lifetime, or Men and Things I Have Seen (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1856), 64; Horace Bushnell, "The Age of Homespun," speech delivered in 1851 at Litchfield, Connecticut, on the occasion of the centennial celebration, in Centennial Celebration (Hartford: Edwin Hunt, 1851), 114; Emerson quoted in Michael

"There are no young Benjamin Franklins in the present generation of youth," Horace Mann lamented in a lecture before the Boston Mercantile Library Association in 1849, which was a strange thing to say since everyone was reading Franklin's autobiography. But Mann had a point, to be gleaned from the epigraph appearing at the head of Hints to Young Tradesmen, and Maxims for Merchants, an advice manual published in 1838 that typically opened with a quote from Franklin: "The way to WEALTH depends on two things, *industry and frugality*." In his Boston lecture, soon repeated at the Mercantile Library in New York, Mann suggested that instead of "industry and frugality," society was increasingly being driven by profit and ambition, if not ostentation, and that these constituted a nervous basis for public life. It was particularly appropriate that Mann voiced his concerns at the Mercantile Library, which was founded in the 1820s for "the especial benefit and intellectual culture of young men, who, in the position of clerks, bookkeepers, salesmen, etc., were engaged in the mercantile profession." These "thousands and tens of thousands, who get their living in one way or another by penmanship" were a most acute expression of the new centrality of buying and selling in nineteenth century life. Whether at work in a counting house, bank, credit agency, trust company, insurance brokerage, auction firm, import business, or commission house, whether selling chintzes and delaines, carpets and drapes, tools, groceries, or stationery at a wholesale or retail salesroom, warehouse, store, or marble palace, the clerk was the one who actually administered the new markets. His numbers consequently grew apace with the exploding volume of exchange. "The young men engaged in the commercial houses of this metropolis are innumerable," the Reverend James W. Alexander observed in his "Merchants Clerk Cheered and Counselled" in 1857. They operated at the heart of a "centripetal force" of persons, goods, and money set into motion by industrial opportunity,

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T. Gilmore, American Romanticism and the Marketplace (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 32; Phelps in the Cultivator, April, 1845, 108.

a mass public of young men newly arrived in the business entrepot whose very impermanence mimicked the perpetuum mobile of the commodity exchange they had come to the city to administer. Twenty-year-old William Hoffman thus let a room on Greenwich Street upon arriving in New York City in March, 1849, left it for "a better" boarding house on Warren Street two months later, was living on Fulton Street by the end of June, and then moved again a month later, to Booth's Boarding House, where he supplied his own meals in hopes of economizing. He was a caricature of Warren Spencer's assertion, presented in an essay on Mercantile Education, that "our land presents a moving scene" in which "American youth are constantly appearing in a contest for posts of trust and profit." Tocqueville had also noticed that "the American lives in a land of wonders [where] everything around him is in constant movement, and every movement seems an advance." But Edward Tailer, another young New York City clerk, was most incisive of all in describing the sociodynamics of industrial life: "There is no such thing as a stationary point in human endeavor," Tailer announced in his diary. "He who is not worse today than he was yesterday is better. And he who is not better is worse." The result was not just a chronic state of agitation but of "homelessness," as James Alexander worriedly noted, a condition which removed the clerk from the "inspection, admonition, and restraint" of family and household and thus put him outside the venue of traditional government altogether. Indeed, the clerks' wholesale enlistment in the forces of the market underlined the need for new forms of government that would rest on individuality, anonymity, mobility, and urbanity.[6]

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[6] Horace Mann, A Few Thoughts for a Young Man: A Lecture (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850), 29; Hints to Young Tradesmen, and Maxims for Merchants (Boston: Perkins & Marvin, 1838); Earl Fendelman, "Toward Walden Pond: The American Voice in Autobiography," The Canadian Review of American Studies, viii/1 (Spring, 1977), 16-19; New York Mercantile Library, 29th Annual Report; Boston Mercantile Library, 35th Annual Report, 4; B.F. Foster, Foster's System of Penmanship: or, the Art of Rapid Writing Illusted and Explained, to which is added the Angular and anti-Angular Systems (Boston: Perkins, Marvin & Co.), iii; James W. Alexander, "The Merchant's Clerk Cheered and Counselled," in Alexander, et.al., The Man of Business, Considered in his Various Relations (New-York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1857), 7; William Hoffman, Diary (1847-1850), (New-York

The popular response was uneasy, at best. "We venture the assertion that there is not a more dependent or subservient set of men in this country than are the genteel, dry goods clerks in this and other large cities," the American Whig Review opined. "Young men want money," the Atlantic Monthly complained, "and much of it, and quickly. With us trade is an aristocracy that looks down upon manual labor." "Wealth is all," the Reverend E.F. Hatfield observed in a sermon on the evil effects of late store hours on clerks. "To obtain it, all else must be sacrificed." The result was a "fast race of billiard-playing, whisky-drinking, horse-hiring, catfish-suppering upstarts," as Stephen Winslow unhappily compared the modern clerk to his less assertive and far less numerous early republican predecessors. "Stick to the farm, young men," the Cultivator declared in response. "You are tempted to exchange the hard work of the farm, to become a clerk in a city shop, to put off your heavy boots and frock, and be a gentleman, behind the counter!" Such vocational retraining was paramount to selling one's manhood for a wage, to "learning to fetch and carry like a spaniel." Hunt's Merchant's Magazine was equally exercised by the emerging opposition between mammon and manhood: "I almost lose my temper when I see a fellow standing six feet in his stockings, or a neat dapper-dandy of less dimensions, 'dressed to kill,' measuring out a yard of ribbon or tape." The American Phrenological Journal proposed the age-old antidote: "Be men, therefore, and with true courage and manliness dash into the wilderness with your axe and make an opening for the

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Historical Society), March 30, 1848, March 9, June 25, July 20, 1849; Warren P. Spencer, "Essay on Mercantile Education," Hunt's, vol. 37, 702, 703; Goodrich, Recollections of a Lifetime, 91; Charles Frederick Briggs, The Adventures of Harry Franco, a Tale of the Great Panic (New York: F. Saunders, 1839), 104; Tailer quoted in Thomas Augst, The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 52; John Angell James, The Young Man From Home (New York: D. Appleton, 1840), 15.

On numbers of clerks see Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73-8; Brian Luskey, "The Marginal men: Merchants' Clerks and Society in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1860," Ph.D. Emory University, 2004, 395-6; Mary Ryan counted a 7,500% rise in the number of clerks In the commercial town of Utica, New York between 1817 and 1850, Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 108, 167, 178-9.

sunlight and for an independent home." But there was little chance of that happening, as the Vanity Fair caustically observed: "Vain, mean, selfish, greedy, sensual and sly, talkative and cowardly," the clerk devoted most of his energies to dressing better than "*real men* who did *real work*."[7]

The clerk had become a way for Americans to talk about the revolution that was overtaking such a sacrosanct national value as industry. Whether he was showing off goods to customers ("The United States … is but one extended counter from Maine to Texas") or keeping accounts of the subsequent sales (perhaps at Marcus Norton's newly improved office chair which "will always be in the proper position as relates to the office-desk for use in writing"), the clerk proved instrumental in transforming the social and economic nature of property. Once the basis of paternalistic propriety, property now became inseparable from commodity exchange; industry was subsequently redefined to mean a business initiative rather than a family competence.[8] As such, household and even artisanal effort paled in economic importance when compared to a lone clerk assigned to the small back office of a bonded warehouse who was assigned with transferring tens of thousands of dollars worth of goods a day. Even if the market was dull and demand was weak, the "dead stock," if properly accounted for, could be turned into collatoral, "as though it were bills of exchange instead of bales of cloth or hogsheads of sugar." Indeed, bills of exchange might have been more tangible than cloth or sugar. This was because only money value could systematize such a fungible reality. "In this age of skepticism," someone pointed out in undisguised irony that nevertheless did not weaken the truth of the observation, "the excellence of accumulated capital is the one thing no man doubts." Old truths were thus inverted, for how could money be the key to system when its very

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[7] American Whig Review, April 1853, 75; "Fugitives from Labor," Atlantic Monthly, vol. 20, issue 119 (Sept. 1867), 371; Rev. E.F. Hatfield, The Night No Time for Labor: A Sermon on the Early Closing of Stores (New York: D.A. Woodworth, 1850); Winslow, 168; Cultivator, June 1854, 175; Hunt's, vol. 18, 119-20; American Phrenological Journal; Vanity Fair, Feb 18, March 17, 1860.

