

*“Banned in Boston”:
Moral Reform Politics and the
New England Society for the
Suppression of Vice¹*

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AFTER laboring on the outside margins of polite literary circles for his entire career, Walt Whitman traveled to Boston in August 1881 to oversee the publication of his *Leaves of Grass*. The poet was on the verge of enjoying the national reputation that had eluded him for so long. He viewed the publication of the seventh and definitive edition of *Leaves of Grass* by a leading Boston publisher, James R. Osgood and Company, as a vindication of his lifelong labor. Now Whitman was about to be ranked with other notable Osgood authors, including Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain.²

To be sure, some of New England's most famous authors had admired Whitman's poetry. Perhaps the most distinguished author of the day to applaud Whitman's work was Ralph Waldo Emerson. After reading the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Emerson privately wrote that he found the twelve poems to be "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." Yet it was not only, as Charles Eliot Norton protested in an unsigned review in 1855, Whitman's "self-conceit," lack of rhyme, and "scorn for the wonted usages of good writing" that hindered his reputation. Whitman also celebrated sexuality, openly "singing of the phallus" and glorifying the "hymen!"³ According to Norton, Whitman mixed "Yankee transcendentalism and New York rowdyism."⁴ Other early critics

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²"Literary Notes," *Boston Commonwealth*, September 3, 1881, 3; Sylvester Baxter, "Walt Whitman in Boston," *New England Magazine* 6 (1892): 714–21.

³Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blogett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 91, 108.

⁴[Charles Eliot Norton], "Leaves of Grass," *Putnam's Monthly* 6 (1855): 321. While Norton wrote that he admired the "original perception of nature," "manly brawn," and "epic directness" of Whitman,

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were even less charitable. One reviewer dismissed Whitman's work as "a mass of stupid filth," and Charles Greenleaf Whittier reportedly tossed his copy of *Leaves of Grass* in his fireplace.⁵ Even Emerson had deep misgivings about the sexuality of some of Whitman's poems. When Whitman visited Boston in 1860 on the eve of the publication of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which included the grouping of twelve poems on sexuality entitled "Enfans d'Adam," Emerson spent two hours trying to convince him to exclude these poems. Emerson, Whitman later recalled, "did not see that if I had cut sex out I might just as well have cut everything out."⁶ When Emerson received a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1867 that still contained these poems, he asked a mutual friend to "tell Walt I am not satisfied."⁷ After that date Emerson's enthusiasm for Whitman cooled. Other poets of the genteel tradition, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, simply ignored Whitman.⁸

Given Whitman's rather tepid reception from America's leading literary figures, having a distinguished Boston publisher issue the definitive edition of *Leaves of Grass* was for him a personal and professional triumph. In his negotiations, Whitman was adamant that the "Children of Adam" cluster must be included. "Fair warning on one point," he wrote the publisher, "the old pieces, the *sexuality* ones, . . . must go in the same as ever."⁹ Upon completion, he threw a grand party for three hundred people. Whitman finally felt vindicated. As he told the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, he "could not wish for a more beautiful and comforting two months."¹⁰

in a letter to James Russell Lowell he privately confessed, "One cannot leave it about for chance readers." He added that he "would be sorry to know that any woman had looked into it past the title-page. I have got a copy for you, for there are things in it you will admire." Charles Eliot Norton to James Russell Lowell, 23 September 1855, *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 1: 135. "'No, no,' Lowell replied, 'the kind of thing you described won't do.'" James Russell Lowell to Charles Eliot Norton, 12 October 1855, *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton, 3 vols. (1904; repr., New York: AMS 1966), 1:242.

⁵Rufus M. Griswold, *New York Criterion*, November 10, 1855, in *Walt Whitman, the Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 31; Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 4 vols. (1905-1906; repr., New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 1:127.

⁶Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 1:51. On the relationship between Whitman and Emerson, see David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 194.

⁷John Burroughs Diary, December 1871, quoted in Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (1931; repr., Fort Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968), 64.

⁸Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 174; F. Lannon Smith, "The American Reception of *Leaves of Grass*: 1855-1882," *Walt Whitman Review* 22 (1979): 153.

⁹Walt Whitman to James R. Osgood, 8 May 1881, *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 3:224.

¹⁰"Walt Whitman. A Poet's Supper to his Printers and Proof Readers." [*Camden Post*], [18 October 1881], *Walt Whitman—A Series of Twenty-Three Newspaper Items with Notes by the*

Whitman's long hoped for triumph, however, soon evoked controversy. "Our attention," Suffolk County (Boston) district attorney Oliver Stevens wrote James Osgood in March 1882, "has been officially directed to a certain book entitled *Leaves of Grass: Walt Whitman* published by you. We are of the opinion that this book is such a book as brings it within the provisions of the Public Statutes respecting obscene literature, and suggests the propriety of withdrawing the same from circulation and suppressing the editions thereof." Otherwise, Stevens threatened, the charge that the work violated the state's obscenity law "will have to be entertained."¹¹ The complaint originated with Frederick B. Allen, assistant rector at Phillips Brooks's Trinity Church and the secretary of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, a local affiliate of Anthony Comstock's New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Whitman initially agreed to excise a few words from certain poems so long as it was done so "silently." But when he learned that Osgood, at the district attorney's prompting, insisted that he expunge several entire poems, mostly from the "Children of Adam" cluster, he refused. Osgood, fearing prosecution, negotiated a settlement with Whitman. He withdrew the book from publication and gave Whitman one hundred dollars, the remaining 225 copies of the book, and the stereotype plates.¹² A bitterly disappointed Whitman vowed to gain revenge. Besides unleashing his own coterie of militant devotees against the censorship activities of Stevens, Comstock, and the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, Whitman found ready allies in Boston free thinker George Chainey and free love activists Benjamin R. Tucker and Ezra Heywood. Chainey proclaimed that the "Russian Czar was never guilty of greater wrong, nor Spanish Inquisitor of baser injustice."¹³ Tucker advertised Whitman's work in his periodical, *Liberty*, and brazenly challenged Stevens to prosecute him.¹⁴ Heywood also taunted the district attorney and Comstock

Post. Excerpts from the Trent Collection of Whitmaniana located in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library Duke University.

¹¹Oliver Stevens to James Osgood, 1 March 1882, *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel, 10 vols. (1902; repr., Brosse Pointe, MI: Scholarly Press, 1968), 8:289-90.

¹²James Osgood to Walt Whitman, 4 March 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:289; Walt Whitman to James Osgood, 7 March 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:290; James Osgood to Walt Whitman, 21 March 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:293-94; Walt Whitman to James Osgood, [23] March 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:294; James Osgood to Walt Whitman, [29 March] 1881, *Complete Writings*, 8:295; Walt Whitman to James Osgood, March 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:294; James Osgood to Walt Whitman, [10 April] 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:296; Walt Whitman to James Osgood, 12 April 1882, *Complete Writings*, 8:296-97.

¹³George Chainey, "Keep Off the Grass," *This World*, June 17, 1882, 8, Container 22, Reel 13, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁴Advertisement, "Republished! The Suppressed Book!" *Liberty*, 22 July 1882, 2.

in an "Open Letter to Walt Whitman" and published two of his banned poems.¹⁵ When Heywood and Chainey were threatened with censorship, Whitman, ironically, declined to speak out publicly on their behalf.

I. PROTESTANT MORAL REFORMERS

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moral reformers have been the subject of several different historical interpretations. Most historians, as Alison M. Parker contends in her study of the censorship activity of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, view moral reformers as deluded and antiquated remnants of "Victorian prudery."¹⁶ Historians have interpreted these moral reformers as the unenlightened opponents of free speech, a manifestation of status anxiety amid a rapidly changing culture, a movement of cultural elites anxiously defending their social status (and their sons) against immigrants, a backlash against growing women's rights, or a harbinger of feminist values.¹⁷ William R. Hutchison offers an alternative perspective to explain the activities of moral reform societies. Hutchison's

¹⁵Ezra H. Heywood, "An Open Letter to Walt Whitman," *Leaf Literature*, Princeton, MA: Published by Angela T. Heywood, 1882, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

¹⁶Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁷For representative examples of historical studies that interpret the moral reform movement as opponents to free speech rights, see Robert W. Haney, *Comstockery in America: Patterns of Censorship and Control* (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1960); Jay A. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). A number of Whitman scholars also express a whiggish interpretation of the *Leaves of Grass* controversy. Allen, *Solitary Singer*, 494-500; Joseph Andriano, "Societies for the Suppression of Vice," *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), 649; Philip Callow, *A Life of Walt Whitman: From Noon to Starry Night* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), 353-54; Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 530-45; Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion: William Douglas O'Connor* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1978), 405-20; Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 237-51. For status anxiety and social control interpretations, see Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Scribners, 1968); Walter M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1987). As elite defenders of family and cultural status, Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusaders: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). As an anti-feminist movement, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Anna Louise Bates, *Weeder in the Garden of the Lord: Anthony Comstock's Life and Career* (Landham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995). As protofeminists, Parker, *Purifying America*; Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). On the historiography of reform movements, see Alan Hunt, "Anxiety about Social Explanation: Some Anxieties about Anxiety," *Journal of*

analysis is not only less cynical but also resonates more fully with the stated rationale and actions of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice. Moreover, his perspective also corresponds with the perceptions of those who were prosecuted by moral reform organizations.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Protestant establishment at best tolerated religious outsiders. In this regard, Protestant moral reformers were part of the larger Progressive movement, which expressed a less than tolerant ideology toward non-conformists. Consequently, worries about social stability and the moral health of the nation sometimes led mainline Protestants to exert what Hutchison terms a countervailing "antipluralist" or "unitive" impulse. Occasionally, this unitive impulse manifested itself in nativism and the persecution of religious minorities whose behavior—such as the Mormon practice of plural marriages—threatened the moral codes of public Protestantism. At other times, the desire for national unity expressed itself in less violent attempts to exact moral conformity.¹⁸ To be sure, the work of the New England anti-vice society was in part a defensive measure by Protestant leaders to preserve Protestant control over public life, and, insofar as their efforts succeeded, it protected their own social and economic security. Yet the activities of the New England Society are better understood as a manifestation of the unitive impulse that Hutchison describes. Nineteenth-century moral philosophy and the Whig-Republican tradition shaped the organic or communal view of society upon which this conviction rested. By regulating the morality of literature and other potential sources of commercialized vice, these moral reformers strove to suppress alternative moralities in order to enable public Protestantism to serve as the common unifying civic morality.

