

Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord

ROBERT A. GROSS

HENRY DAVID THOREAU was known, from early on, for his 'fondness for reading,' and so widely, so variously did he travel through the world of books that students of his writings are still tracking down his sources and trying to grasp his intellectual milieu. 'Books are the treasured wealth of the world,' Thoreau declared, 'and the fit inheritance of generations and nations.' They were the one legacy he was glad to possess. Homer and Virgil, the Bible and Bagvad-Geeta, the long line of English poets from Chaucer to Wordsworth, the Common Sense philosophy taught at Harvard College, books of travel, history, and natural science: the list of his readings could go on and on. But Thoreau was discriminating as well as capacious—'Read the best books first,' he advised, 'or you may not have a chance to read them at all'—and there were many books he simply could not stomach. This essay tells the story of one of them: an obscure title in the

Listings of the holdings of Concord's Charitable Library Society and the Concord Social Library will be published in the next issue of the *Proceedings* (vol. 97, pt. 2). The two parts—this essay and the book listings—will be issued as a separate pamphlet. Research for this essay was begun under a fellowship from the Bibliographic Society of America. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the following people in the conduct of my research: Marcia Moss and Joyce Woodman at the Concord Free Public Library; Margaret Groesbeck, Michael Kasper, John Lancaster, and Floyd Merritt at the Robert Frost Library, Amherst College; Michael Friedman and Betty Steele at the Amherst College Academic Computer Center; and David Bryan, Amherst '89, and Tanya Elder, Amherst '87. The critical questions of Jeanne Chase, Phyllis Cole, David D. Hall, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg prompted me to rethink and revise the original version of this essay.

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Concord Social Library, which has attained in *Walden* a dubious literary immortality through the artistry of Thoreau's comic wit.¹

'There is,' he observes in the chapter on 'Reading,' 'a work in several volumes in our Circulating Library entitled Little Reading, which I thought referred to a town of that name which I had not been to.' The jest is typically Thoreau: a clever play on words that pokes fun at both the localism of the Yankee and the parochialism of his culture. Light humor, one thinks, until the passage goes on, the wit suddenly turning savage: 'There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all sorts of this, even after the fullest dinner of meats and vegetables, for they suffer nothing to be wasted. If others are the machines to provide this provender, they are the machines to read it.' 'Little Reading,' we now realize, is no joke. It marks the desperate condition of Concord culture.

Thoreau focuses his critique on his neighbors' reluctance to take up any 'heroic' books. Having accepted the wisdom of 'one good book,' the Bible, most have abandoned any further striving for truth and crave only 'easy reading' to kill their leisure hours. And so, they consume popular fiction—'the nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sephronia, and how they loved as none had ever loved before'—the way many Americans are said to watch television today, passively, indiscriminately, insatiably, without any hint of mental improvement. In the course of such reading, the powers of perception dull, vital energy seeps away, the mind goes slack. And the disease of low aspirations spreads. Not everybody, of course, Thoreau acknowledges, is addicted to fiction; others take newspapers. Even the college-educated rarely read the English classics, and 'as for the recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and Bibles, which are accessible to all who will know of them, there are the feeblest efforts anywhere to become acquainted with them.' From 'Easy Reading' in school, the people of Concord pass on to "Little Reading," and story books, which

1. Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading* (forthcoming, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), ch. 1; Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 96.

MUCH INSTRUCTION
FROM
LITTLE READING,
OR,
EXTRACTS
From some of the Most Approved Authors,
ANCIENT AND MODERN.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED,
SOME BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES FROM THE EARLIEST
AGES OF THE WORLD TO NEARLY THE PRESENT
TIME. ALSO, EXTENSIVE SCRIPTURE LES-
SONS. BEING THE RESULT OF
TWENTY-TWO YEARS'
APPLICATION.



BY A FRIEND TO GENERAL IMPROVEMENT.

==
VOL. III.
==

New-York :
PRINTED BY MAHLON DAY,
NO. 376, PEARL-STREET.

1827.