[8] Michael Zakim, "Merchant Clerks, Industrial Statistics, and the Tautologies of Profit," forthcoming.

promiscuity violated the boundaries separating independence and subservience, land and commerce, and making and selling? Contemporaries struggled with the end of such fixed limits, which lost their relevance in a market society whose very nature, and success, rested on its ability to turn apples into oranges. This is what provoked George Simmel to argue that money acquired a deified status in the nineteenth century. Just as God had once been manifest in the fact "that all the diversity in the world comes to a unity in Him," so now it was with money. The clerk turned this commercial epistemology into lived experience. Negotiable, impermanent, unhinged from farm and family, and carried along by the continental tides of boom and bust, his life suggested not only that money had become a metaphor for life, but that life might even be a metaphor for money.[9]

The clerk's labor violated another common truth, for as hard as he worked he did not produce anything. He had no tangible product to show for all his long hours on the job. "I never reached home until half past eight," Edward Tailer testified after preparing several thousand shawls for auction, "and then being greatly fatigued sought soon after my couch where I forgot the trials of the day." Such "strenuous idleness" put the clerk outside an Anglo-American tradition that identified labor as the source of value. The clerk was, in this respect, quite worth-less. And yet, his labor was essential to industrial production. Francis Walker, surveying the statistical tables generated by the manufactures census of 1860, noted how the country's plethora of goods were "conveyed from the producer to the consumer by a series of exchanges which can hardly average less than three in number, and with a percentage of expenses and profits … that must amount to fifty per cent upon their

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[9] Hunt's, vol. 15, 343-48, vol. 17, 441; U.S. Patent no. 42016 (March 22, 1864), 2; Archibald Russell, Principles of Statistical Inquiry; as Illustrated in Proposals for Uniting an Examination into the Resources of the United States with the Census to be Taken in 1840 (New York: D. Appleton, 1839), 50-1, 121-21, "Fugitives from Labor," 370; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 135; Julian Hoppit, "Reforming Britain's Weights and Measures, 1660-1824," The English Historical Review, vol. 108, no. 426 (January 1993), 86; United States and Democratic Review, July 1850, 37; George Simmel, Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings, David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds. (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 243; Charles E. Rogers Diary (New York Public Library Special Collections), March 2, 1864.

original cost. What a tremendous fact!" Such new facts proved that industry rested as much on selling as on making things, and that labor was no longer the source of value but of surplus value.[10]

The "merchant clerk" owed his existence to a labor market that offered an alternative to a livelihood once exclusively gotten from the land. His wage could be said to have replaced both the products of the soil and the social order anchored by the household. Toqueville thus observed that "as soon as the young American approaches manhood, the ties of filial obedience are relaxed day by day; master of his thoughts, he is soon master of his conduct." He belonged to that generation, E.L. Godkin declared in 1867, that replaced status with contract. The mutuality and hierarchy of agrarian life was replaced by what could be called mutual independence, a "calculating sense of private interest" on the part of both fathers and sons. "The fates of the next generation were only loosely connected to the inheritance of family property," as Toby Ditz has written of the end of patriarchy in Connecticut. "Heads of households no longer used their property directly to ensure that heirs would become independent producers." Thus, the New World householder, whose authority was once considered essential for governing an American society threatened both by the arbitrary encroachments of metropolitan rulers and by the unusual degree of freedom born of extensive land ownership and religious plurality, now lost his premier place in the polity.[11]

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[10] Edward N. Tailer, Diary (New-York Historical Society), Dec 5, 1849; Norma Clark, "Strenuous Idleness: Thomas Carlyle and the Mann of Letters as Hero," in Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800, Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds. (London: Routledge, 1991); Francis Walker, "American Industry in the Census," Atlantic Monthly, xxiv, no. 146 (December 1869), 691-2. Richard Biernacki, The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 41, 236-7; Roll, History of Economic Thought, 154-60, 168-70, 172-73.

[11] Blumin, Emergence of the Middle Class, 133; Hunt's, vol. 39, 410-11; Tocqueville quoted in Burton J. Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 212-3; Amy Dru Stanley, From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

On the end of patriarchy see Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, 9-10, 18-65; Winifred Barr Rothenberg, From Marketplace to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts,

James Alexander explained the result: "In our hurrying age boys become men by a sort of start or explosive advance." And S.G. Goodrich recalled his adolescent beginnings as a clerk: "I am speaking of that crisis of existence, when an impulse to the right or left may determine the direction … as [youth] stand at the door of mankind." Impulse was a powerful motivating force, and an especially threatening one now that the individual was sovereign. "Does not reason suggest that such a transition as leaving home, cannot [but] be negative in its influence?" John Angell James alerted readers in his Young Man From Home. "New temptations assail you, which, if not at once and successfully resisted, will acquire a permanent ascendency." Indeed, the threat of anarchy was immanent to a society where "no man is bound down to the condition or the walk or the occupation of his fathers," as Boston physician and collector of vital statistics Edward Jarvis explained in an address on "the causes of insanity" to the Norfolk District Medical Society.[12]

Such modern insanity had its physiognomic expressions as well, evidenced in the clerk's "pale and pimply face not embrowned by the sun," in his pasty complexion and gouty inertia, and in the characteristic curving forward of the chest of "thousands of young men engaged from morning till night in the occupation of writing down figures, sitting in uncomfortable positions, breathing an unwholesome atmosphere, unrelieved by relaxation." The potential for disease was indicative of the pathology inherent in the clerk's employment, in the "ill effects produced by habits of business," and in the disaster that

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1750-1850 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 165-66, 214-18; Howard S. Russell, A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976), 343; Toby Ditz, "Ownership and Obligation: Inheritance and Patriarchal Households in Connecticut, 1750-1820," William and Mary Quarterly 47/2 (April, 1990), 258-62; Nancy R. Folbre, "The Wealth of Patriarchs: Deerfield, Massachusetts, 1760-1840," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, xvi:2 (Autumn 1985), 199, 219; Carole Shammas, A History of Household Government in America (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 32-7, 47-9, 50-2; Shawn Johansen, Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America (New York: Routledge, 2001), 96-7, 110, 124-5; Allan Kulikoff, "The Rise and Demise of Yeoman Classes," in The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 34-59.

[12] Alexander, "Merchant Clerk Cheered"; Goodrich, Recollections of a Lifetime, 406-7; James, The Young Man from Home, 11; Edward Jarvis, Address, delivered at the Laying of the Corner Stone of the Insane Hospital at Northampton, Massachusetts (Northampton: J.&L. Metcalf, 1856), 6-8.

resulted from the separation of physical and mental activity. William Hoffman confirmed the dangers to himself: "Having little to perform from the cessation of trade and living high brought on dyspepsia and costiveness in its worst forms." Only a stay in the country, Hoffman was convinced, would repair his "natural vigor." Edward Tailer, who had recently been promoted to entry clerk at Little, Alden & Co., was likewise agitated by corporeal decline, in his case by a continual burning sensation in his eyes. "[I] have good reason to believe that these unpleasant sensations are caused by the optic nerve being strained and tasked too much by the miserable blinding light which finds its way into our counting room." Such complaints belonged to a broad range of "desk diseases" that included giddiness, liver problems, bladder and uretha infections, a swimming of the head, deafness, stomach and bowel disorders, piles, and strictures. Other diagnoses – masturbatory insanity being perhaps the newest, and arguably the most dangerous – were also disproportionately ascribed to sedentary men. A new physicality was subsequently required of the citizen, one no longer defined by plough, chisel, or forge, but by an ethical responsibility for one's own well-being which would satisfy the "rational laws of self-government" (Jarvis again). William Hoffman thus became a zealous consumer of Graham bread and Edward Tailor stopped every morning to exercise at his gym on the way downtown to work.[13]

[13] H.I. Bowditch, "Consumption in America," Atlantic Monthly (January, 1869), 60; Parker, "Thoughts on Labor," Dial, 498, 502; Conkin, Prophets of Prosperity, 54; Hunt's, vol. 18, 119-20, vol. 23, 248; "Twice Married," Putnam's Magazine, 578; "Modern Clerks," United States Democratic Review, 121; Roberta J. Park, "Biological Thought, Athletics and the Formation of a 'Man of Character': 1830-1900," in J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, ed., Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 18-19; Atlantic, Jan, 1869, 60; American Whig Review, May 1852, 472; New York Daily Times, July 23, 1855; Hoffman, Diary, Jan 26, 1850; Tailer, Diary, May 30, 1850; W.M. Wallace, A Treatise on Desk Diseases (London: T. Griffiths, 1826), 3-4; Robert H. MacDonald, "The Frightful Consequences of Onanism: Notes on the History of a Delusion, in Journal of the History of Ideas, vol. 28, no. 3 (1967), 429; Nicholas K. Bromell, By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 70-5; Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism, 216; John Todd, Student's Manual (Northampton, MA: J.H. Butler, 1835), 262; Joan Burbick, Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Edward Jarvis, "On the Causes of Insanity; An Address delivered before the Norfolk (Mass.) District Medical Society," May 14, 1851, 16; Michael