The New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, which renamed itself the Watch and Ward Society in 1891, took advantage of the opportunity provided by the publication of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to advance its views of sexuality and literature. This study examines the mainline Protestant establishment's efforts to define acceptable views of sexuality and marriage in literature during a time when many Protestants practiced, as Hutchison observes, the toleration of pluralism. This study demonstrates that

Social History 32 (1999): 509–28; Donna I. Dennis, "Obscenity Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Law and Society* 27 (2002): 369–81.

¹⁸William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 6, 8, 30–83. On moral reform movements, see Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

although their views were strongly contested the Protestant establishment had the power (through the state's obscenity laws, the enforcement of this law by the district attorney, the police, the New England Society acting as an extralegal police force, and the publisher's fear of prosecution) to enforce conventional Protestant attitudes toward sexuality and marriage and to censor literature that violated traditional standards.¹⁹

II. ANTHONY COMSTOCK AND THE NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE

When Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* in 1882, he unwittingly stepped into a conflict between proponents of free love and Comstock's anti-obscenity forces that had been raging for a decade. Comstock had previously arrested a number of free love advocates and secured several controversial convictions. In 1868, Comstock launched a one-man campaign after he saw a friend reportedly brought to "ruin" by obscene literature. By 1872, he realized that obscene literature was such "a very large and systematic business" that he needed help.²⁰ He approached the Young Men's Christian Association for assistance. The wealthy philanthropist and president of the New York YMCA, Morris K. Jessup, met with Comstock and quickly arranged the formation of a Committee for the Suppression of Vice. With pledges of support from the financier J. P. Morgan, mining magnate William E. Dodge, and soap baron Samuel Colgate, Comstock set out to clean up New York. Comstock, however, found it particularly troubling that the United States Postal Service was being used, as he put it, "to assist this nefarious business, because it goes everywhere and is secret."²¹ In 1872-73, Comstock and his supporters successfully lobbied Congress to amend the nation's anti-obscenity laws. The new federal statute empowered the U.S. Post Office to ban "obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print, or other publications of an indecent character,"

¹⁹The term "Protestant establishment" and its synonyms are used in a descriptive, not normative, sense. William R. Hutchison, "Preface: From Protestant to Pluralist America;" "Protestantism as Establishment," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vii-xi, 3-17.

²⁰Charles G. Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock, Fighter: Some Impressions of a Lifetime of Adventure in Conflict with the Powers of Evil* (New York: Fleming, 1913), 51; Anthony Comstock, "The Suppression of Vice," *North American Review* 135 (1882): 484.

²¹Anthony Comstock, *Frauds Exposed, or How the People Are Deceived and Robbed, and Youth Corrupted; Being a Full Exposure of Various Schemes Operated Through the Mails, and Unearthed by the Author in a Seven Years' Service as a Special Agent of the Post Office Department and Secretary and Chief Agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice* (1880; repr., Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969), 391.

including information about abortion, from the mail. Penalties for violating the Comstock Act, as it was popularly known, included fines of up to two thousand dollars and as much as five years in prison.²² "This law is a barrier," Comstock reasoned, "between the souls of our children and the most subtle enemy we have to deal with."²³ Congress also appointed Comstock a Special Agent of the Post Office Department to enforce the law. In May 1873 the YMCA's anti-vice committee reorganized itself as an independent organization, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, with Comstock as its secretary.²⁴

III. COMSTOCK AND THE ANTI-VICE ACTIVISTS

Armed with new federal powers, Comstock launched a crusade in the spring of 1873 to keep objectionable literature out of the mails. Free love advocates stood high on his list. In fact, Comstock had already arrested one of its leading proponents, Victoria Claflin Woodhull, a year earlier. Woodhull was a spiritualist, an outspoken feminist, and an individualist anarchist who helped lead the International Workingmen's Association, Section 12. But it was Woodhull's advocacy of free love that most troubled Comstock. In an 1871 lecture, Woodhull frankly declared, "Yes I am a Free Lover. I have an *inalienable, constitutional and natural* right to love whom I may, to love as *long* or as *short* a period as I can; to *change* that love *every day* if I please."²⁵ Woodhull apparently practiced what she preached. Twice married, she openly

²²Appendix to the *Congressional Globe: Containing Speeches, Reports, and the Laws of the Third Session Forty-Second Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Congressional Globe, 1873): 297. At one level, the Comstock Act built upon previous legislation. The first federal law against obscene literature was the Tariff Act of 1842, which gave authority to customs officials to seize obscene material. During the Civil War, Congress had passed a law in 1865 against mailing obscene literature. In comparison to these two laws, the Comstock Act was more far-reaching in its scope. Moreover, as Hal Sears observes, the law neither defined obscenity nor specified "whether it intended to be solely a criminal statute (that is, concerned with seizing objectionable matter only as a contingency of the arrest of a violator) or whether it aimed to establish a civil post-office censorship separate from any criminal provisions of the law." Hal Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 71.

²³Comstock, *Frauds Exposed*, 425.

²⁴Comstock, "Suppression of Vice," 484-89. On Comstock's background, the founding of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and the 1873 Comstock Act, see Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock*, 43-99; Richard Christian Johnson, "Anthony Comstock: Reform, Vice, and the American Way" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1973), 45-72; Robert H. Bremner, "Introduction," in *Traps for the Young*, by Anthony Comstock, ed. Robert H. Bremner (1883; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967), vii-xiv; Bates, *Weeder in the Garden of the Lord*, 49-97.

²⁵Victoria Claflin Woodhull, "And the Truth Shall Make You Free." *A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom, Delivered in Steinway Hall, Nov. 20, 1871 and Music Hall, Boston, Jan. 3, 1872* (New York: Woodhull, Claflin & Co., 1872), 23.

enjoyed many lovers, including Cornelius Vanderbilt. In a November 1872, lecture to the American Association of Spiritualists in Boston, Woodhull was the first to publicize the alleged sexual relationship between one of the nation's most popular ministers, Henry Ward Beecher, and Elizabeth Tilton, the wife of a close friend. Woodhull hoped to compel Beecher to preach what he apparently practiced as well as to exact a measure of revenge against two of her more prominent detractors, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. She followed up this shocking revelation by publishing a detailed story of the affair in the November issue of her newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*.²⁶ The day after its publication federal marshals arrested Woodhull and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, for sending obscene literature through the mail. At their trial in June 1873, the charges were dismissed on a technicality: the obscenity law of 1872 did not include newspapers. Their dismissal helped convince Comstock that the federal obscenity law needed to be revised.²⁷

Although Comstock failed to convict Woodhull, he relentlessly pursued other free lovers. The controversy over the suppression of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* occurred on the heels of heated battles between Comstock and free lovers and the establishment of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice. Ezra Heywood, the leading Massachusetts individualist anarchist and free love advocate, took up Woodhull's cause in his periodical *The Word*. When the Boston Music Hall canceled a Woodhull lecture under pressure from local authorities, Heywood's Labor Reform League, meeting in Boston in January 1873, invited her to speak. Denouncing Comstock, she declared that it was "simply nobody's business what anybody eats, drinks or wears, and just as little who anybody loves."²⁸ Soon thereafter, Heywood, his wife Angela, and Benjamin R. Tucker organized the New England Free Love League. The Heywoods regularly attacked "Comstock's insane efforts to stifle investigation of the social question."²⁹

²⁶"Arrest of Woodhull and Claflin for Slander of Henry Ward Beecher," *Boston Evening Transcript*, November 4, 1872, 4.

²⁷After the trial, Woodhull went on a lecture tour. A few years later she sailed for England, renounced free love, and married a British aristocrat. For an excellent analysis of the life and thought of Victoria Claflin Woodhull, see Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

²⁸Victoria Claflin Woodhull, "Moral Cowardice and Modern Hypocrisy; or, Four Weeks in Ludlow Street Jail, the Suppressed Boston Speech of Victoria Woodhull," *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, December 8, 1872, 3-7, quoted in Martin Henry Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism: The Biography of Ezra Heywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 80. On the history of the free love movement and its battles with moral reformers, see Sears, *Sex Radicals*, 3-149.

²⁹Ezra Heywood, *The Word*, January 1876, 2. See also, for example, Ezra Heywood, "Intelligent Motherhood," *The Word*, December 1872, 1; Ezra Heywood, Editorial, *The Word*, February 1873, 3; Ezra Heywood, "Free Love League," *The Word*, May 1876, 2; Angela T. Heywood, "Woman's

For his part, Comstock certainly attempted to silence free love publications. In 1876, he sent John Lant, editor of the free thought journal, *The Toledo Sun*, to jail for eighteen months for publishing various alleged obscenities. Nailing Heywood, however, represented the top prize for Comstock.³⁰ Also in 1876, Heywood published *Cupid's Yokes*, a free love critique of marriage. This institution, Heywood reasoned, was not "a finality, but, rather, a device to be amended, or abolished, as enlightened moral sense may require." Relationships between men and women, he contended, should instead be based upon a "mingled sense of esteem, benevolence, and passional attraction," and "mutual discretion—a free compact, dissolvable at will." As Angela Heywood insisted, free love did not mean "reckless sexual intercourse" but self-regulation.³¹ The Heywoods likened the contemporary practice of marriage to prostitution. Little could be done to change marriage, Ezra lamented, because the "religious monomaniac" Comstock prevented the free exchange of ideas by censoring the mails.³² An incident the following year proved Heywood's point. Comstock purchased a copy of *Cupid's Yokes* as well as R. T. Trall's *Sexual Physiology* from Heywood through the mail under a false name. In November 1877, Comstock arrested Heywood for violating the federal obscenity law. Heywood's arrest by the "exponent of sectarian Repression," as he described Comstock, was a real spectacle.³³ Comstock grabbed Heywood by the collar as he walked off the stage after speaking at the Free Love League's convention in Boston and dragged him off to jail. At Heywood's January 1878 trial, a Boston jury determined that Trall's *Sexual Physiology* was not obscene. But it found *Cupid's Yokes* lewd and sentenced Heywood to two years in prison. Heywood immediately appealed the decision.³⁴ Meeting in Boston in May—just a few weeks before the federal appeals court rendered its decision—the New England Free Love League strongly protested Heywood's conviction. One resolution denounced Comstock's "lasciviously false reports" about the League. Their reception, they added, indicated "the mental depravity of those in church and state who

Love: Its Relations to Man and Society," *The Word*, June 1876, 1; Ezra Heywood, "Free Love League," *The Word*, July 1877, 3.