Fig. 1. Title page from volume 3 of *Much Instruction from Little Reading* (New York, 1827). American Antiquarian Society.

are for boys and beginners.' Thoreau's final judgment is delivered with characteristic extravagance: 'We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate.' 'Little Reading' is a puny town.²

But what, in fact, is 'Little Reading'? Does it deserve its fate as the comic emblem of a trivial culture? Thoreau creates the impression that the work is a collection of popular romances and tales. It is not. Nor is it a reader for school-children, which the compilers of the Concord Public Library's 1855 catalogue thought when they classified the title under 'Education.' No, 'Little Reading' was adult reading: an anthology of eighteenth-century poetry and prose. The full title was *Much Instruction from Little Reading, or, Extracts from Some of the Most Approved Authors, Ancient and Modern. To Which Are Added, Some Biographical Sketches from the Earliest Ages of the World. Also, Extensive Scripture Lessons. Being the Result of Twenty-Two Years' Application*, all of which had been carefully compiled by 'A Friend to General Improvement.' First issued as a series in late eighteenth-century London, the collection provides excerpts from prominent and little-known authors of the age. In English poetry, there is Pope's *Essay on Man*, Thomson's *The Seasons*, Young's *Night Thoughts*, Cowper's *Task*; in religion, the Scottish divine Henry Hunter's *Sacred Biography; Or, the History of the Patriarchs* and Lindley Murray's *Power of Religion on the Mind in Retirement, Sickness, and at Death, Exemplified in the Testimonies and Experience of Men Distinguished by Their Greatness, Learning, or Virtue*; and in natural philosophy, the Frenchman St. Pierre's *Studies of Nature, or Botanical Harmony Revealed*, in a translation by Henry Hunter. Included with them are two volumes of curiosities: extracts from a 1784 biographical dictionary that cover only the letters 'A' through 'C' and an abridgement of the Old Testament, which omits all the 'begats.' Taken as a whole, the series was typical of the numerous anthologies that flowed from the presses of eighteenth-century London, offering up 'the beauties,' 'the flowers,' and the 'elegant extracts' of a host of mod-

2. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 104-7.

ern writers for an expanding middle-class public. They were the eighteenth-century counterpart to the *Reader's Digest* Condensed Book. *Little Reading* was, I suspect, not very successful: its bibliographic history is obscure, and the biographical dictionary abruptly stops. Still, the work survived to be reprinted by the New York publisher Mahlon Day in 1827 (though Day covered his risks by taking subscriptions in advance) and to be purchased by the new Concord Social Library, which had been established only six years before. The managers of that library clearly knew what they were getting. They rightly catalogued the work under 'Miscellaneous.'³

But there is no evidence—no extracts in a commonplace book, no comments in letters or journals—that Thoreau knew anything about the anthology besides its title. For his purposes, that was enough: he recognized an apt metaphor when he saw one and seized it for his parody. Yet, had he explored 'Little Reading,' he probably would not have altered his judgment. He was certainly familiar with the poets represented in the collection—Pope, Cowper, Thomson, and Young; he had studied them at Harvard, had read them over for his own projected anthology of English poetry, owned copies of two of them—Pope and Cowper—and admired Thomson a good deal. 'Thomson,' he thought, 'was a true lover of nature—and seems to have needed only a deeper human experience, to have taken a more vigorous and lofty flight. He is deservedly popular.' Indeed, the example of Thomson's *The Seasons* may well have inspired his own thoughts of writing 'a poem to be called Concord,' celebrating the natural scenes of his native town through the changing rhythms of the year. Still, the eighteenth-century muse was not his. He gave the Augustans short shrift in his anthology and lamented in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack* that the recent English poets had lost the heroic force

3. *Much Instruction from Little Reading* (New York: Mahlon Day, 1827); Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 126-27; *Catalogue of Concord Social Library* (Concord, Mass., n.p., 1836), p. 20; *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Concord Town Library, 1855* (Concord: Benjamin Tolman, 1855), p. 34.

of the ancient bards. They had become too domestic, too content to sit by the 'comfortable fireside' and compose pleasant verse. 'In the entire long procession from Dryden to Matthew Arnold,' the critic Norman Foerster observed long ago, 'Thoreau had but a handful of friends.'⁴