The clerk's diseased nature was, of course, social in origin. Americans had long recognized that labor was not just necessary for physical existence but was the means by which culture reproduced itself. What, then, did the rise of an ennervated "clerkly life" mean for the young republic? It encapsulated an industrial threat, adumbrating a world in which social intercourse would become as atomized and artificial – indeed, would become a mirror of – commodity exchange. Flitting to and fro behind his counters, the clerk displayed wares he had no interest in, to those he had no acquaintance with, and affected pleasure at all witticisms, however dismal. Marked by an overly-fastidious appearance and a carefully mannered speech, the clerk nurtured a persona calibrated for personal advancement. For what was the essence of the American mercantile system, the American Whig Review asked, and proceeded to supply the answer: "Simply one where the natural selfishness of men finds its widest range; in which his acquisitive faculties may be kept … in unremitted exertion." And for whom did these immortal sons of calico and special servants of tape exert themselves? Certainly not for any "commonwealth" of family, community, or nation. Even loyalty to one's employer was an entirely ephemeral matter, resting as it did on a passing coordination of personal interests – "enlightened selfishness," as Daniel Haskell celebrated this new form of social interaction in an address to the Mercantile Library Association – which provoked numerous and anxious essays in Hunt's Merchant's Magazine on "How to Reform a Dishonest Clerk," "Integrity the Foundation of Mercantile Character," "The Prompt Merchant's Clerk," "Counsel to Merchants' Clerks," "The Wife of a Merchant's Clerk," "What Young Men in Stores Should Do," "The Dignity of the Mercantile Profession," "The Merchant Clerk and his Duties," etc., etc. Herman Melville famously played on the clerk problem in his 1853 tale of Bartleby, the Wall Street law copyist who was obsequiously subject to none but his own will and who proved

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Newbury, "Healthful Employment: Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Middle-Class Fitness," American Quarterly, 47, no. 4 (Dec 1995).

politely and maddeningly impervious to his employer's attempts to exercise paternal control. And so, Edward Thomas, who had recently begun work in a Boston hardware firm, might have been "as obliging as possible to all, hop[ing] to gain their good will by my good conduct and faithfulness" but his self-determination could only raise suspicions that he would soon share Edward Tailer's less idealistic attitude: "There is not a day which passes during which I do not imagine that I might better my situation as a clerk and receive an ample compensation for services rendered." Work, once a site of cooperative effort and hierarchical obligation, in other words, was transformed into an instrumental means serving one's own ends. In so exploiting the market's new employment opportunities, the clerk suggested that the rules of exchange were far less benign than they pretended to be, even though he had no intention of repudiating them. Rather, cooperation and obligation would have to be redefined.[14]

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Nineteenth century Americans found increasing occasion to ask "What Shall I do for a Living?" and responded by attending customers, shipping merchandise, filing letters, posting books, and balancing the cash. In smaller firms a single clerk often made sales, collected debts, and was assigned responsibility for deliveries. Larger businesses divided the labor between a cashier whose experience in both accounting and penmanship qualified him to oversee the day-to-day affairs of the entire office, a bookkeeper who posted up transactions, made out the accounts current, and produced balance sheets when required, a sales-book clerk (or several, depending on the number of separate departments in the firm)

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[14] American Whig Review, May, 1852, 472; Vanity Fair, Jan 21, 1860; F.R. R[eed], Experience of a New York Clerk (New-York: F.R. Reed, 1877), 4; Hoffman, Diary, April 12, 15, May 5, Oct 7, 14, 1848; Daniel Haskell, "Address," 19; Hunt's, vol. 18, 119-20, vol. 20, 570, vol. 24, 134, 648-49, vol. 27, 392, vol. 29, 264, 646-7, 779, vol. 35, 55, 770-1, vol. 41, 422-23; Melville had spent his teens as a self-improving clerk. Hershel Parker, Herman Melville: A Biography, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 84-112. On Bartleby Richard Henry Dana wrote to Evert: "The secret power of such an inefficient and harmless creature over his employer who all the while has a misgiving of it, shows no common insight." Parker, Herman Melville, vol. 2, 179. Edward Isaiah Thomas, Diary, 1852-1858 (American Antiquarian Society), June 20, 1853; Tailer, Diary, June 8, 1850.

who kept the running accounts, including storage, insurance, and labor expenses, and who was often charged with going out to collect debts, a confidential clerk who primarily managed the proprietor's private books that contained assets and debts left over from previous enterprises and partnerships, a receiving and delivery clerk also responsible for settling freight and storage bills, and a coterie of salesmen organized according to the goods they sold, or the markets they sold them to, or simply by seniority. All these cashiers, bookkeepers, penmen, and sales agents worked in close or adjacent quarters, documenting, arranging, and moving goods and information, connected as they were through a matrix of journals, ledgers, cash books, invoices, commission accounts, receipts, inventories, expense records, accounts current, copy books, and memoranda. A clerk could devote whole days to ruling up the Invoice Book, or to preparing a list of the stock recently arrived from Boston in order to then double-check the actual yardage of the new goods against the invoices. Robert Graham, who clerked for the well-known New York merchant prince William Aspinwall, spent his mornings writing up duplicates of the firm's correspondence until the mail went out at eleven thirty. The rest of the day was given over to copying accounts current and invoices, or copying duplicates of additional letters into the firm's correspondence book. Benjamin Browne Foster looked back with a mixed sense of satisfaction and alarm at the four hundred pages of daybook he had filled over the course of the spring 1848 season, thinking ahead to the need to reexamine all those records before he posted them to their relevant ledgers, and then to examine all those postings before putting the individual accounts into final order. Meanwhile, Edward Tailer was sent around to city firms at the end of the season to collect outstanding debts. "I was compelled to visit about thirteen of our customers in order to quicken their movements in relation to the drawing up and sending in of their notes so that we may close our spring sales and all open accounts by note at Eight Months." Tailer also delivered his own firm's notes to

creditors, deposited checks, prepared and shipped out orders, waited on line at the Custom House to pay duties on goods that needed to be withdrawn from the warehouse, and ventured out with the sample cards of a case of French Jacconets the firm had unexpectedly acquired in hopes of finding a buyer among city retailers.[15]

A properly disciplined clerk also read the price current each morning to familiarize himself with the names and prices of merchandise, or studied McCulloch's Dictionary in his spare time, inculcating its free trade maxims, or reviewed his firm's old letter books shelved in the counting room in order to deepen his understanding of the specific business. He further enhanced his "useful knowledge" by perusing the popular business literature – James Robinson's Merchants', Students' and Clerks' Manual, or S.H. Browne's Manual of Commerce, or B.F. Foster's Merchant's Manual, or any number of other new primers designed to both standardize the habits of a commercial public and to train the thousands aspiring to join the clerking class. They counted the interest on one dollar compounded at 6 per cent per annum for every day of the year, or displayed the number of days separating any two dates, which was "very useful in computing Interest, averaging Bills, [and] showing when Notes and Bills on time become due." Others, such as Charles Rogers, who moved in 1864 from a sales job at A.T. Stewart's to a position as copyist in a federal government office in New York, turned to the growing number of private business academies offering practical courses of study. Rogers thus enrolled in penmanship lessons at Bryant and Stratton's New York College, at the same time joining the Mercantile Library

[15] American Phrenological Journal; Reed, Experience of a New York Clerk, 10, 30-7; I. Irvine Hitchcock, A New Method of Teaching Book-Keeping (Boston: Nichols & Hall), 5-6; Graham, Journal of Passing Events (New-York Historical Society), Jan 16, 1844; Feb 13, March 25, April 20, May 5, 9, 1848; Charles H. Foster, ed., Down East Diary by Benjamin Browne Foster (University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975), 121; Tailer, Diary, March 22, June 3, 1850.