³⁰Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 100–41; Sears, *Sex Radicals*, 153–82.

³¹Angela T. Heywood, "Men's Laws and Love's Laws," *The Word*, September 1876, 1.

³²Ezra Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes: The Binding Forces of Conjugal Love. An Essay to Consider some Moral and Physiological Phases of Love and Marriage, Wherein is Asserted the Natural Right and Necessity of Sexual Self-Government* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing, 1877), 3, 12.

³³Ezra Heywood, letter to the editor, *Boston Commonwealth*, reprinted in *The Word*, December 1877, 3.

³⁴Ezra Heywood, "Trial and Verdict," *The Word*, February 1878, 2. See also "Mr. E. H. Heywood's Case," *Boston Globe*, January 25, 1878, 3.

employ this savage monster to supervise the morals of intelligent people."³⁵ The free love movement directly challenged the mainline Protestant establishment's unitive impulse. As anarchists, they threatened to subvert mainline Protestantism's organic or communal view of society. More obviously, the movement violated conventional Protestant convictions about sexuality and monogamy. In the face of such intolerable defiance, moral reformers felt compelled to suppress the writings of free love activists.

IV. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE NEW ENGLAND SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE

One day after the Free Love League concluded its meetings, local ministers gathered at Park Street Church to establish the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice. The "savage monster" himself traveled to Boston to help organize this anti-vice society. Frederick B. Allen, who had helped Comstock raise support for the New York anti-vice society, organized the Park Street Church meeting. The growing activities of the free love movement, as well as the apparent rising tide of obscene publications, inspired Boston Protestants to organize their own anti-vice society.³⁶

Although Heywood questioned the mental and moral capacity of those who endorsed Comstock's work, the New England Society attracted support from a broad range of New England Protestant elites. While a pair of prominent conservative clerics—Clarendon Street Baptist Church pastor, A. J. Gordon, and Yale College president, Noah Porter—served on the original board, the overwhelming majority were leading liberal Protestants. The board of directors and board of vice-presidents read like a "who's who" of liberal Protestant Boston Brahmins. Phillips Brooks, pastor of Trinity Church, Copley Square; William Lawrence, Brooks's successor as Episcopal Bishop; William Jewett Tucker, a professor of theology at Andover Seminary and later president of Dartmouth College; Robert Treat Paine, founder of Associated Charities; and George Herbert Palmer, a Harvard philosophy professor, were some of the organization's leaders in the late nineteenth century.³⁷ Most important was Frederick B. Allen who served as secretary from 1878 until 1915 and

³⁵"Free Love League," *The Word*, July 1878, 2.

³⁶Editorial Notes, *The Word*, July 1878, 2; "Society for the Suppression of Vice," *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 29, 1878, 2. For at least three years, Allen had been raising funds for the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice from wealthy Bostonians. Frederick B. Allen, 21 January 1875, "The Suppression of Obscene Literature," [circular], Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio.

³⁷New England Watch and Ward Society, *Sixty-Sixth Annual Report of The New England Watch and Ward Society, For the Year 1943-1944* (Boston: Office of the Society, 1944), 6-8 (hereafter cited as *Annual Report WWS*, [year]).

president from 1915 to 1925. The New England Society had an easy time raising funds to support its battle against "commercialized vice."³⁸

V. THE RATIONALES FOR CENSORSHIP

Several factors shaped the New England Society's rationale for censoring works like *Leaves of Grass*. Most obviously, the organization embraced the late nineteenth-century Victorian view of literature and defended it well into the twentieth century. Several leading New England "apostles" of Victorian culture, most notably Charles Eliot Norton, actively encouraged the work of the Watch and Ward Society.³⁹ Their concern about the moral character of literature motivated many to participate in the organization. "We cannot resist the inference," Yale president Noah Porter wrote in *Books and Reading; or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* "that books and reading must exert a powerful influence upon the *opinions* and *principles*. This they do both directly and indirectly." To determine the "moral influence" of a piece of literature, Porter quoted the English romantic poet Robert Southey: "Would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil, examine in what state of mind you lay it down. Has it induced you to suspect that that which you have been accustomed to think unlawful, may after all be innocent, and that that may be harmless, which you hitherto have been taught to think dangerous?" In an 1882 popular article on literature, Porter argued that published fiction "rightly used cannot but elevate the soul." He added that it "is the prerogative of the imagination to lift man to a higher mood, and to suggest to him nobler desires and aspirations." Bad literature, according to Porter, entailed more than poor diction or "an infelicitous style." It embodied "bad morals." Porter was quick to draw what he saw as an important distinction between immodest and immoral literature. The former, for instance, might be a "boldness of speech" rarely found in common conversations. He cited Shakespeare and Milton as well as a few passages in the Bible "which to the mind and ear seem and sound immodest." Unlike immoral literature, "there is nothing that is fitted to excite lascivious passion or to gratify prurient desire" in this type of literature. In other words, immoral fiction could "beguile to sin" and stimulate "foul and vicious passion."⁴⁰

³⁸Frederick Lewis Allen, *Frederick Baylies Allen: A Memoir* (Cambridge, Mass.: Privately Printed at the Riverside Press, 1929), 75–80; New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, *Annual Report of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice* (Boston: n.p., [1883]), 3 (hereafter cited as *Annual Report NESSV*, [year]).

³⁹*Annual Report WWS*, 1893–94, 30.

⁴⁰Noah Porter, *Books and Reading; or, What Books Shall I read and How Shall I read Them?*, 4th ed. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1870), 62, 72, 59–60, 89, 90; Porter, "Fiction: Its Capacity to Amuse, Instruct, and Elevate," *Our Continent*, February 15, 1882, 9. On Victorian

In the early twentieth century, the New England Society's rationale for censorship would selectively employ the quasi-scientific discourse of the social hygiene movement and certain pieces of the works of influential social scientists, such as G. Stanley Hall, who, incidentally, was president of the organization in 1908–09.⁴¹ But in the late nineteenth century the justification for suppression drew its warrant principally from moral philosophy and Protestant theology. Three of the founders of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice—Yale College president Noah Porter, Brown University president Ezekiel G. Robinson, and Amherst College president Julius H. Seelye—taught moral philosophy well into the late nineteenth century. Their moral philosophy textbooks provide insights into an important intellectual justification for the censorship of obscene literature as well as their opposition to the free love movement.

In *The Elements of Moral Science*, Porter outlined the moral reformers' understanding of human nature and the reputed impact that "licentious literature" had upon individuals and society. According to the faculty psychology common among nineteenth-century moral philosophers, the mind had three functions: "*feelings, will, and intellect.*" According to Porter, each person had, among other natural desires, appetites "of food and drink, of rest and sleep, and of sex." The sexual appetite, he explains, "has for its immediate object the transmission of life to other individuals." The "indulgence" of this appetite, however, is "not indispensable to the health or life of the individual." This appetite "can be controlled by withdrawing the attention from the objects and thoughts which would excite it." Each person, Porter explained, "owes it as a duty to himself, to indulge his appetites under the limits and restraints imposed by a fundamental regard to his bodily health and life."⁴² Licentious literature poses a mortal danger to a person's character because it could capture the imagination and drive an individual to abandon all responsibilities in the quest for pleasure. Robinson described the imagination as "one of the fruitful sources of moral good" and "the

literary culture, see Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time, 1912–1917* (1959; repr., New York: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 30–51; Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–19.

⁴¹ *Annual Report WWS, 1908–1909*, 29–35; Parker, *Purifying America*, 21–22.

⁴² Noah Porter, *The Elements of Moral Science, Theoretical and Practical* (New York: Scribner, 1887), 22, 325–26, 333. On Porter as well as nineteenth-century moral philosophy, see Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58–74; Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edward to John Dewey* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 128–45; D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

foster-parent of some of the worst" evils. It needed, according to Robinson, "constant care and discipline."⁴³

To the Protestant moral reformers, the advocates of free love promoted the unrestrained expression of sexual desires just like licentious literature. In stark contrast to Heywood's vision of sexuality, the moral reformers held that marriage provided the sole morally acceptable context in which the appetite for sexual pleasure could be fulfilled. Only in marriage, insisted Seelye, is "sexual intercourse consistent with virtue."⁴⁴ The "penalties of unchastity, and the vice into which it plunges," although "less marked it may be to the common eye than those of intemperance," observed Robinson, "are not a whit less ruinous, impairing health, blunting the sensibilities, poisoning the fountain of moral life, and blighting the whole soul." If these results were not frightening enough, Robinson added that unchastity often led to "idiocy or insanity."⁴⁵ Porter castigated free love advocates in his moral philosophy textbook. Free lovers, he wrote, "fail to recognize the fundamental truth, that love is little more than an animal passion, except as it is energized and controlled by the personal will under the sanction of duty, and is perpetuated by a continued and unbroken" marriage vow.⁴⁶

"Vicious" literature, as Porter explained in *Books and Reading*, is dangerous because it would "inflame and excite lascivious passion" that would ultimately imperil the family and society. Licentious feelings, like other "absorbing passions," eventually so pervert the will that the person becomes a brute. "Prurient and salacious literature," Porter concluded in *The Elements of Moral Science*, "furnishes abundant opportunity for the heightening and justification of unlawful passion, and the corruption of the individual and the community." Like free love, licentious literature threatened not only an individual's character but also civil society because it aroused uncontrollable passions that destroyed marriages and families, which he deemed the foundational institution out of which the state "naturally grows."⁴⁷

Claiming that reading obscene literature ruins a person's character did not justify the censorship of licentious literature by either voluntary associations

⁴³Ezekiel G. Robinson, *Principles and Practice of Morality: Ethical Principles Discussed and Applied* (Boston: Silver, Rogers, and Co., 1888), 200.

⁴⁴Julius H. Seelye, ed., *A System of Morals*, by Laurens P. Hickok (Boston: Ginn and Company, [1880], 1896), 51.

⁴⁵Robinson, *Principles and Practice of Morality*, 199, no. 1. According to Seelye, "God, in nature, has surrounded" the sexual passion "by the many checks and safeguards of the native modesty and previous estimate of virtue in the pure, the public disgrace and self-reproach which attaches to the impure, the most inveterate and loathsome diseases which follow in its train, and the debasing of every refined sensibility which follows on the loss of sexual virtue." Seelye, *A System of Morals*, 51.