If the poets in 'Little Reading' ultimately disappointed Thoreau, the prose writers would have done so as well. The French naturalist St. Pierre, an early Romantic who had been close to Rousseau, traded on the sentimental opposition between nature and society—'The history of nature exhibits blessings only, that of Man, nothing but robbery and madness'—and idealized the virtues of rural solitude and meditation in language that sometimes evokes Thoreau. 'Distance,' he declared, 'increases reverence.' So, too, the Presbyterian preacher Hunter could denounce the evils of worldliness with the severity of Thoreau: 'the love of riches is . . . at the bottom of most of the ill we do, and of most of the ills which we suffer.' But these writers were, in the end, as bound to social conventions as the eighteenth-century English poets. They rejected worldliness in a contemplative mood, offering up the solaces of traditional Christianity and natural tranquility without any hope for transforming self or society. St. Pierre's nature stood outside man, an image of serenity to the world-weary; but it embodied no transcendental spirit, no divine life-force that man might tap for his own renewal. It was merely a temporary refuge from care. St. Pierre devoted much of his thought to inventing designs for rural cemeteries, where the living could savor the delights of 'gentle melancholy' amid the peaceful groves of the dead. It was fitting, then, that his writings, as translated by Hunter, should rest in an anthology alongside the work of Edward Young, the melancholy

4. Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1982), pp.37-38; Robert Sattelmeyer, 'Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets,' *Studies in the American Renaissance* 4 (1980): 239-57; Walter Harding, 'A New Checklist of the Books in Henry David Thoreau's Library,' *Studies in the American Renaissance* 7 (1983): 159, 177; Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:85-88; Thoreau, *A Week*, p.367; Norman Foerster, 'The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau,' in Richard Ruland, ed., *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p.48.

poet-laureate of England's 'graveyard school' of verse. For the authors in this collection, contemplation was, finally, spiritual self-indulgence, a retreat from the anxieties of ambition and the cares of wealth, appealing to the desire for quiescence, not personal change. The dominant message of 'Little Reading' would never have attracted Thoreau.⁵

Whatever the limitations of these authors in the original, they appeared to even greater disadvantage under the auspices of 'Little Reading.' In principle, Thoreau did not reject the anthology as a genre; he had, in fact, recently attempted his own. In that project, his editorial technique was Transcendentalist: he excerpted poems without any concern for context or continuity; what mattered was epiphanies, not transcripts. The compiler of 'Little Reading' was no more respectful of the literal texts than was Thoreau; he reduced them to little snatches of wisdom, fit for embroidering on a moral sampler. Truth could be found at random on any page. But 'Little Reading' lacked the serious ambition of Thoreau's design. It contained no critical introduction, no historical essay, no statement of overall purpose, such as Thoreau intended. It was held together only by its wispy mood. The collection was, at bottom, a piece of literary hack-work, cobbled together, in all likelihood, by a struggling denizen of Grub Street in hopes of profiting from the rich market in 'beauties' and 'elegant extracts.'⁶

Such anthologies had proliferated in direct response to the publishing revolution of the times. The eighteenth century, as the Reverend Samuel Miller observed in 1803, was 'pre-eminently entitled to the character of THE AGE OF PRINTING,' for it was in that era that the vast potential of Gutenberg's ingenious invention was fully released. Books poured forth from London's presses in ever-increasing volume, to meet the soaring demand of an expanding middle-class, enjoying the first fruits of England's Industrial

5. *Much Instruction from Little Reading*, 1: 132, 186; 2: 78; Blanche M. G. Linden, 'Death and the Garden: The Cult of the Melancholy and the "Rural" Cemetery' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1981), pp. 234-38; Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1876), 2: 360-64, 452-54.