Association and depositing twenty-five dollars in the Manhattan Savings Bank in a concentrated display of clerkly rectitude.[16]

"Writing operations" were of paramount importance in the office since they dramatically extended both the physical and temporal dimensions of doing business. Benjamin Franklin Foster, founder of a private business school in New York City and prolific author of texts on bookkeeping and penmanship, enthused about writing's ability "to transmit to others, in places no matter how remote, every species of intelligence, with a secrecy that savors of miracle." The scrivening thus knew no bounds. Lawyers typically required four copies of each real estate transaction they brokered, one for the seller, the buyer, the public records office, and for their own files. Many firms also insisted on making three copies of all their correspondence, sending two of the same letter out separately in case one was lost in the mails. Postal rates dropped in the late forties while the high costs of the telegraph restricted its use to price quotes and urgent orders. This brought about a dramatic rise in the volume of business correspondence, and in the associated demand for penmen. "Use the pen," Hunt's advised its readers. "Of all the correspondence you receive, a concise record should be kept; which should also contain a note of what was done upon any letter, and of where it was sent to, or put away." Some government offices were hiring extra copyists at ten cents per hundred words in the 1850s in order to keep up with the paper work as a pre-mechanical assembly line of deeds, contracts, and accounts took shape, an industrial economy that required its laborers "to bend over a desk and scratch from 'morn till dewey eve' without intermission from day to day." Melville expanded on the job description:

> If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house

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[16] James Robinson, Merchants', Students' and Clerks' Manual (Boston: Thomas Groom & Co., 1856); Charles E. Rogers Diary, .July 27, Sept 6, Sept 8, Dec 2, 1864.

> for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands and steeped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back.

But B.F. Foster explained that such aches and pains were the fault of traditional systems of chirography which taught pupils to write while resting their hands and arms on the paper. This fatigued the fingers, slowed down the execution, and ruined the parallelism of one's letters. The "legibility, rapidity, and elegance" required of mercantile writing would never be achieved in such conditions and young men entering the counting-house often had to learn to write all over again – unless, of course they first acquired proper skills from Foster's own System of Penmanship, or from Benjamin Rand's American Penman, or from C.W. Bazeley's Elements of Analytical and Ornamental Penmanship, or from any numer of other texts allowing one to realize James French's dictum pronounced in his Gentlemen's Writing Book that "a neat handwriting is a letter of recommendation." In fact, the efficient, unadorned "clerk-like manner of writing" originally developed for recording figures in ledgers and issuing bills of credit now became the universal standard for the male hand. The exercises contained in Rand's American Penman thus included a promissory note, a business draft, two receipts, a bill of parcels, some book debt, a letter of credit, and a ledger page, in addition to aphorisms expounding on business morality.[17]

All the writing spurred a flurry of technological spillovers that included single or double standing desks, or counter desks, or double counter desks that contained both a lid

[17] Foster, System of Penmanship, 10-11; Tailer, Diary, May 25, 1850; Foster, System of Penmanship, 10-11; Keith Robson, "Accounting Numbers as 'Inscription': Action at a Distance and the Development of Accounting," Accounting, Organizations and Society, vol. 17, no. 7 (1992); Hunt's, vol. 15, 484-5; Tamara Plakins Thornton, Handwriting in America: A Cultural History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 37, 43; Benjamin H. Rand, The American Penman (Philadelphia, 1840), n.p.; JoAnne Yates, "Investing in Information: Supply and Demand Forces in the Use of Information in American Firms, 1850-1920," in Temin, ed., Inside the Business Enterprise: Historical Perspectives on the Use of Information (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 133-4; Cindy Sondik Aron, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Foster, Diary, 12; Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Other Tales (New York: The New American Library, 1961), 107; Margery W. Davies, Woman's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870-1930 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 13;

and a drawer, or single or double office tables, or sitting desks with nine pigeon holes or fifteen pigeon holes, with three upper drawers and three lower drawers. There were also banker inkstands, square inkstands, glass inkstands, traveling inkstands, and library inkstands. There were distinct types and brands of inks – some for copying and some for letter writing – that all guaranteed a free flow without any annoying globules, and that would not cause corrosion or thicken and stick to the pen, inks that came in brilliant blacks, reds, and carmines which would also not fade even after decades. In addition, offices were equipped with ink powder, glass sponge cups, desk weights, paper weights, check cutters, pen racks, copying brushes, dampening bowls, waste-paper baskets, office slates, sealing wax, seal presses, paper fasteners, blotters, and writing pads. There were cash boxes with detachable trays and apartments and covers and tumbler locks, office boxes with or without locks and with a varying number of partitions that were variously intended for storing stamps, bills, and change. Stationery cases all contained small trays for holding pins, wafers, pencils, and pens. There were, in addition, billhead cases, envelope cases, business card cases, receiving boxes for papers or letters, twine boxes, calendars showing the day of the month only, or the month together with the day, or the month, the day of the week, and the day of the month. There were new office systems "for arranging related documents … that would allow for their speedy retrieval in the course of the working day," not to mention an increasing number of press copiers by which one inserted a recently composed letter between damp tissues inside the copy book and closed the screws.[18]

Steel nibs began to replace traditional quill pens at the beginning of the nineteenth century although their success was far from immediate. Many contemporaries insisted that a hard quill with a clear barrel, kept well mended, remained the best tool for writing.

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[18] American Desk Manufactory, Illustrated Catalogue; Corlies, Macy & Co, Catalogue; Maynard & Noyes, "Black Writing Ink" (Warshaw Collection of Business Paraphernalia, Smithsonian Institution, ink, box 1); Orrin N. Moore's Premium Inks (Warshaw Collection, ink, box 1); Dolbear & Bros. (Warshaw Collection, penmanship, box 1); Hunt's.

William Dunlap, for one, had a difficult time adjusting to a steel pen in 1834. Metal pen manufacturers subsequently sought to duplicate the "soft feeling" and "freedom of action" characteristic of a fine quill while emphasizing the advantages of innovation. The principal improvement combined nib, shaft, holder, and inkstand into a single tool that was now being called a "fountain pen." This could be carried on one's person from place to place and was ever ready for use. It was also celebrated by inventors for preventing the ink from spattering or coming into contact with the fingers. But others complained about the tendency of the new pens to unexpectedly dry up, or to leak, or to fail to throw out the requisite quantity of ink. And while the metal tips were promoted as more durable, the fact is that a quill was easily refreshened by slicing two or three thin shavings off the sides. This could be done several times, in fact, without having to extend the pen's slit, which would alter its length and weight, although that was an option as well. Quills began to be sold in a variety of grades and prices and after 1820 it became possible to purchase ready-made versions that were easily replaced once they wore out.[19]

William Hoffman, who landed a coveted position at the New York City dry goods firm of Robertson Bro. & Co. only after submitting a sample of his handwriting, had begun his clerking career a year earlier in upstate Albany folding calicos, shaking out carpets, mending the awning, and brushing off the piles of muslins put on display in front of the store. "I am busy about all the time," he attested to his new employment, which he never said of his previous labors on the family farm. Hoffman was kept busiest combing the streets of Albany together with another new clerk, John Boyd, in order to distribute

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[19] Dunlap, Diary; C. Bertil Nystromer, Four Thousand Years in the Office (National Office Management Association, 1940), 15; Thomas Groom & Co advertisement in Robinson, Merchants', Students' and Clerks' Manual; Foster, System, 62-6; Hand-Book for Home Improvement, comprising How to Write. How to Talk. How to Behave. How to do Business (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1875), 9-10; Alan Delgado, The Enormous File: A Social History of the Office (London: John Murray, 1979), 18, 68-9; Rev. R. Donkersley, Budget of Facts for Young Readers (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1867), 17; Dolbear & Brothers, A Chirographic Atlas (New York: Keese & Co., 1837); Henry Bore, The Story of the Invention of Steel Pens (New York: Blakeman, 1890), 13; C.W. Bazeley, Elements of Analytical and Ornamental Penmanship (Philadelphia, 1830), 10-12.

handbills announcing upcoming sales or the arrival of fresh goods. "We walk very fast [and] return at 9 to the store very much wearied," he complained. On Saturdays they were sent across the river and told to cover the main streets of Green Bush, leaving an advertisement at each dwelling. On Tuesday William was back on State Street in Albany, placing handbills in farmers' wagons. And again on Thursday. Two weeks later he and John Boyd packed up a thousand bills and boarded the stage for West Troy and other points north, traversing sparsely populated villages and posting advertisements on trees.[20]

Hoffman accepted such assignments as part and parcel of his junior status. In fact, within half a year he was no longer distributing handbills on foot but was responsible for actually composing the advertising copy and sending it out to the newspapers. He now listed himself as "superintendent" of upcoming auctions. He also continued carrying out the rudimentary tasks of opening and closing the store each day, building the fire, putting out the heavy rolls of carpeting and bales of sheeting, and cleaning up under the counter in the evening. In addition, he was "kept at the desk" writing bills, recording transactions, and making change. But what he most wanted to do was "to make a sale or two." His chances of doing so were limited since he was only allowed to wait on customers when all the store's other clerks were otherwise engaged. And even then Hoffman was admonished to desist until he had acquired a better knowledge of the business. It was advice he did his best not to heed for the prospect of closing a deal provoked the most excitement, and competition, amongst all the young men. Hoffman and Boyd, for instance, both scrambling after the few sales opportunities allowed them, were involved in an altercation after Boyd accused William of stealing a customer away, picking up a board with which to strike him.