⁴⁶Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 470.

⁴⁷Porter, *Books and Reading*, 90; Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 336, 487.

or the state. Porter, however, offered a rather robust rationale for the suppression of vice by voluntary associations and the state. As outlined in *The Elements of Moral Science*, individuals have an immutable moral obligation to combat the corruption generated by licentious literature, not only because of the danger that it poses to themselves, but also to others. Porter emphasized that individuals have a moral obligation to "reclaim and recover" their neighbors caught in vice by stamping it out as well as "to prevent these evils and the causes of them."⁴⁸

While Porter saw voluntary associations as the most effective means for curbing "vicious" institutions associated with licentious practices, he did not rule out a role for the state in combating and preventing vice. As he explained, "the state not only may, but must, legislate not only for the punishment, but also for the prevention of crime." The "public order," he insisted, "cannot be preserved so long as a lower stratum is becoming ignorant and brutalized from one generation to another."⁴⁹

The anti-vice activists' justification for the state's duty to curb social vices, such as obscene literature, rests upon their organic view of society. Since "man is born in society," Porter reasoned, he "is a 'political animal,' existing in a social organism." To Porter, the state was simply the family writ large. "It is almost superfluous to say that the state naturally grows out of the family, inasmuch as every family is already a state in miniature."⁵⁰ Robinson shared this communal vision of society: "We begin life in this world as members of human society and under civil governments."⁵¹ The Whig-Republican tradition, which dominated New England for much of the nineteenth century, further reinforced this organic view of society because it stressed self-discipline, rational order, and social responsibility.⁵² Late nineteenth-century Protestant moral reformers certainly did not think that the free market could determine what books should be available for public consumption. Nor did they think what a person read was a matter of individual liberty. The state, in short, had a duty to restrict what type of literature was available to the public in order to safeguard civil morality. But to free love activists, Protestants were legislating personal morality.

⁴⁸Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 437, 438. See also, Robinson, *Principles and Practice of Morality*, 244, 249–50.

⁴⁹Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 493–94.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 488, 397, 487, 396, 491. On the organic view of society of Porter and other moral philosophers, see Louise L. Stevenson, *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830–1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 129–30; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 126, 128.

⁵¹Robinson, *Principles and Practice of Morality*, 205.

⁵²D. G. Hart, "Mainstream Protestantism, 'Conservative' Religion, and Civic Society," in *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*, ed. Hugh Heclo and Wilfred M. McClay (Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 199–203.

The conflict between moral reformers and free love and free speech activists not only pivoted on the alternative views of sexuality but also upon their radically different conceptions of society and view of the state. Whereas the moral reformers in the Whig-Republican tradition embraced an organic view of society, free love activists, such as Ezra Heywood, and free speech advocates, most notably Robert Ingersoll, advanced a radically individualistic view. To Heywood, the free and autonomous individual was the sole building block of a civil society—not the church, family, and state as the moral reformers believed. Like the moral reformers, individual anarchists rested their political views upon the American democratic tradition, but they emphasized a very different part of that tradition. In *Social Ethics*, for instance, Heywood pointed to the political thought of Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and other “recognized exponents of Natural Law and Order” who teach “that the right to do what we will, provided we invade not the equal freedom of others,” is completely a matter of personal liberty. Whereas the Whig-Republican tradition venerated self-control, orderliness, and the common good, the free love activists represented a radical libertarian strain of the Jeffersonian tradition that separated religion and public life. Consequently, Heywood deemed efforts to regulate sexuality through marriage laws “unnatural” and “unconstitutional.”⁵³ Likewise, any effort to suppress any type of literature constituted an assault on “the natural right of American citizens to acquire and impart knowledge.”⁵⁴

By contrast, moral reformers like Porter insisted that the community, “as organized into civil government,” has the “duty and right” to “prevent and remove ignorance and vice” by means of “public arrangements.”⁵⁵ Seelye also argued that the state has a right and the responsibility to “guard the public freedom against all particular encroachments.” He cited prostitution, illicit drugs, gambling, and “immoral speech and publications” as examples of when “individual passion or interest induces some to disregard the public

⁵³Ezra Heywood, *Social Ethics: An Essay to Show that, Since the Right of Private Judgment Must be Respected in Morals, as well as in Religion, Free Rum, the Conceded Right of Choice in Beverages, and Required Power to Decline Intoxicants Promotes Rational Sobriety and Assures Temperance* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing, n.d.), 5. One of the chief reasons that the state “must be made unnecessary,” Benjamin R. Tucker argued in the initial issue of his periodical, *Liberty*, was that the state “stifles thought.” Benjamin R. Tucker, “Our Purpose,” *Liberty*, August 6, 1881, 1. On Tucker and individualist anarchy, see Wendy McElroy, *The Debates of Liberty: An Overview of Individual Anarchism, 1881–1908* (Landam, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003); Michael E. Coughlin and Charles H. Hamilton, eds., *Benjamin R. Tucker and The Champions of Liberty: A Centenary Anthology* (St. Paul, Minn.: Michael E. Coughlin and Charles H. Hamilton Publishers, 1975). On Heywood’s view of society, see also Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 56.

⁵⁴Heywood, letter to the editor, 3.

⁵⁵Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 438.

rights of man, and invade the freedom of the commonwealth by putting in jeopardy the property, the morals, the health, or lives of others." According to Seelye, the manufacturers and consumers of products that "contribute to the public disturbance" are "both alike within the sovereign authority to be restrained." Products deemed "pernicious," he insisted, "have no protection from law." Seelye dismissed as a red herring the libertarian claim that the freedom of the press or free speech rights protects those who sell or read allegedly objectionable literature: "The plea of any man that he has a right to use his own as he will, is wholly impertinent." Because obscene literature endangers the "public peace," Seelye reasoned, the state's obligation to civil society entails the suppression of it.⁵⁶ Moral reformers expressed few misgivings about suppressing obscene literature because, like free love views of marriage, it imperiled public Protestantism as the nation's common civic morality.

Besides moral philosophy, Protestant theology provided another source for the New England Society's rationale for censorship. The organization was dominated by leading first- and second-generation liberal Protestants.⁵⁷ Three key convictions lay at the heart of Protestant modernism: the belief that human society is moving toward the realization of the Kingdom of God; the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it; and the conscious adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture.⁵⁸ The views of George A. Gordon of Old South Church on human sin and social evil offer an important insight into the anti-vice society's theological rationale for censorship. Gordon, who was a vice-president of the society for forty-two years, carefully balanced his eschatological optimism with moral realism. He expressed great optimism about Western society's progress. The gradual but "universal movement from darkness to light," he contended, assures believers "that injustice and inhumanity are not here to stay." Both corporate and personal evil, he argued, obstructed the "speedy realization" of the Kingdom of God. Gordon identified three sources of personal evil: atavism, a "weakness of human reason," and the "perversity" of the human will. "The believer in human progress," Gordon concluded,

⁵⁶Seelye, *A System of Morals*, 139, 173–74, 174, emphasis added, 175.

⁵⁷For example, William Jewett Tucker, who was president of the New England Society in the early 1890s, was tried for heresy in the 1886 at Andover Seminary. His acquittal signaled the victory of the New Theology over Edwardsean Calvinism in the Congregational Church. Phillips Brooks's 1891 election as Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts likewise marked the triumph of the Broad Church theology in that denomination. Daniel Day Williams, *The Andover Liberals: A Study in American Theology* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1941); Gillis Harp, *Brahmin Prophet: Phillips Brooks and the Path of Liberal Protestantism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

⁵⁸William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (1976; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 2.

"must reckon with the fact of wickedness."⁵⁹ Destructive literature threatened to nurture an animalism and perversity that could sabotage character and ultimately retard the coming kingdom. Gordon's effort to adapt religious ideas to modern culture inspired him to reject traditional theological formulations as antiquated.⁶⁰ Although modernists distinguished between the form and substance of Christian theology and viewed creeds as temporary and changeable, these Victorians considered ethics as immutable as the most staunch old guard Congregationalist. So he gave his wholehearted support to the work of the New England Society to ensure that the Boston youths loitering in Copley Square never put their hands upon Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The expression of theological certainties was malleable to the spirit of the times. Morality was not.

Why is it the "duty" of a "private philanthropy" and not the police to ensure "the existence of a healthy social state?" asked Francis G. Peabody, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard. When "we want to do a thing," he told an audience at the New England anti-vice society's annual meeting, "first of all we do it ourselves, and then in its own place and way the State learns the lesson of public sentiment and obeys it." He cited the abolitionist movement as an example. "In precisely this way, when the community becomes aware of these subtle, insidious solicitations to sin smouldering in our midst, then first of all the popular conscience speaks, not to blunt public activity but to fortify it and to meet the immediate responsibilities of citizenship."⁶¹ Peabody's conviction that citizens had a "duty" to curb vice reflects the Protestant presumption that they had a custodial responsibility for American culture. Moral philosophy, Whig-Republican tradition, and Protestant theology nurtured this conviction.

Because its members conceived of pernicious literature as a "social problem," this organization was also one of many voluntary societies that emerged in the late nineteenth century to attempt to reform different aspects of American society that troubled Protestants. The New England Society did not arrest the consumers of lewd literature but rather those who produced and sold it. As its leaders repeatedly insisted, "We concern ourselves with fighting vice as a business, not vice as a diversion; public immorality, not private immorality." Likewise, the society professed that it did not intend to "supplant" but to "supplement" the work of the police.⁶² New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco had similar organizations. They were part of a larger late nineteenth-century movement of extralegal law enforcement agencies that attempted to reform municipal

⁵⁹George A. Gordon, *The New Epoch for Faith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), 17, 361, 36-41.

⁶⁰Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 134.

⁶¹*Annual Report WWS, 1897-98*, 41-42.

⁶²*Annual Report WWS, 1914-15*, 5, 21; *Annual Report WWS, 1923-24*, 6.

governments.⁶³ Other parachurch and professional organizations—such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (which established its own Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature in 1883), the Christian Endeavor, the League of American Mothers, and the American Library Association—also promoted censorship. So did numerous Protestant denominations. In 1895, Protestants established the International Reform Federation in Washington, D.C., to lobby for censorship and other moral reform causes.⁶⁴ Thus the New England Society was part of a broad array of voluntary associations comprising the Protestant establishment that advocated moral reform, as Peabody put it, to advance "social progress."⁶⁵ The informal Protestant establishment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as William Hutchison notes, was comprised not only of powerful Protestant denominations but also of a large network of cultural, literary, educational, and journalistic enterprises, and a personal network of friendships that extended across churches, political life, and virtually all major secular institutions. It also included a host of nondenominational voluntary associations that championed foreign missions, peace, temperance, and various other kinds of moral and social reform.⁶⁶ The New England Society was the Protestant establishment in action.