6. Sattelmeyer, 'Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets,' pp. 239-57.

Revolution. In this setting, publishing flourished, and 'for the first time,' in Miller's words, 'AUTHORSHIP BECAME A TRADE,' attracting 'swarms of book-makers by profession,' who earned their living from literature in whatever way paid. If religious attacks on money-getting sold, they hastened to peddle them in the market, despite the contradiction. Cutting up books for anthologies like 'Little Reading' was another ready resource. For so many works were now being issued, year after year, that nobody could possibly keep up, even as it had become de rigeur to be familiar with the latest tastes. Enter the compilers and the condensers to answer the need. In the resulting competition, no major work escaped the shrinkers, who could reduce a book upon order; such wretched salmagundis as 'Little Reading' were the result.⁷

Publishers and men of letters might hail the eighteenth-century as 'the Age of Reason' and point to the 'unprecedented diffusion of knowledge' as proof. But serious scholars like the Reverend Mr. Miller, the Scottish-born president of Princeton College, knew better. In his *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, a learned, but profoundly conservative critique of all the intellectual trends of the era of Enlightenment, Miller denounced the proliferation of publications and the popularization of knowledge in much the same terms as did Thoreau. The great Dr. Johnson, Miller observed, was once told by a friend that 'abridging a book was like presenting a cow with her head and tail cut off.' 'No, Sir,' thundered the outraged critic, 'it is making a cow to have a calf.' Puny books, Miller added, made for puny minds. 'THE AGE OF PRINTING WAS ALSO THE AGE OF SUPERFICIAL LEARNING.' The 'mass of new, hastily composed and superficial works' had 'crowded out of view the stores of ancient learning and even many of the best works of

7. J. H. Plumb, 'The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century England,' in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 262-85; Leo Lowenthal and Marjorie Fiske, 'The Debate over Art and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,' in Mirra Komarovsky, ed., *Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 33-112; Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1803), pp. 417-20.

the preceding century. . . . [They] divert[ed] the mind from the treasures of ancient knowledge, and from the volumes of original authors.' People bought best sellers, not the classics. The age was 'hostile to deep and sound erudition.'⁸

'Little Reading,' then, truly deserved its name, whether in the eighteenth-century or in Thoreau's time. But there remains a problem about Thoreau's selection of the work to symbolize the low state of Concord culture. The fact is that this anthology of English Augustans and early Romantics was, in no way, characteristic of popular reading interests in the town, at the time Thoreau penned his critique. 'Each age . . . must write its own books,' Ralph Waldo Emerson had declared in 'The American Scholar' address, 'or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.' By this standard, the authors represented in 'Little Reading' had outlasted their time, and the readers in Concord knew it. Even as Emerson was offering up a philosophy to free Americans from 'the sepulchres of the fathers,' his neighbors were enacting their own cultural liberation within the respectable institution of the Concord Social Library. They were participants in a remarkable transformation in the sensibility of an entire generation: the recasting of the intellectual heritage of the eighteenth century, in terms appropriate to an age of economic progress and social change. That movement stands out dramatically in the records of the subscription libraries in Concord over the half-century from the 1790s to the 1840s. By exploring the policies those libraries followed and the books they bought, we can gain a larger understanding of the connections that bound Emerson and Thoreau to their countrymen and simultaneously cut them off. In this perspective, 'Little Reading' takes on the larger meaning it was assigned by Thoreau. It may have been a book from another era, but it was a persisting frame of mind.⁹

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8. Miller, *Brief Retrospect*, pp. 420-21, 424-28.

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar,' in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert B. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,

To open the pages of 'Little Reading' is to return to the world of Concord in the last decade of the eighteenth century. It was then, in 1795, that the post-Revolutionary elite founded a Charitable Library Society as an expression of its fundamental republican faith. This was 'the golden age of social libraries' in New England, and Concord fully shared in its earnest spirit. 'It is essential to the prosperity and happiness of society,' the organizers affirmed, 'and [to] the support of Republican government, that useful knowledge be diffused, and the principles and practice of virtue be cultivated among all ranks of the people. . . . As republicans and christians we are bound to desire and endeavour the increase of knowledge and the progress of virtue.' To that end, they joined themselves together into a voluntary association, whose guiding principle was the public good.¹⁰