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[20] Hoffman, Diary, April 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, May 6, 1848, March 8, 1849; Briggs, 99; Robinson, Merchants', Students' and Clerks' Manual, 10-1, 29-36. See too Walter Licht, Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 38; New York Journal of Commerce, Aug 7, 1849.

William escaped direct injury but only after colliding with the counter in his attempts to avoid being smacked.[21]

Edward Tailer also became embroiled in work conflicts born of clashing ambitions. "Dunbar and I had a regular blow out together this afternoon," he wrote about an argument that erupted with his boss. The latter had criticized him for his overly aggressive sales manner, saying "that I should not put myself out of the way to speak to customers" since such unabashed hunger to make a deal "savored too much of the Chatham St[reet] manner of receiving a customer, to see every man in the establishment running out to salute and shake a buyer by the hand." Dunbar insisted, instead, that the sale should be allowed to unfold in an apparently natural fashion, that the encounter with the customer should not seem to rest purely on commercial motives but should be unhurried and unforced. Tailer was admittedly so anxious "to force myself ahead" that he had no patience for such politesse, even if it came at the behest of his employer. "I of course dissented from this doctrine and insisted upon my right to speak to whoever I pleased." This, of course, only fanned the rancor.[22]

The intra-office tensions at Little, Alden & Co. were not just born of a "business revolution." They were the result of a social revolution in which a culture of patronage was giving way to one of self-reliance. Self-reliance, however, threatened to end in moral anarchy. "If a man only get a fortune, no matter how," Putnam's Monthly observed, "too often his success is his defence; its glitter hides the odiosness of the means." Mercantile success, in other words, was its own measure and the rise of a clerking class running out to shake each customer's hand was consequently perceived as a tautological rather than a moral event, divorced as it was from any natural checks. The veteran New York merchant Joseph Scoville missed the older ways of doing business, "the mutual confidence and

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[21] Hoffman, Diary, April 14, 15, 29, Sept 4, 23, Oct 28, Nov 2, 11, 15, 1848.
[22] Tailer, Diary, Jan 15, Oct 19, 1852.

courtesy that subsisted in our better days," and complained about young clerks living in fancy boarding houses who curled each others' hair on Saturday night and seduced the pretty daughters of Presbyterian stalwarts on Sunday. Business writers, aware of the mercantile community's role in undermining the very courtesies it pined for, consequently urged merchants to assume personal responsibility for rehabilitating social authority. "So much of a man's character … depends on what kind of an employer he had when young ," Hunt's explained, implicitly assigning the merchant the position of *loco parentis* in relation to his clerk. This obliged employers to acknowledge a "duty" towards their clerks that lay outside business hours and profit margins. They were "to find a place for them as much like a home as possible, and not leave them to form their first acquaintainships amidst the chance-company of a boarding-house." The practical goal, in the absence of household government and in light of the "inexhaustible resources of amusement which are to be found in this city after seven o'clock," was to furnish incentives for the clerk to occupy his leisure "usefully," to surround himself with positive associations that would arouse in him a "desire for self-improvement." The United States Economist likewise observed that "many merchants would be gainers if they were a little more interested in the means, and how their clerks passed their evenings." Samuel Wells quoted another business pundit of the times, Edwin Freedley, in his How to do Business: "Clerks should be faithful to their employers, and employers should concern themselves in the welfare of their clerks." Freedley's was not the interested quid pro quo of a salary negotiation but a form of mutuality that could not be written into a contract since it rested on acts of faith and concern "which we are not obliged to do" and for which "we receive no direct remuneration." This was a form of benevolent patronage sponsored by the merchant who

was then required to subliminate his commercial ambition in a selfless persona harking back to less flush times.[23]

And so, capitalists struggled to contain the effects of the market, knowing first hand that the tendency to make everything alienable was good for business but less propitious for the social contract. The relationship between the merchant and his clerk became representative of the central conundrum of bourgeois revolution, that is, industry's creation of a social order that was highly threatening to those who most profited from it. The problem was not unknown to contemporaries, as Emerson makes clear in his "Ode, Inscribed to W.H. Channing:"

> There are two laws discrete,
> Not reconciled –
> Law for man, and law for thing;
> The last builds town and fleet,
> But it runs wild,
> And doth the man unking.

It also provoked Toqueville's more conservative prejudices: "One feels proud to be a man, and yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature." Such man-made sovereignty was "a fearful as well as a glorious endowment," as William Ellery Channing declared in his widely-read Self-Culture. The republic, in short, became caught in a vortex of its own making. The equation of freedom and property that originally defined American independence had

[23] Thomas S. Cochran, "The Business Revolution," American Historical Review, vol. 79, no. 5 (Dec 1974); Daniel A. Cohen, "Arthur Mervyn and His Elders: The Ambivalence of Youth in the Early Republic," William and Mary Quarterly, vol. 43, no. 3 (July 1986), 377; Putnam's; Joseph Scoville, Old Merchants of new York City (New York: Carleton, 1863), 25; Alan Stanley Horlick, Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1975); Hunt's, vol. 5, 536; Woodward v. Washburn in the Supreme Court of Judicature of New York (New York, 1846); Duties of Employers and Employed, Considered with Reference to Principals and their Clerks or Apprentices (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1849), 4-5, 17-19; United States Economist, June 18, 1853; Hunt's, vol. 20, 686; John Frost, The Young Merchant (Philadelphia: R.W. Pomeroy, 1839), 102-3; Hatfield, The Night No Time for Labor, 130-1, 135-6; Tailer, Diary, March 23, 1850, June 8, 1850; Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, 65-75; Wells, How to do Business, 57.

become a recipe for aggrandizement once property began to circulate outside of the traditional "inspection, admonition, and restraint" of patriarchal practice. As Ezekiel Bacon pointed out in his Recollections of Fifty Years Since (1843), "Can this sweeping tide of many rushing waters now be expected to recede, or to stand still where it is?" Once exchange itself was commodified, in other words, no longer serving as a means for acquiring goods but for acquiring profit, property was transformed from the eternal root of stability into the driving force of progress. Such a system will, Bacon continued, "press onward and upward, driven by the ever increasing steam-forced powers and passions of man's restless and struggling spirit." The clerk was at the center of this permanent revolution, and was consequently seen as subverting the natural order of things. His loaferism became central to the new production regime. His deference signaled the destruction of authority. And his acquisitiveness threatened the propertied order.[24]

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Why, then, has the clerk been left out of labor history? Why has a disclipline devoted to charting the industrial transformations of work and the social relations that ensued ignored the clerk's signal contribution to the creation of a new capitalist regime? The question, of course, is rhetorical, for the explanation is obvious to all: it was the clerk's very identification with capital and his determination to invent a life consonant with the practices and ethos of market exchange that have disqualified him as a subject of labor.[25] It matters little that he was to be found at the heart of contemporary debates over

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[24] Stanley, From Bondage to Contract, 12-14; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ode, Inscribed to W.H. Channing," in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, second edition, vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 984; Toqueville quoted in Albert Boime, The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830-1865 (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 6; Jeffrey Sklansky, The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2-6, 16-20; Ezekiel Bacon, Recollections of Fifty Years Since; A Lecture Delivered before the Young Men's Association of the City of Utica, February 2, 1843 (Utica: R.W. Roberts, 1843), 24; Horowitz.