VI. THE SUPPRESSION OF *LEAVES OF GRASS*

When Boston district attorney Oliver Stevens threatened to charge Whitman's publisher with violating the state's obscenity law in 1882, it was an obscenity law that the New England Society had helped to write. Inspired by the passage of the Comstock Act in 1873, a number of states strengthened their own anti-obscenity laws. Massachusetts revised its obscenity law in 1879. The following year, the New England Society successfully introduced an amendment to that law. It prohibited books, pamphlets, ballads and the like "containing obscene, indecent, or impure language" and also works "manifestly tending to the corruption of the morals or youth."⁶⁷ The absence of clear definitions

⁶³The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, founded in 1872, is just one example. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 185–91.

⁶⁴Parker, *Purifying America*, 5–6, 35–36; Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876–1939: A Study in Cultural Change* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 28; Wilbur F. Crafts, *Patriotic Studies of a Quarter Century of Moral Legislation in Congress for Men's Leagues, Young People's Societies and Civic Clubs including Extracts from Bills, Acts and Documents of United States Congress Relating to Moral and Social Reforms, 1888–1911* (Washington, D.C.: International Reform Bureau, 1911); Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*.

⁶⁵*Annual Report WWS*, 1897–98, 41.

⁶⁶Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 61.

⁶⁷*Annual Report NESSV, 1879–80*, 3; Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1880* (Boston: Rand, Avery and Co.,

for the key terms "obscene, indecent, or impure," as well as the exact meaning of "manifestly" provided the society with plenty of leeway to prosecute publications it deemed obscene. Massachusetts's law proved to be an important institutional structure that empowered the anti-vice society as it exercised jurisdiction over literature in New England.

Less than three weeks after the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice was organized, the U.S. Circuit Court heard Heywood's appeal. The court was not persuaded by Heywood's argument that the Comstock Act was "unconstitutional, inoperative and void." The conviction was upheld and Heywood began serving a two-year sentence at Dedham State Prison in June.⁶⁸ Outraged free lovers and free thinkers organized an "Indignation Meeting" at Faneuil Hall in early August to protest Heywood's imprisonment.⁶⁹ This meeting moved the free lovers to circulate a petition, which gathered a reported six thousand signatures, to secure a presidential pardon for Heywood. Although the moral reformers countered their arguments, in December 1878 President Rutherford B. Hayes pardoned Heywood.⁷⁰ "A man guilty of circulating writing or publishing obscene books—books intended or calculated to corrupt the young would find no favor with me," Hayes wrote in his private diary. However, he concluded, "In this case the writings were objectionable but were not obscene, lascivious, lewd, or corrupting in the criminal sense."⁷¹ When Whitman's

1880), 418; Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Journal of the Senate, for the Year 1880* (Boston: Rand, Avery and Co., 1880), 214; Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts, in the Years 1880–81* (Boston: Rand, Avery, and Co., 1881), 64.

⁶⁸United States v. Heywood, Circuit Court, Federal Records, vol. 78, 1877–78, 695–96, District Court of the United States of America, for District of Massachusetts, National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Mass.

⁶⁹*Proceedings of the Indignation Meeting Held in Faneuil Hall, Thursday Evening, August 1, 1878, to Protest Against the Injury Done to the Freedom of the Press by the Conviction and Imprisonment of Ezra H. Heywood* (Boston: Benj. R. Tucker, 1878); "Free Speech: Great Meeting in Faneuil Hall," *Boston Globe*, August 2, 1878, 1; "The Heywood Indignation Meeting," *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 2, 1878, 2.

⁷⁰"The Pardon," *The Word*, December 1878, 2; "Heywood Pardoned," *Boston Globe*, December 20, 1878, 4; "Heywood at Liberty," *Boston Globe*, January 4, 1879, 4.

⁷¹Rutherford B. Hayes, *Hayes: The Diary of a President 1875–1881: Covering the Disputed Election, the End of Reconstruction, and the Beginning of Civil Service*, ed. T. Harry Williams (New York: David McKay, 1964), 184–85. This victory inspired free lovers to seek a pardon for another convicted free love activist and editor of the *The Truth Seeker*, D. M. Bennett, who had been arrested by Comstock. A judge had sentenced Bennett to thirteen months in prison and fined him three hundred dollars in June 1879. This time the anti-pardon campaign, which gathered the signatures of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Talbot, Unitarian theologian James Freeman Clarke, and a number of leaders in the New England Society, won. "The Opposition," *The Word*, September 1879, 2; "Free Speech, Free Mails," *The Word*, October 1879, 2; Robert G. Ingersoll to Rutherford B. Hayes, 2 July 1879, Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, Rutherford B.

publisher withdrew *Leaves of Grass* in April 1882, the level of discontent among free lovers with the "vulgar, superstitious, vindictive conspiracy against civil rights" by Comstock and other "narrow-minded blockheads" in anti-vice societies had been brewing for more than two years.⁷²

VII. WHITMAN AND THE "WHITMANIACS" RESPOND TO THE SUPPRESSION OF *LEAVES OF GRASS*

"I have heard nothing but expurgate, expurgate, expurgate, from the day I started," Whitman told Horace Traubel, his longtime friend and secretary. "Expurgation is apology—yes, surrender—yes, an admission that something or other was wrong."⁷³ Once Whitman and Osgood severed their relationship, the poet went on the attack. While Whitman published only one response to the controversy, he plotted with two of his closest confidants—Richard M. Bucke, the superintendent of the London Insane Asylum in southwest Ontario, and William D. O'Connor, a novelist who worked at the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C.—to challenge what the latter termed "the greatest outrage of the century." O'Connor had attempted to rally political contacts in Washington, D.C., including the free thinker Robert Ingersoll, to persuade the U.S. Attorney General to pressure Stevens into reversing his threat of prosecution.⁷⁴ Having failed, he turned his attention to marshaling outrage against the suppression. Like "a skunk to a barn-door, as an example to deter," O'Connor wrote, Comstock "ought to be crushed, signally, publicly, in the interest of free letters and the rights of thought."⁷⁵

In a letter to the *Springfield Republican* in May 1882, Bucke attacked the suppression of *Leaves of Grass*. The work, he wrote, was not obscene but "the most honest, pure, religious and moral" book ever published. Whitman's crime, Bucke argued, was that he believed "in the grandeur and good of humanity in all its parts and relations," including "his sexual

Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio; Anthony Comstock to Rutherford B. Hayes, 7 July 1879, Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio. On Hayes and the controversy over Heywood and Bennett, see Ari Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes: Warrior & President* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 383–86; Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 118–19; Sears, *Sex Radicals*, 166–68, 171–72.

⁷²"Mrs. Hayes' Censorship of the Press," *The Word*, March 1880, 2.

⁷³Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 1:150–51. Despite his objections to expurgation, Whitman had a hand in, or at least approved, four different expurgated editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Ed Falsom, "Leaves of Grass, Junior: Whitman's Compromise with Discriminating Tastes," *American Literature* 63 (1991): 641–63.

⁷⁴William D. O'Connor to Richard M. Bucke, 29 April 1882, Container 53, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

⁷⁵William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 17 April 1883, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 4:193.

passion, and the organs and the acts" by which this passion "finds its gratification." The suppression of any book under any under circumstance, Bucke added, was "wrong, inexpedient and contrary to the spirit of this age."⁷⁶ In three essays published in the *New York Tribune* between May and August, O'Connor, who had made a career of defending Whitman from obscenity charges, largely repeated the same two points that Bucke had made but did so with a great deal more histrionics. O'Connor declared that Emerson, "our man of holier heart," had praised the twenty-two passages that Stevens deemed allegedly obscene. O'Connor ridiculed Osgood's "shameful transaction," mocked the district attorney's banning of "liberty of thought," and berated Comstock for waging a "holy war" against the poet. In O'Connor's second letter, he responded to a critic who pointed out that Emerson had cautioned Whitman against publishing the "Children of Adam" poems. O'Connor's final letter scorned "the musing owl" of the New York anti-vice society. "So long as Mr. Comstock chooses to confine his industry to the removal of the stuff which Dutch and English lust produced," he argued, "all may be well with him." But "let him dare to throw into his night-cart that pearl of great price . . . and he will find himself the centre of a tornado."⁷⁷ Comstock eagerly took up the challenge.

Not only did the two leading "Whitmaniacs," as one Whitman scholar described Burke and O'Connor, denounce the suppression of Whitman's work but two nationally prominent free lovers, Ezra Heywood and Benjamin R. Tucker, and one locally notorious free thinker, George Chainey, also quickly joined the fray.⁷⁸ Chainey's and Heywood's initial participation came unsolicited but Tucker's involvement was in part courted by O'Connor. During the late spring and summer of 1882, O'Connor corresponded extensively with them and fed them details about the suppression, including copies of correspondence between Whitman, Osgood, and Stevens.

Given their similar views of sexuality and free speech as well as their common criticisms of Protestant Christianity, Whitman and free lovers and free thinkers were natural allies. In fact, one of Whitman's earliest reviewers proclaimed *Leaves of Grass* to be a manifestation of the "lecherous lips" of

⁷⁶R. M. Bucke, letter to the editor, *Springfield Republican*, May 23, 1882, 1.

⁷⁷William D. O'Connor, letter to the editor, *New York Tribune*, May 25, 1882, 3; John W. Chadwick, letter to the editor, *New York Tribune*, May 25, 1882, 7; William D. O'Connor, letter to the editor, *New York Tribune*, June 18, 1882; William D. O'Connor, "Mr. Comstock as Cato the Censor," *New York Tribune*, August 27, 1882, 5. O'Connor's most notable contribution to American literature was his 1866 apologia of Whitman in the wake of his dismissal from the Department of the Interior in 1865, *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (New York: Bunce and Huntington, 1866). On O'Connor's role in defending Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1882, see Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion*, 123-38.