As the title 'Charitable' suggests, this was to be no ordinary, private club, serving the self-interest of the members. Quite self-consciously, it set itself off from the typical library of the early republic, which was organized like any other business of the day. In the common practice, a group of founders, numbering from twenty-five to seventy-four, would buy and sell shares in a common-law partnership, reserving the privileges of the book collection to themselves or, alternatively, letting nonmembers borrow books for a fee. In fact, this model had governed an early effort to establish a library in Concord back in 1784. Launched by leading figures in the social elite, and open to a maximum of sixty members, the Library Company of Concord was an expressly genteel group, devoted to 'the diffusion of entertaining and useful knowledge' among themselves. By this liberal standard, the library encompassed a diverse reading fare; in the few, scattered records that survive, detailing donations to the collection, Jonathan Edwards's

1979), p. 56; Concord Charitable Library Society, Constitution and Records, 2 vols., Concord Free Public Library (hereafter, CFPL), Safe, Shelf 3, Item 4; Concord Social Library Records, 1821-51, 2 vols., CFPL, Safe, Shelf 3, Item 6.

10. Jesse H. Shera, *Foundation of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England 1629-1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 69; Charitable Library Society Records, 1: 1-14.

evangelical *Treatise on the Religious Affections* stands alongside the ribald novels of Smollett and Sterne. Yet, despite its appeal to varied tastes, the venture was short-lived. By the time the Charitable Library Society was founded, it had disappeared entirely. Its successor would pursue a radically different approach to books.¹¹

Indeed, the Charitable Library Society was a model of upper-class, benevolent reform in the early republic. Its first officers had belonged to the previous Library Company, but few of their fellow shareholders had joined them in the new venture. Perhaps that is the way the sponsors of the institution wanted it; theirs was, by design, a self-selected club of fifteen, making it one of the smallest social libraries in New England. Even more narrowly than the Library Company, the members were drawn from the social and economic elite. Their conception of culture was more exclusive, too. Light amusement had no place in this plan; it was only 'useful knowledge' and 'virtue' they prized. But if the goals and membership of the library were restrictive, its ambitions were large. Affirming the republican faith that 'every member of the community is obliged to seek and promote the public good,' the founders pledged to reach readers 'among all ranks of the people.' At their own expense, they would maintain a collection of books, to be donated to deserving individuals or loaned freely to others. To borrow a volume, an inhabitant need only apply to the library's officers and be approved. In the paternalist ethos of Concord, the Charitable Library was generous with its privileges, so long as one accepted its terms. The practice of benevolence was a carefully structured and highly personalized affair.¹²

Even so, the founders of the Charitable Library did not segregate themselves from the townspeople they assisted. They bought books for the benefit of both their neighbors and themselves.

11. Shera, *Foundations*, pp. 57-59; Constitution of the Library Company of Concord, 1784, CFPL, Safe, Shelf 3, Item 3; Jocelyn Schnier Goldberg, 'The Library in America and the Reading American Public: An Evolution and A Case Study of Concord, Massachusetts' (senior honors thesis, Princeton University, 1974), pp. 44-50.

12. Shera, *Foundations*, p. 76; Charitable Library Society Records, 1: 1-14; 2: 2 (June 8, 1795); Goldberg, 'Library,' pp. 77-79; Gordon S. Wood, 'Introduction,' in *The Rising Glory of America 1760-1820* (New York: George Braziller, 1971), pp. 3-22, 88.