[25] This has recently begun to change. See, for instance, Luskey, "Marginal Men;" Jerome P. Bjelopera, City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia, 1870-1920 (University of Illinois

the changing experience of work and over labor's role as the source of value, or that he was born of the capitalist transformation of both the countryside and the city, or that he owed his very existence to the labor market and the commodity's rise to hegemonic status. In the facile terms of moral struggle between capital and labor, "between business interests and the people," embraced by historians anxious to represent the left in contemporary political discourse ("To choose a life in the academy instead of the political arena is not to discard one's beliefs but rather to put them to work in a different setting," Melvin Dubovsky explains in his "True Confessions of a Labor Historian"), the clerk is an anamoly. He has consequently been invisible to the predisposed gaze of the engaged historian, for how can an avowed servant of capital also constitute one of the era's dangerous classes?[26]

The ontological division between those who bought labor and those who sold it – between those who made things and those who made profits – has not only failed to make historical sense of the new clerking class, but has generally been unable to explain the nature of power in the modern republic, where the market became a popular model of democratic ethics if not even the practical foundation for social intercourse. Thus, for instance, social and labor historians have embraced producerism in recent decades as both an authentic democratic impulse and a radical, if not even modern, critique of capital. In fact, cliches championing the heroism of hard work were often empty gestures, expounded by conservative opponents of capital as much as by "radicals," or, as we have seen, by capitalists themselves nervous about the destruction they had wrought, not to mention by their clerks, who declared allegiance to an agrarian ethos while dismantling it. William

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Press, 2005), and Augst, Clerk's Tale. I hope that this new scholarly attention in the clerk reflects a general reorientation of historical interest in the social and cultural nature of capital.

[26] Melvyn Dubofsky, "Starting Out in the Fifties: True Confessions of a Labor Historian," in Hard Work: The Making of Labor History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 24; see also Ira Katznelson, "The 'Bourgeois' Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History," in International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 46 (Fall 1994), 7-32; James Livingston, "Modern Subjectivity and Consumer Culture," in Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century, Susan Strasser, et.al., eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Hoffman, for instance, complained of the bustle and monotony of life in Gotham, "with all its mammon – its business – its would be luxuries – its plethoric 'markets,'" and ringingly declared his preference for an "ordinary country location and residence." Political idealizations aside, however, Hoffman was soon selling off the family farm in an attempt to liquify his assets. Another New York clerk, Henry Patterson, attended a Mercantile Association debate in 1841 devoted to the question of whether "Commercial pursuits [are] more favorable to the development of mind than Agricultural" and reported that the assembled clerks voted at the end of the evening in favor of the Agricultural.[27]

Identifying the clerk as a central figure in the coming of the modern order suggests that capital rather than labor was the agent of revolution in America, and that the social history of industrial life would be better written by business historians rather than labor historians (a suggestion, I suspect, of embarrassment to both camps). Clerks certainly did not behave like the modern revolutionaries we are used to thinking about, or populating our narratives with. As S.S. Packard explained at the graduation ceremonies of his New York Business College in 1869: "We simply say to men, 'If you will come here, we will teach you something that will enable you to get a living; or, that will help you to use to better purpose the knowledge you have already acquired." Such knowledge entailed compounding interest, averaging accounts, and transacting business "with facility and dispatch," banalities were the key operations of a ruling class in the making, acquired in private business academies or from manuals of self-instruction published for a mass public "pursuing a course of studies to qualify themselves for a situation in a counting-house." There now arose a whole cadre of business pedagogues who built an enterprise out of the close relationship between the expanding market and the democratic spread of ambition. Their publications belonged to a broader, post-patriarchal genre of advice – "letters" to

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[27] Biernacki, The Fabrication of Labor, 2-3; Feb 19 [1850]; Hoffman, Diary, Aug 31, 1850, n.d. (late June, 1850); Henry A. Patterson, Diary (New-York Historical Society), Jan, 1841 (vol. 3, 47).

young men, "lectures" to young men, "thoughts" for young men, "considerations" for young men, young men's "counselors," and young men's "guides" – that sought to integrate its readers into novel versions of manhood. "No gentleman's education is complete without it," Frederick Beck exclaimed in his Young Accountant's Guide, while B.F. Foster claimed that balancing the ledger teaches "those things which the [young] will need to practice when they come to be men." Fowler & Wells published a series of "hand-books" on How to Write, How to Talk, How to Behave, and How to do Business that could be purchased as a set, and that were eventually issued in a single volume, while business maxims – "keep good company or none;" "never be idle;" "make few promises;" "keep your own secrets, if you have any;" "when you retire to bed, think over what you have been doing during the day;" "save when you are young to spend when you are old" – became general advice. "Doubtless you look forward to the time when you will be able to take a responsible position in the active pursuits of life and be prepared to maintain it," James Nixon wrote in his Rudiments of Book-keeping. The best advice Nixon could consequently give his readers was "to depend upon yourself."[28]

It was this individualized sense of agency and opportunity rather than any proud craft identity on the part of iron puddlers or steel rollers that augered the future. Artisans in the nineteenth century still considered their work skills to be a form of proprietorship. They consequently battled to protect those skills by keeping them trade secrets, both as a matter of tradition and of a cohering class interest. The clerk operated on the opposite terms. He not only eagerly sold his labor on the open market, turning his employment into an entirely commercial event, but acquired his professional training by similar means, that is, by purchasing knowledge that was available to anyone with twenty five dollars to spend

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[28] Packard's New York Business College, Practical Education (New York, 1869), 1; Robinson, Preface, n.p.; Bledstein, Culture of Professionalism, 216; Horlick, Country Boys and Merchant Princes, 147-78; Stephen Nissenbaum; Augst, Clerk's Tale, 24; Hunt's, vol. 26, 135; New-York Daily Times, March 6, 1857; James Nixon, The Rudiments of Book-Keeping, Designed for Schools and Self-Instruction (New York: F.J. Huntington, and Mason Brothers, 1854), 1-2.

on a course of business instruction from C.C. Marsh, who pledged in exchange to "watch over your work as you advance step by step, from book to book, entry to entry, and transaction to transaction," or to anyone who could take advantage of Mr. Dolbear's special, half-price offer of ten dollars for a full course on double-entry which did not, however, include writing and arithmetic instruction, but did promise to prepare "gentlemen" for positions as bookkeepers in any commercial house. Similar claims were made by Mr. Paine's Academy, and Jone's Initiatory Counting Rooms, and Mr. Renville's courses of business instruction, and Foster and Dixon's school, and of the Writing and Book-keeping Academy managed by Brown & Pond. Brown was a "master of pedagogy" who had recently taken the highest prize in business writing at the World's Fair and who regularly held writing demonstrations for the general public at his Academy on Broadway.[29]

Such promiscuity did not make the clerk's labor skills any less exclusive a source of class identity, or symbolic capital. Knowledge of double-entry bookkeeping was the surest indication of young Arthur Tappen's seriousness about his business ambitions, for instance. What's more, the nature of this knowledge as a commodity consumed on the mass market did not make the clerk a passive bystander to events. He constituted, in fact, a most proactive class whose clear business agenda represented the middling interest's transformation into an industrial bourgeoisie no longer satisfied with the prospects of a "happy mediocrity" but intent, instead, on exploiting its main chance.[30] Courses on penmanship, bookkeeping, commercial arithmetic, and commercial law were a highly

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[29] David Montgomery, "The Manager's Brain Under the Workman's Cap," in The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9-57; New-York Daily Times, May 5, 1853, May 8, 1856, Sept 20, 1858, Jan 10, 1853, May 18, 1855, Dec 7, 1854.

[30] Lewis Tappan, The Life of Arthur Tappan (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1870), 40-1; Patrick Joyce, "The Historical Meanings of Work: An Introduction," in Patrick Joyce, ed., The Historical Meanings of Work (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 6; John Rule, "The Property of Skill in the Period of Manufacture," in Joyce, The Historical Meanings of Work," 104-11.

mobile form of property, no longer passed on from father to son but a skills set increasingly on demand in the marketplace. S.S. Packard had gotten his start writing accounting texts for the national chain of Bryant and Stratton business schools, texts which consequently created a uniform body of business skills. Such standardization both enhanced the ability to trade in professional knowledge and served the needs of an industrializing economy for reliable and interchangeable labor. Joseph Palmer promoted his self-instructing Treatise on Practical Book-Keeping by similarly arguing that it no longer made sense for young men to learn on the job. C.C. Marsh explained: "A person may keep correctly the accounts of the house in which he was brought up, but as the business may be quite different in any other house, change his situation, and he who was capable will be incapable." This was not so with someone who had studied bookkeeping independently, as a "scientific" discipline. "He is at home in the accounts of any business." Like all important industrial technologies, thus, business knowledge became interchangeable, which allowed a fluid national market in clerking labor to develop.[31]

The standardization of bookkeeping practices was not only a function of the economy's growing need for documentation. Keeping accounts also acquired an unprecedented cultural significance in the nineteenth century. Frederick Beck made a representative claim in his Young Accountant's Guide, first published in 1831: "Mercantile Book-keeping is the art of recording and stating accounts in such manner, that the true state of each and all the accounts, and the merchant's situation, may at any time be easily, speedily, and distinctly comprehended and known." Accounts, in other words,