⁷⁸Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion*, 132.

the burgeoning free love movement.⁷⁹ Whitman even got fired from his position with the Interior Department in 1865 because Secretary of the Interior James Harlan believed the poet "was a free lover."⁸⁰ Drawing upon the passionate theory of sexuality introduced to America by the French utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, and developed by, among others, John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community, free love advocates and Whitman held an unbridled commitment to sexual self-determination. Whitman also distinguished between "adhesiveness," or comradeship, and "amativeness," or heterosexual love.⁸¹ Like Ezra and Angela Heywood, Whitman glorified sexual relations based solely on amativeness or passionate attractions. *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote in 1888, "is avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality."⁸²

Victorian Protestants, like those in the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, by contrast, insisted that sexual impulses should only be expressed within the confines of marriage. In the eyes of Homer Sprague, president of the New England Society, the "self-styled reformers" of the free love movement wanted to "reconstruct society on a new foundation" by "bringing back the golden age of monkeydom and—liberty!"⁸³ The moral philosopher Noah Porter was somewhat less melodramatic in his assessment of free love. The movement, he wrote, "dethrones the will from its appropriate dominion over the feelings, and releases the emotions from their responsibility to the conscience." As a result, free love not only destroys marriage but also "a wholesome and most necessary discipline to the duties of good citizenship and of personal responsibility."⁸⁴

⁷⁹Griswold, *New York Criterion*, November 10, 1855, in *Walt Whitman*, ed. Hindus, 31.

⁸⁰Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:798, quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 456.

⁸¹Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 207–210, 222, 225, 461; William H. Schurr, "Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: The Making of a Sexual Revolution," *Soundings* 74 (1991): 126; David Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 139; Rosemary Graham, "The Prostitute in the Garden: Walt Whitman, *Fanny Hill*, and the Fantasy of Female Pleasure," *ELH: English Literary History* 64 (1997): 484–85.

⁸²Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," *November Boughs* (1888), reprinted in *Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1900), 556–57.

⁸³Homer B. Sprague, "Societies for the Suppression of Vice," *Education* 3 (1882): 74. At the height of the *Leaves of Grass* controversy, one moral reformer wrote: "The passions are normally and gradually developed in man as in the lower animals; but the brutes are under no restraint. Instinct, impulse, and opportunity determine their actions. Yet, as passion strengthens, it stimulates the imagination. Marriage, only, affords legitimate gratification. Lust, indulged in thought or deep apart from love, is moral impurity; sexual love with lust, apart from wedlock, is the spirit of adultery. This is the strain placed by God, human nature, and law, upon man." J. M. Buckley, "The Suppression of Vice," *North American Review* 134 (1882): 495–96.

⁸⁴Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, 478.

Whitman's "Children of Adam" cluster offered a dramatically different understanding of sexuality. He urged Americans to return to the Garden of Eden and recover the sexual innocence of Adam and Eve before the fall.⁸⁵ Like free love advocates, *Leaves of Grass* celebrated sexuality unfettered by the fig leaves of social convention. Space permits only two brief examples. "Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and Lusty by Nature," Whitman begins his ode "To a Common Prostitute." Unapologetic, the author sings the praise of the woman he has hired for sex: "My girl I appoint with you an appointment, / and I charge you that you make preparations to be worthy to meet me."⁸⁶ According to one Whitman scholar, the poet "gives a modern vision of Christ's compassionate treatment of Mary Magdalene by fusing democratic sympathy with images of beauty and ennoblement."⁸⁷ In the first stanza of "A Woman Waits for Me," the author articulates his pounding desire for the woman who is anticipating his arrival. The second stanza suggests that sex is a natural part of creation. The third and fourth stanzas emphasize how both the man and the woman speak of the pleasures of physical contact: "Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex, / Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers." The final four stanzas describe the act of intercourse. "I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me. / Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself."⁸⁸ Given Whitman's exaltation of sexual self-determination based upon passionate attraction, it is little wonder that the moral reformers sought to suppress his work.

Whitman also shared with free love advocates a common commitment to free speech. As noted above, he scorned expurgated editions and the infringement upon his constitutional right to free speech. After Whitman was fired from his position in 1865, O'Connor denounced the dismissal as but one manifestation of the effort "throughout Christendom" to "obstruct the freedom of letters."⁸⁹ As individualist anarchists, Ezra and Angela Heywood and Benjamin R. Tucker cherished free speech as a sacred right. After his 1878 conviction at the hands of Comstock, Heywood asked "whether the American people, themselves . . . or Anthony Comstock, shall decide what books may be read; whether freedom of conscience, of speech, of the press, and of the mails, the most precious and indispensable achievements of civilization, are to be permanently suppressed in these States."⁹⁰

⁸⁵James E. Miller, Jr. "Children of Adam (1860)," *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, 115.

⁸⁶Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 387.

⁸⁷Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 230.

⁸⁸Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 101–03; Maire Mullins, "A Woman Waits for Me (1856)," *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, 794–95.

⁸⁹O'Connor, *The Good Gray Poet*, reprinted in Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion*, 202.

⁹⁰Ezra H. Heywood, "The Outlook," *The Word*, August 1878, 3.

Whitman, the free love activists, and the free thinker George Chainey also held in common a similar critique of Protestant cultural hegemony. This is not to say, however, that Whitman, free lovers, and free thinkers had similar religious views. Heywood, who had aspired to become a Baptist minister while attending Brown University, was a spiritualist. Tucker and Chainey were atheists. Tucker, for example, gleefully asserted that the French Enlightenment had "brought the authority of the supernatural into disrepute. The Church has been declining ever since."⁹¹ Chainey, also a former Baptist minister, excoriated Protestant Boston from his "Infidel Pulpit" every Sunday afternoon in Paine Memorial Hall.⁹² Whitman, by contrast, viewed himself as a prophet of a new post-Christian religion. Informed by transcendentalism and religious romanticism, Whitman believed that the divine presence in all of creation was part of its evolutionary process toward higher perfection. At the human level, as one Whitman scholar observed, "this divine force manifested itself in the instinctive desires of the soul—desires for sex, love, freedom, immorality—which could only be satisfied through the soul's participation in divinity."⁹³

What Whitman did share with Tucker, Chainey, and Heywood was an antagonism toward public Protestantism. "The churches are one vast lie," Whitman insisted. The "priests are continually telling what they know well enough is not so, and keeping back what they know is so. The spectacle is a pitiful one."⁹⁴ To Heywood, the Comstock Act expressed an "incarnate Intolerance" paralleled only by "Medieval Inquisitions."⁹⁵ Tucker denounced both liberal Protestant moralists and orthodox theologians. "The sickening gush and cant of some of these ethical cranks is not a whit less contemptible

⁹¹Tucker, "Our Purpose," 1.

⁹²Benjamin R. Tucker, "Mr. Chainey's Gospel," *Liberty*, November 12, 1881, 2.

⁹³Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 21. Whitman once described *Leaves of Grass* to Traubel as a "New Bible." *Complete Writings*, 9:6. According to Kuebrich, the role of religion in *Leaves of Grass* is best understood not as one theme among others but constituting "a coherent world view that informs the other themes and integrates them with one another." As such, he notes, *Leaves of Grass* is designed "to emancipate the human subject and promote his or her development. After announcing himself as a saving prophet in 'Song of Myself,' Whitman immediately leads the reader through two sequences: 'Children of Adam,' designed to sanctify the body and liberate heterosexual passion; and 'Calamus,' designed to liberate men from emotional repression, call for new levels of male intimacy, and united the soul with God.... he presents a vision of a loving God who not only provides for evolutionary and historical progress but also personal immortality and the soul's ongoing development in the afterlife." Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 10; Kuebrich, "Religion," *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, 583.

⁹⁴Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1332, quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 238. Whitman once told Traubel that "the negative virtues of the churches are the most menacing, to me the most abhorrent, of all professed virtues.... The morals of the churches: they might be morals if they were not something else: I have always looked about to discover a word to describe the situation: how Jesus and the churches have got divorced: how the institution has destroyed the spirit." Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 1:97–98.

⁹⁵Heywood, letter to the editor, 3.

than the orthodox bigot's whining over the Blood of the Lamb," he complained. "With cool effrontery," he insisted, they both "set up standards, ways, and methods of conduct and then simmer, scold, and dictate over other people's ways and walk in life," and constantly strive to inflict the penalties of social ostracism upon those "who morally choose to mind their own business."⁹⁶

When the Osgood edition of *Leaves of Grass* came out in the fall of 1881, free lovers "praised all its naked truthfulness and purity."⁹⁷ After the New England anti-vice society successfully suppressed *Leaves of Grass* in 1882, Whitman responded to his critics in an article published in the *North American Review*.⁹⁸ The poet observed two prevailing American attitudes toward sexual matters. The "conventional one," fueled by "Puritanism," advocated an ignorance and repression that resulted in "ill births, inefficient maturity, snickering pruriency," and "human pathologic evil and morbidity." The second, "by far the largest," found expression in "erotic stories" that dwelt on "sensual voluptuousness." Whitman called for "a new departure" that viewed "the sexual passion in itself, while normal and unperverted," as "inherently legitimate, creditable, not necessarily an improper theme for a poet." He aspired to redeem the subject from the "pens of blackguards" and show that "motherhood, fatherhood, sexuality," and all that "belongs to them," can be "openly and joyously" addressed from the "highest artistic" perspective. Might not, Whitman concluded, "the Creative Power itself deign a smile of approval?"⁹⁹ The new edition, however, left some reviewers wincing. In the *New York Tribune*, one asked "whether anybody—even a poet—ought to take off his trousers in the marketplace."¹⁰⁰ Other

⁹⁶"Morality and Purity Cranks," *Liberty*, August 9, 1883, 5.

⁹⁷Benjamin R. Tucker, "Leaves of Grass," *Liberty*, November 26, 1881, 3.

⁹⁸Walt Whitman to John Burroughs, 28 April 1882, *Correspondence*, 3:274.

⁹⁹Walt Whitman, "A Memorandum at a Venture," *North American Review* 134 (1882): 546–48. To Whitman's dismay he could not shake the association with erotic literature. Apparently people wrote Whitman letters or sent him writings that were obscene. He got one such letter and showed it to Traubel and said: "It has always been a puzzle to me why people think that because I wrote Children of Adam, Leaves of Grass, I must perforce be interested in all the literature of rape, all the pornograph [*sic*] of vile minds. I have not only been made a target by those who disposed me but a victim of violent interpretation by those who condoned me. You know the sort of stuff that's sent to me here." Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 4:119.

¹⁰⁰"New Publications," *New York Tribune*, November 19, 1881, 6. Like Whitman's contemporaries, Whitman scholars today continue to disagree over whether Whitman offered a true alternative to both erotic and Victorian literature. David Reynolds, for instance, argues that Whitman offered a "chaste alternative" and "a new objectivity to the exploration of human sexuality" when compared to the erotic writing of his day. *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 223; Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 298. Rosemary Graham, by contrast, argues that "Whitman's best erotic writing owes a substantial debt to pornography," especially the eighteenth-century British erotic classic, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, or as it is better known, *Fanny Hill*. "The Prostitute in the Garden," 569–97. On the sexuality of Whitman's poetry, see also Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 44–47, 327–28, 330; Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet* (New York:

newspapers and literary journals applauded Osgood's decision to withdraw *Leaves of Grass* from circulation. Society, one critic wrote, "has the right and the duty to step up and say, No, you shall not do this." Yet others denounced the decision. Massachusetts, one *Boston Globe* editorial complained, has put "the thumb-screws upon thought and consigns ideas to dungeons built by ignorance and infested by squatting toads of hypocrisy and sham modesty."¹⁰¹

VIII. FREE LOVERS AND FREE THINKERS TAKE UP WHITMAN'S CAUSE

Free love advocates and free thinkers, having battled moral reformers for more than a decade, eagerly took up Whitman's cause. In a "sermon" in early June 1882, George Chainey proclaimed, "How delightful to recline at one's ease in the summer grass! How exasperating to want to do so," he added, "only to be told by some official sign to keep off the grass!" Chainey praised Whitman's poetry for exalting "the glory of the body as well as that of the soul. . . . In his sight, no part or passion of the body is to be slighted or regarded as vulgar." Chainey repeated Emerson's admiration of Whitman's work. He also viciously denounced the "autocratic, inquisitorial, self-appointed guardian of the public morals" who trampled upon "the sacred rights of the liberty of conscience."¹⁰² Chainey, ironically, was about to encounter one such custodian of public Protestantism, Edward S. Tobey, the postmaster of Boston and one of the founding vice-presidents of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice.

Fearing that he might be prosecuted for violating the Comstock Act, Chainey's printer refused to publish the sermon because *This World* included Whitman's poems, "To a Common Prostitute" and "A Woman Waits for Me." After checking postal guidelines, Chainey issued the number as a special supplement and consulted the Boston postmaster, Tobey, who, after reading the poems and checking his regulations, determined that the issue could be mailed. But Tobey, as Chainey recounted in letters to both O'Connor and Whitman, had second thoughts about the matter. He consulted the district attorney, Oliver Stevens, "who aroused his doubts as to its mailability." Tobey then decided to refer the entire matter to the postmaster

Oxford University Press, 1989), 308-23; Allen, *Solitary Singer*, 64; Paul Zweig, *Whitman: The Making of a Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 12; Schurr, "Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," 101-28.

¹⁰¹"The Suppression of Walt Whitman," *Literary World*, June 3, 1882, 180; "Leaves of Grass," Editorial, *Boston Globe*, May 28, 1882, 6.

¹⁰²Chainey, "Keep Off the Grass," 3, 4, 6-7, 8. Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 142-60.

general in Washington, D.C.¹⁰³ At this point, O'Connor leaped into the fray. O'Connor wanted "to draw the enemy's fire until some *act* of resistance is committed." He hoped that either the New England Society or Comstock would engage him in a fight so that he could further discredit them and, more importantly, force them into court where he could secure a legal vindication of *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁰⁴ O'Connor might have also wanted to reassure the Philadelphia publisher, Rees, Walsh and Company, who had agreed to reprint the Osgood edition, that *Leaves of Grass* was immune from persecution.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, controversy might help "secure a prodigious sale" of books.¹⁰⁶ O'Connor recruited Robert Ingersoll to help him persuade the acting postmaster general in Washington, D.C., to allow Chainey's periodical to be distributed. "We had a red-hot time over the outrage," O'Connor wrote Whitman.¹⁰⁷ The postmaster general told Tobey to release the publication for circulation.¹⁰⁸ Tobey dragged his feet for several days before actually placing *This World* in the mail. Indignant over the delay, Chainey confronted Tobey and told the postmaster "that he has the Gospel to comfort him and Jesus to forgive him all the lies he has told about this business."¹⁰⁹

As soon as news of the suppression of Whitman's poetry hit the streets, Benjamin R. Tucker sarcastically praised the state for banning the "villainous teaching" of Whitman and saving "our pure and innocent youth" from his "fiendish designs."¹¹⁰ He also lambasted the "asinine postmaster" for attempting to suppress *This World*.¹¹¹ Since the New England Society worked in a much more circumspect fashion than the publicity-seeking Comstock, Tucker also provided O'Connor throughout the controversy in the spring and summer of 1882 with information about who was behind the

¹⁰³George Chainey to William D. O'Connor, 27 June 1882, Container 22, reel 13, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress; George Chainey to Walt Whitman, 27 July 1882, Container 194, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 20, 1882; and "'The Late Attack on Walt Whitman's Book.' From the Philadelphia Press," n.p., two newspaper clippings included in George Chainey to William D. O'Connor, 11 July 1882. Excerpts from the Trent Collection of Whitmaniana located in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library Duke University.

¹⁰⁴Benjamin R. Tucker to William D. O'Connor, 9 July 1882, Container 63, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁵Walt Whitman to William D. O'Connor, 9 July 1882, *Correspondence*, 3:296.

¹⁰⁶William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 20 July 1882, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 2:60.

¹⁰⁷William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 29 June 1882, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 3:50.

¹⁰⁸James M. Marr to Postmaster, Boston, 1 July 1882, Container 22, reel 13, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁹George Chainey to William D. O'Connor, 11 July 1882. Excerpts from the Trent Collection of Whitmaniana located in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library Duke University.

¹¹⁰Benjamin R. Tucker, "Obscenity and the State," *Liberty*, May 27, 1882, 2.

¹¹¹Benjamin R. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty*, July 22, 1882, 1.

suppression of *Leaves of Grass*.¹¹² Like O'Connor, Tucker hoped to bait the anti-vice society into defending the suppression in a court of law. In late May, Tucker offered to republish *Leaves of Grass* in order to "invite the authorities to dispute my right to do so."¹¹³ Whitman never replied to the offer. Undaunted, Tucker began advertising the sale of *Leaves of Grass* in the pages of his journal and invited the authorities to take him to court. The postmaster general's decision to permit Chainey to circulate two of Whitman's poems may have left the New England Society reluctant to make Tucker into a martyr. In late August, Tucker complained, "We have offered to meet the enemy, but the enemy declines to be met."¹¹⁴

Ezra Heywood surpassed both O'Connor and Tucker in his vitriolic denunciations of the mainline Protestant efforts to coerce conformity to its moral vision through suppression. According to one diatribe, the "orthodox obscenest," Anthony Comstock, had become "President *de facto* of these States" in 1873. Despite the setback handed the moral reformer in 1878, Heywood asserted, "President *de facto* Comstock's lieutenants are still seeking 'smut,' still mousing for 'obscenity' in literary 'Grass.'" Heywood emphatically concluded, "Lascivious censors who presume to say who shall & who shall not read this book are turned 'out to grass' to browse on thistles of wrath" and the "nettles of contempt" that "their idiocy provokes."¹¹⁵ In August 1882, Heywood published a special supplemental edition, *The Word "Extra,"* with Whitman's poems, "To a Common Prostitute" and "A Woman Waits for Me," as well as an "Open Letter to Walt Whitman." The "dark spirit of persecution which hanged Quakers," Heywood complained, "now revisits Massachusetts to hunt down & exterminate unpopular reformers who assert Personal Liberty, freedom of the press, of the mails and the right of private judgments in morals."¹¹⁶

Heywood achieved what Tucker could not: Comstock arrested him in late October on four counts of violating the federal obscenity statute.¹¹⁷ Heywood finally had another chance in open court to rebuff mainline Protestant efforts to compel conformity to its vision of sexuality, literature,

¹¹²Benjamin R. Tucker to William D. O'Connor, 4 July 1882, Container 63, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress; William D. O'Connor to Benjamin R. Tucker 6 July 1882, Container 22, reel 13, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress; Tucker to O'Connor, 9 July 1882.

¹¹³Benjamin R. Tucker to Walt Whitman, 25 May 1882, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 2:253-54.

¹¹⁴Benjamin R. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty*, August 19, 1882, 1.

¹¹⁵"The Sovereignty of Liberty," *The Word*, August 1882, 2. See also, "Inspiration Versus Censorship," *The Word*, July 1882, 2.

¹¹⁶Walt Whitman, "To A Common Prostitute," *The Word—Extra* (1882), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Heywood, "An Open Letter to Walt Whitman."

¹¹⁷"The Latest United States Assault," *The Word*, December 1882, 2.

and the common good. Attempting to rally support for his upcoming trial, he sent Whitman a copy of the "Open Letter" in early November.¹¹⁸ Whitman did not reply. Meanwhile, the Heywoods launched a series of literary salvos against the "obscenists" of the New England anti-vice society, against the U.S. government for allowing "itself to become basely subservient to ecclesiastic, church intrusion," and against the "religio-political pimp," Comstock.¹¹⁹ At the April 1883 trial, the first two charges against Heywood were immediately dropped on a technicality: the original indictment did not actually include the words of the two allegedly obscene poems and *Cupid's Yokes* because they were too lewd to be included in the court records. The remaining two charges concerned Heywood's advertisements for vaginal syringes, or "Comstock syringes," as Heywood called them. The jury found Heywood not guilty.¹²⁰ O'Connor and Whitman privately rejoiced over Comstock's defeat. "The news of Comstock's disaster," a gleeful O'Connor wrote, "gave me the greatest relief and exultation." Whitman gloated too. Comstock, he told O'Connor, "retires with his tail intensely curved inwards."¹²¹

Whitman's silence in response to Heywood's appeal for assistance seems very strange, especially since they shared similar views of sexuality and a common commitment to free speech. After Heywood contacted him in November 1882, Whitman wrote O'Connor that "I see nothing better for myself or friends to do than quietly stand aside & let it go on."¹²² The reason for Whitman's silence is twofold. Despite their similarities, Whitman did not share the Heywoods' desire to abolish marriage. In his *North American Review* article, Whitman called marriage "the foundation and sine qua non of the civilized state."¹²³ Shortly before Heywood's trial in 1883, Whitman told O'Connor that he desired "to remain entirely aloof & silent (& send no money)."¹²⁴ O'Connor shared Whitman's opinion: "I don't like Heywood's ways, and I don't like the Free-Love theories at all, but he has his rights, which these devils trample on."¹²⁵ Whitman's reluctance to be

¹¹⁸Walt Whitman to William D. O'Connor, 12 November 1882, *Correspondence*, 3:314.