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[31] 125 Years of Education, 7; Gary John Previts and Barbara Dubis Merino, A History of Accounting in America: An Historical Interpretation of the Cultural Significance of Accounting (New York: Ronald Press, John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 78; Leverett S. Lyon, Education for Business (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 234-5; C.C. Marsh, The Science of Double-Entry Book-Keeping (New York: John C. Riker, 1857), 7; Joseph H. Palmer, A Treatise on Practical Book-Keeping and Business Transactions, thirteenth edition, (New York: Farmer, Brace & Co, 1857), vii; J.R. Edwards, History of Financial Accounting, 71-3; B.F. Foster, The Origin and Progress of Book-Keeping (London: C.H. Law, 1852), 15-6; Terry Sheldahl, "Forward to C.C. Marsh's 1835 'Lecture on the Study of Book-Keeping, with a Balance Sheet,'" The Accounting Historians Journal, vol. 15, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 191.

which would obstinantly refuse to add up if anyone tried to make them tell anything but the whole story, were perceived as uniquely able to uncover the truth buried within a mass of self-interested figures. They were, as such, an island of neutrality in the era's tidal wave of profit-seeking. Young Benjamin Browne Foster, for one, put such conceits into practice when he assisted his employer, Mr. Stevens, in uncovering the errors and omissions made in the sales book, journal, and ledger of a recently dismissed clerk. Benjamin, who had been reading B.F. Foster's Theory and Practice of Bookkeeping in his spare time, found that the task was made easier by "an excellent system" adopted by Stevens "in which I long to be dabbling." Such systems were an apposite method of accounting for market society in general since they created equilibrium by turning the perpetual movement of commodities – the subject of accounts – into the key of certainty and stability.[32]

This is why bookkeeping – a centuries-old technology – now struck a chord that reached far beyond the immediate employment needs of the clerk and acquired something of an epistemological status. The "bottom line" became synonymous with the unadulterated truth and double-entry captured the popular imagination, becoming a popular hobby and the subject of study on the part of young and old, men and women, and professionals and amateurs alike, while also being integrated into the common school cirriculum.[33] This is also why Henry David Thoreau made accounting the object of such pointed ridicule in Walden, which was written, of course, as a general protest against the material condition of modern life. Thoreau's assault was contained in the pedantic records

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[32] Keith Hoskin and Richard Macve, "Writing, Examining, Disciplining: The Genesis of Accounting's Modern Power," in Anthony Hopwood and Peter Miller, Accounting as Social and Institutional Practice ..., 77-8; Frederick Beck, The Young Accountant's Guide: or an Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Mercantile Book-Keeping (Boston: Stimpson and Clapp, 1831), 5; May Poovey, A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Foster, Diary, 222, 229; Harry C. Bentley and Ruth S. Leonard, Bibliography of Works on Accounting by American Authors, vol. 1 (Boston: Harry C. Bentley, 1934).

[33] Henry A. Patterson, Diary, Sept 1, 1836; S.W. Crittenden, An Elementary Treatise on Book-keeping (Philadelphia: E.C. & J. Biddle & Co., 1860), 5-8.

of expenditures with which he pretended to document the superiority of his alternative economy. We are privy, for instance, to a ledger of eating expenses:

Item	Cost
Rice ……………..	$1 73 ½
Molasses …………	1 73
Rye meal …………	1 04 ¾
Indian meal ………	0 99 ¾
Pork ………………	0 22
Flour ……………..	0 88
Sugar …………….	0 80
Lard ………………	0 65
Apples ……………	0 25
Dried apple ………	0 22
Sweet potatoes ……	0 10
One pumpkin …….	0 06
One watermelon ….	0 02
Salt ……………….	0 03

"Yes, I did eat $8.74," Thoreau deposed after balancing the books, suggesting that cash really was good enough to eat. In fact, Thoreau was intimating that everyone had become a clerk. That is, even an economy resting on self-sufficiency and home production was inconceivable without the syllogisms of debit and credit. At Walden, the literary historian Michael Warner has pointed out, "it is *the* economy that interferes with economy." "Men labor under a mistake," Thoreau famously wrote at the beginning of his book, thus telescoping its central message, namely, that the dignity of labor had become an oxymoron. Thoreau observed his neighbors plowing and sowing, hoeing and harvesting, practicing what appeared to be a venerable tradition of landed labor. But he was not fooled. They were no longer growing crops, or flowers, or fruit, he contended, but dollars. As such, they were "contracting [them]selves into a nutshell of civility." Nineteenth century advocates of an agricultural life might denounce the servile habits of store-bound clerks who were subject to "the arbitrary will of another" because they had no land of their own. But as far as Thoreau was concerned there was no difference between farmer and counter-jumper. Neither the sweat of one's brow nor the soil that soaked up the farmer's

physical efforts any longer constituted a higher law. "We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do," Thoreau asserted. Labor was a false value. And it needed to be divorced from the civic ethos because the production of things was thoroughly contaminated by political economy. The American Phrenological Journal could try to salvage a familiar sense of security amidst the industrial wreakage by declaring that "all necessary labor is honorable." But was "necessity" a reliable measure anymore? Was not Thoreau's whole project at Walden inspired by the observation that civilization had progressed beyond the category of necessity, that labor was now dedicated to making surpluses rather than growing a competence? As the historian Jeffrey Sklansky has observed: "What appeared in the light of classical political economy as the very essence of individual agency – mastery of productive property – was actually [now] the basis of the soul's alienation from nature."[34]

But if growing and making things no longer served as the proper foundation of civic life, what then could constitute such a foundation? What was to be the proper object of man's prodigious productive powers and his breathtaking domination over the natural world? The answer was that man himself would be the end – and no longer just the means – of labor. The modern production project, that is to say, would be devoted to producing one's self, which now accordingly became the most important form of property, namely, property in oneself. *The* economy was an autonomous entity (soon even to become an autonomous social science) with a shadowy and opaque nature that, as the New York City clerk Benjamin Tilton observed in the wake of the 1837 Panic, could not be relied on to anchor social relations. Stability would have to come from another source. And, in fact, as everyone agreed, those who weathered economic panics were men of character. Personal

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[34] Henry David Thoreau, Walden: or, Life in the Woods (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 4, 11, 47-8; Michael Warner, "Walden's Erotic Economy," in Hortense J. Spillers, Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text (New York: Routledge), 165; Cultivator, June, 1854; Burbick, Healing the Republic, 60; American Phrenological Journal, vol. 11, 343; Sklansky, Soul's Economy, 36-7, 42.

prudence, resolution, modesty, and regularity, in other words, had become the most reliable material assets in what Martin Bruegel has described as an industrial shift from "public honor to private honesty." Now that the economy had lost its firm grounding – Do you pay rent? Do you pay my taxes? Is this property yours?" an exacerbated employer interrogates Bartleby – it became obvious to the New York Mercantile Library that "few reach the period of manhood without the conviction that something more is required than can be gained in the counting-room."[35]

The consequent efforts to cultivate the self were a "labor of love." Thus George Russell emphasized the noncommercial essence of this new form of production. Harper's Magazine expanded on the nature of such labor in a pictorial parable depicting the "Two Paths of Life." Two parallel columns presented a series of starkly contrasting portraits of one and the same person as he passed through the stages of his life. One version was characterized by learning, love, and earnestness, the other by idleness, dissipation, and uselessness. Since "two lives like these be in possibility enfolded within every infant born into the world," the choice as to who we were to become rested with our own personal efforts. This was indeed "a fearful as well as glorious endowment" that led the renowned publicist of self-control, William Alcott, to exchort young men to exercise "self-dependence." Alcott's was a revealing neologism, for it at once allowed for individual action while recognizing that independence itself was an impractical, if not dangerous, goal, not only in an employment situation but in a society free of "restraints" in general. The Boston clerk, Charles French, referred in similarly qualified terms to his "comparative independence." He discovered after leaving home that the requirements of making a living were too contingent on mutual promises and support for anyone to truly act independently of anyone else. On the other hand, the corporate obligations of old had lost all relevance to

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[35] Augst, Clerk's Tale, 120; Martin Breugel, Farm, Shop, Landing: The Rise of a Market Society in the Hudson Valley, 1780-1860 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 192; New York Mercantile Library, vol. 17, 7;

his life. His new obligation, then, was to create a coherent individuality, one that conformed to the expectations of the rest of humanity. This is how the private self became the basis of public life and why William Alcott, in another passage from his Letters to Young Men, urged his readers to devote themselves to social reform by first beginning at home. "Shall he not, at least, take the first step – that which must, forever, be the first step – shall he not reform himself?" Another young Boston clerk, James Blake, concurred: "Nothing is so good for a young man I think as reflection, self examination to look within himself." And Samuel Wells advanced such industrial slogans in his How to Do Business: "The young man should first of all study himself. He should consider well the comparative development of the various faculties of his mind, his temperament, the powers of his physical constitution, and the tendency given to his mind by his early training. Let him ask himself, 'What am I best fitted to do? What can I do best? What pursuit would be most attractive to me?'"[36]

"I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well," Thoreau declared in explaining the prevailing use he made of the pronoun "*I*" in Walden. But there was little need to apologize for it was the age of self-culture, or "self-study," "self-knowledge," "self-observation," "self-esteem," "self-respect," "self-confidence," and "self-satisfaction," as one could read with dulling frequency in such vehicles of embourgeoisement as the Young American's Magazine of Self-Improvement. These keywords all underlined the "plastic" nature of young lives. As Frank Ferguson characteristically observed in yet another volume of advice to the Young Man, the question of character was "*entirely within your power*." Of course, no one pretended that such self-

[36] Augst, Clerk's Tale, 1, 9, 45-6, 109-11; Harper's; Alcott, Letters to Young Men, 43-6; William B. Sprague, Letters to Young Men (Albany: Erastus H. Pease, 1845), 54; Alexander, "Merchant Clerk Cheered," 18; Karl J. Weintraub, "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," Critical Inquiry, vol. 1, no. 4 (June 1975), 841; Rose, 4; 109-11; Vincent J. Bertolini, "Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s," American Literature, vol. 68, no. 4 (December 1996), 710-1; Wells, How to do Business, 41.

making was free of social struggle. But the attempt to bring order to society would now be a personal affair. In fact, this cultivation of the self was the most important class struggle in the age of capital for it was the avenue by which the bourgeoisie came to power. In liberal regimes the ruling class is that which first and foremost proves best at ruling itself. This was because the individual was now assigned responsibility for both driving the engine of change and for applying the brakes. Capitalists might have destroyed traditional authority, in other words, but they had no desire to undermine the authority of authority. "We have the power not only of tracing our powers, but of guiding and impelling them; not only of watching our passions, but of controlling them," William Ellery Channing explained in Self-Culture. "Freedom is the only *certain cure* for the *evils* of Freedom," Daniel Haskell lectured the Mercantile Library in 1838. The new sovereign self, thus, at once constituted the gravest threat to the social order and an unprecedented ability to fix it. In a dialectic suited to the revolutionary moment, the problem became its own solution.[37]

And so, the "self-made man" ascended to the historical stage, the cultural agent of capitalist production and a poster boy of self-government. "Self-made or never made," O.S. Fowler declared on the title page of his Self-Culture, and Perfection of Character; including the Management of Youth. In fact, America now became "a country of self-made men," a society of sovereign individuals each responsible for the social order, which is what distinguished it from the rest of the world, as the Family Lyceum explained in a series of biographical examples in 1832.[38] The best and most popular example of self-

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[37] Thoreau, Walden, 1; Young American's Magazine of Self-Improvement; Ferguson quoted in Augst, Clerk's Tale, 57; New York Mercantile Library, Seventeenth Annual Report, 6; John Demos and Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," Journal of Marriage and the Family, vol. 31, no. 4 (1969), 634; Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 8; Channing; Haskell in Hunt's, vol. 18, 620; David J. Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 57-78; Rose, 154.

[38] O.S. Fowler, Self-Culture, and Perfection of Character; including the Management of Youth (Manchester: John Heywood); Jonathan A. Glickstein, Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 326; Family Lyceum, Sept 1, 29, Oct 13, 1832; Scott E.

making, of a personal life cum man-made drama that allowed others to imagine themselves as full-fledged subjects of history, was, of course, Franklin's own version of himself. Thomas Mellon recalled reading Franklin's autobiography for the first time in the 1830s: "I had not before imagined any other course of life superior to farming, but the reading of Franklin's life led me to question this view." Thus, Max Weber was entirely correct in identifying Franklin, who had also published an Instructor for Young Men that ran through several editions, as the archetype of capitalist ethics, as was Charles Baudelaire, who less admiringly identified Franklin as "the inventor of the ethics of the shop-counter." This historical role could also be observed in two reviews of Franklin's autobiography that appeared in the North American Review, the first in 1818, the second in 1856. The earlier essay, devoted to previously unpublished sections of the memoirs and to recently published private correspondence, described a personage making his way in the world by force of great personal talent and industry, and, as such, one lacking any moral compass. "The groundwork of his character … was bad; and the moral qualities, which contributed to his rise, were of a worldly and very profitable kind," as the neo-Calvinist judgment of history concluded. Franklin's ambitious rise, the Review complained, was to be traced to his ethical failures. He had abandoned his childhood home early on and remained indifferent all his life to the consequent suffering this caused his parents. His views on the nature of vice and virtue were unnoteworthy because "no such things exist[ed]" as far as Franklin was concerned. This is what then allowed him to practice a "libertinism" in his daily life that found no expression of shame or repentance in his memoirs. Franklin's well-known recipe of acquirable virtues – temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility – which were

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Casper, Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1, 78-80, 87-91; Michael Kammen, A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 199-200; Thomas N. Baker, Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78.

now published for the first time, revealed a notion of duty that extended no farther than himself. This suited his practice of keeping an exclusive eye on what was "*most profitable*" for him. Self-improvement, thus, was a miserly matter of utility and calculation, to be weighed and measured and even demonstrated in a statistical table.[39]

With personal ambition serving as his guide, it was little wonder that Franklin "was not a man to distinguish himself by bold efforts or thankless sacrifices." This was clearly manifest in his behavior during the Revolution, characterized by indecision and wavering and by "too great a readiness" to compromise with, and even embrace, the British position. Franklin's failure to rise to the occasion of national crisis was indicative of his lack of "severe integrity" and "disinterested patriotism." It was simply wrong, thus, to rank Franklin as a father of the nation, or as a visionary of American greatness. Rather, as someone who "regards man principally as being of this life, with certain natural wants and desires," Franklin represented the banal pursuit of profane success.

A review of a ten-volume collection of Franklin's works edited by Jared Sparks that appeared in the North American Review in 1856 offered little disagreement on the facts: "The pervading trait of Franklin's character was allegiance to the Practical," it was observed, an allegiance that found expression in a consistent neglect of more idealistic and intellectual subjects. But rather than the source of moral failure, Franklin's pragmatism was identified as the portent of a new moral order. Franklin had imbibed the New England values of "self-dependence" and "self-control" while dispensing with the inflexible habits and narrow vision of puritan culture. The result was uniquely cosmopolitan. "Commerce one moment and a *jeu d'esprit* the next, advice to a Yankee tradesman and a bagatelle for a Parisian lady, seem equally congenial themes [to Franklin]; a state paper and a proverb,

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[39] Augst, Clerk's Tale, 257; William E. Lingelbach, "Franklin's American Instructor: Early Americanism in the Art of Writing," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 96, no. 4 (August, 1952), 367-81; Charles Baudelaire, "Further Notes on Edger Poe," in The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, ed. And trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: De Capo, 1964), 101; North American Review, no. 21 (Sept 1818), 289-323.

allegory and statistics, the way to save money and the way to form a government." Commerce and culture no longer constituted an opposition in Franklin's regime, which is what recommended him as an archetype of industrial consensus. Of course, there were still blemishes, particularly of a sexual nature. But these were insignificant when compared to "the silent dignity with which he was content, amid the inevitable attacks, and even insults, misrepresentations, and sneers." Such modesty, in fact, was one of Franklin's most admirable character traits. It made it possible for him to recognize that "happiness was the aggregate of small satisfactions," just as fortune was "the reward of assiduity." This, in turn, made him into a true "American philosopher." And so, the autobiography's documentation of Franklin's rise "from poor mechanic to statesman and philosopher" was no less than "a triumph of self-culture."[40]

Franklin thus became America's first clerk, who was himself a precocious embodiment of the spirit of capitalism. Wresting control over his personal fate from the traditional strictures and structures of patriarchal control, the clerk wed his new-found autonomy to the marketplace and thus suggested that competition was indeed "free" and exchange was "equal." At the same time, in making a self that was no longer defined by property relations – in fact, one that was self-consciously divorced from material corruption – the clerk could pretend that his individuality was distinct from commodity relations and that towns and fleets doth not the man unking. Such schizophrenia was probably the most significant desk disease of all, for its mire of self-contradictions became the cogent structure of our own liberal modernity.

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[40] North American Review, vol. 83, issue 173 (Oct 1856)