¹¹⁹Ezra Heywood, "Trial of the Case, UY.S.G. v. E.H.H.," *The Word*, January 1883, 2; Angela T. Heywood, "The Woman's View of It—No. 2," *The Word*, February 1883, 2–3; Ezra Heywood, "Citizen Right vs. Class-Rule Assault," *The Word*, March 1883, 2.

¹²⁰Ezra Heywood, "Citizen Right Vindicated," *The Word*, May 1883, 2; Benjamin R. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty*, June 9, 1883, 1; Benjamin R. Tucker, "The Value of the Heywood Victory," *Liberty*, June 9, 1883, 3; Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 144–46.

¹²¹William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 17 April 1883, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 4:90–91; Walt Whitman to William D. O'Connor, 14 April 1883, *Correspondence*, 3:338–39.

¹²²Whitman to O'Connor, 12 November 1882, *Correspondence*, 3: 314.

¹²³Whitman, "A Memorandum at a Venture," 548. For other evidence of Whitman's critic of free love views of marriage, see Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 223–24.

¹²⁴Walt Whitman to William D. O'Connor, 29 March 1883, *Correspondence*, 3:335.

¹²⁵William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 27 October 1882, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 4:323. On the day of Heywood's trial, O'Connor wrote Whitman, "To-day is the day set for

identified with Heywood and the free love movement was not entirely unusual even among social progressives in the 1870s and 1880s. In 1879, the National Liberal League fractured over whether to support a campaign to repeal the Comstock Act, as free love activists in the organization demanded, or to merely advocate the revision of federal obscenity laws. League president Francis E. Abbot and vice-president Robert Ingersoll favored revision, not abolition, of the Comstock Act because they feared the free speech movement was being hindered by its critics' association of the movement with the promotion of obscene literature and the free love movement. Comstock, Abbot declared, "has done a great deal of dirty but most necessary work." About free lovers Ingersoll said, "Let them spend their time examining each other's sexual organs, and in letting ours alone." When free lovers succeeded in getting the league to support total repeal in 1879, Abbot quit in frustration. Ingersoll followed suit the following year.¹²⁶ Whitman, in other words, was not alone in his misgivings about the free love movement.

The poet also remained distant because he was keenly aware that any association with free lovers would damage his already fragile reputation. When the Reverend William F. Channing invited him to lecture in Boston as part of a series organized by Angela Heywood's sisters, Josephine and Flora Tilton, Whitman wrote O'Connor that he declined the invitation because of scheduling conflicts and added, "I shall certainly not do anything to identify myself specially with free love."¹²⁷ Before Heywood's acquittal in 1883, O'Connor told Whitman that he "*did perfectly right* in keeping aloof and not contributing to the defense. Your connection could not help him and might hurt you. 'Against stupidity the gods themselves are powerless,' says Euripides, and Heywood is certainly a champion jackass."¹²⁸

Heywood's trial, and cold shivers run over me as I think of it. I can't help some sympathy for the devilish fool, despite the mischief he is likely to do to us." William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 27 March 1883, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 3:566.

¹²⁶Lawrence B. Goodheart, "The Ambiguity of Individualism: the National Liberal League's Challenge to the Comstock Law," in *American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-National Context*, ed. Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), 133–50, quotations are on 145. At the National Liberal League meeting in 1878 just before he resigned, Ingersoll said: "I believe that the family is the unit of good government, and that every good government is simply an aggregation of good families. I therefore not only believe in perfect civil and religious liberty, but I believe in the one man loving the one woman." Robert Ingersoll, "Convention of the National Liberal League," *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, 12 vols. (New York: Dresden, 1909), 12:233–35. On Abbot and the controversy within National Liberal League over free love, see Sydney Ahlstrom and Robert Bruce Mullin, *The Scientific Theist: A Life of Francis Ellingwood Abbot* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–27.

¹²⁷Whitman to O'Connor, 12 November 1882, *Correspondence*, 3:315.

¹²⁸William D. O'Connor to Walt Whitman, 1 April 1883, Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 2:260.

IX. CONCLUSION

While the banning of *Leaves of Grass* in Boston did boost sales of the Philadelphia edition, the suppression of the volume did not enhance Whitman's reputation.¹²⁹ When James Russell Lowell produced a list of great literary figures to be inscribed on the Boston Public Library in 1895, he omitted Whitman's name.¹³⁰ Libraries in Boston and Cambridge placed *Leaves of Grass* on restricted circulation.¹³¹ Only after his death in 1892 did Whitman begin to enjoy a national reputation. In the subsequent generation, Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud would give scientific credence to Whitman's views of sexuality. Yet Whitman's poetry was more than an important precursor to later writers who defied the Victorian Protestant vision of sexuality. Whitman exerted a great deal of influence on subsequent generations of poets. As literary scholar Harold Bloom observes, "All major American poetry since Whitman is Whitmanian."¹³²

While important because it offered a radical alternative to, and critique of, the dominant Protestant morality, the free love movement had only a limited impact. Comstock, as well as moral reform societies in Boston, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Baltimore, and San Francisco, among other cities, successfully prosecuted free love activists during the late nineteenth century. Comstock in fact arrested Heywood two more times after the *Leaves of Grass* controversy. While he escaped punishment after his first arrest, he served two years in prison after his 1890 arrest.¹³³

The suppression of *Leaves of Grass* was not a decisive triumph for the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice. While the organization stopped the circulation of the Osgood edition in Boston, it did not prevent the publication of the definitive edition. Moreover, Chainey's periodical was not prohibited from the U.S. mails. Yet the successful banning of *Leaves of Grass* was nevertheless an important victory for the society. The law they had written was enforced in Massachusetts. The society would write a number of new laws to prevent the circulation of literature they deemed

¹²⁹According to Reynolds, the *Leaves of Grass* edition produced by the Philadelphia publisher Rees, Welsh and Company quickly went through five printings by the end of 1883. In December of that year, Whitman received a royalty check for more than \$1,200. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 543–44.

¹³⁰William S. Kennedy, *The Fight of a Book for the World* (West Yarmouth, Mass.: Stonecraft Press, 1926), 115.

¹³¹Charles B. Willard, *Whitman's American Fame: The Growth of His Reputation in America After 1892* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 1950), 26.

¹³²Harold Bloom, "Bloom on Walt Whitman," in *Walt Whitman*, Classic Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007). *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc. <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=5&iPin=CCVWW001&SingleRecord=True> (accessed March 22, 2009).

¹³³Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism*, 147–81.

obscene. Between 1880 and 1905 the organization successfully introduced ten new laws or amendments to curb the sale of obscene literature. The organization also proved to be remarkably successful at prosecuting the peddlers of objectionable literature as well as gambling, prostitution, and the sale of illicit drugs. For instance, between 1893 and 1897 the society helped convict 95 percent of the 539 people it arrested. This success rate persisted through the first two decades of twentieth century. In 1918, the society boasted that it had a conviction rate of 98 percent over the course of its history.¹³⁴

The members of the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice also learned important lessons from their first major public controversy. Unlike the publicity-seeking Comstock, the organization did not publicly threaten to suppress publishers or authors. Nor did it advertise the books it had successfully banned. The organization cultivated cooperative relationships with the police and local district attorneys and selectively used public criticism as a final measure to prompt them into action. In 1891, the society sought to distinguish itself from the controversial Comstock by renaming itself as the New England Watch and Ward Society.

For a generation, the Watch and Ward Society attempted to control literary consumption in New England. In an 1891 review of the controversy, one free love advocate lamented the cultural power of the moral reformers. "Even now the lewd terrorism is so potent that large publishing houses surrender books & plates to these sodomists, & great daily newspapers bow to their maggot-brained, rotten-hearted despotism."¹³⁵ The power of the Watch and Ward Society only grew in the early twentieth century. In 1915, the organization and the Boston Bookseller Association formed a committee to review allegedly objectionable books. If the committee unanimously determined that a volume transgressed Massachusetts's obscenity law, an "informal notice" was distributed to all Massachusetts booksellers who "quietly" withdrew the book or risked prosecution. The society had a similar arrangement with the New England Magazine Sellers Association.¹³⁶ For more than a generation, the unitive impulse of the mainline Protestant establishment set the limits of its willingness to tolerate allegedly salacious literature. A Victorian understanding of literature, late nineteenth-century moral philosophy, Whig-Republican political tradition, and liberal Protestant theology provided the intellectual warrant for the suppression of alternative moralities that threatened the moral codes of public Protestantism. In the

¹³⁴ *Annual Report WWS, 1896-97*, 20; *Annual Report WWS, 1917-18*, 22.

¹³⁵ A. E. G. "Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass," *The Word*, January 1889, 2.

¹³⁶ "Boston Discusses Its Censorship Problem," *Publishers' Weekly*, May 28, 1927, 2118-20; *Annual Report WWS, 1915-16*, 32.

1920s, Ferris Greenslet, the head of Houghton Mifflin Company, complained that the Watch and Ward Society had prevented Boston from playing a significant part in the decade's literary renaissance.¹³⁷ In the eyes of Whitman, Heywood, and their allies a generation earlier, Protestant cultural hegemony controlled literature in New England. As one critic put it,

The Church is responsible for Comstock. He is her agent. He does her bidding, and earns the salary which she pays; and her clergymen rush to his defence when he falls into difficulty, or gets criticised in the newspapers. The Church owns Comstock, and he runs the United States courts. It may as well be understood first as last, a new struggle has started for ecclesiastical supremacy in the State.¹³⁸

A generation would pass before critics of the Protestant establishment could successfully topple the Watch and Ward Society. While it had encountered significant opposition during the late nineteenth century, the Protestant establishment largely defined and enforced the parameters of acceptable literature about sexuality and marriage in New England.

¹³⁷Ellen B. Ballou, *The Building of the House: Houghton Mifflin's Formative Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 548–59.

¹³⁸Letter from Theron C. Leland, 29 July 1878, *Proceedings of the Indignation Meeting Held in Faneuil Hall*, 62.

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