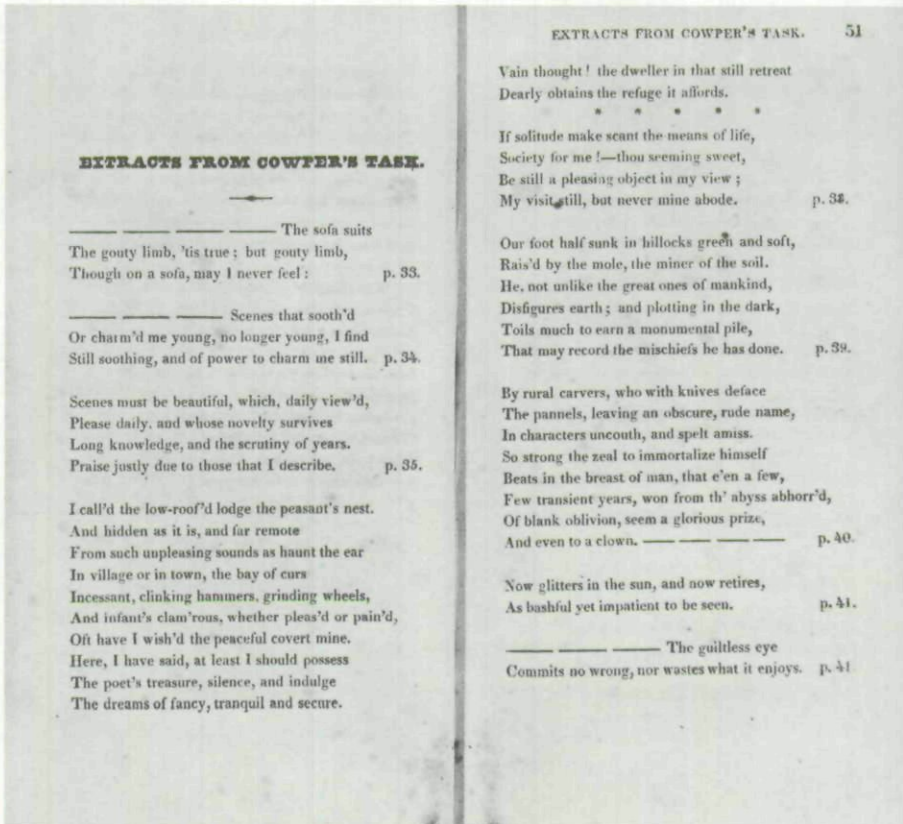


Fig. 2. Extracts from Cowper's 'The Task,' in *Much Instruction from Little Reading*, vol. 1. American Antiquarian Society.

Indeed, the sponsors drew on the collections more than anyone else; in the first five years of the institution, the only period for which a circulation list survives, they took out fully half the books. And they read much the same fare as ordinary folk—even the same works they loaned to the prisoners in the Concord jail. In culture, as in society, Concord remained a hierarchical but inclusive world. Just as the Women's Charitable Society, made up of the wives of the elite, provided the needy poor with tea, coffee, and sugar—

luxuries they enjoyed themselves—so the Charitable Library diffused a common culture of books.¹³

'Little Reading' was a characteristic expression of that culture. The Charitable Library, in fact, included nearly all of the authors represented in that anthology: Pope, Thomson, Young, Cowper, St. Pierre, Hunter. They were joined in the collection by other key works of England's Augustan age: *The Spectator* of Addison and Steele, *The Rambler* of Samuel Johnson, the 'graveyard poetry' of James Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs*, the fiction of Oliver Goldsmith. Nor was the Charitable Library above buying popular anthologies: it had *The Beauties of History*, *The Flowers of Modern Travel*, and a counterpart of 'Little Reading' entitled *The Hive: or a Collection of Thoughts on Civil, Moral, Sentimental & Religious Subjects: Selected from the Writings of Near One Hundred of the Best and Most Approved Authors of Different Nations; But Chiefly from the Most Celebrated English Writers*. It even owned an abridged version of the Scriptures, *The Beauties of the Bible*. And just as English and European titles were the mainstay of the compilations, so they dominated the Charitable Library as a whole. Seventy per cent of the books had been written outside America, over half in Great Britain alone. The entire collection was more diverse than 'Little Reading,' encompassing modern histories, biographies, and travels as well as poetry, natural philosophy, and religion. But the prevailing mood was the same: a sober, highly moral tone.¹⁴

13. Record of Books Lent by the Charitable Library Society, 1795-1800, CFPL, Safe, Shelf 3, Item 5; Goldberg, 'Library,' p. 85; Janet Granger and Margaret Andrews, 'The Women's Charitable Society and the Ladies' Sewing Society of Concord' (seminar paper for History 55, 'Culture and Community: The World of Emerson, Dickinson and Thoreau,' Amherst College, spring 1982).

14. The following titles by authors included in 'Little Reading' are listed in the accessions records and circulation list of the Charitable Library: William Cowper, *Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper, Esq., Written by Himself, and Never Published Before* (Philadelphia: Edward Earle, 1816); Pope; St. Pierre; James Thomson, *The Seasons*; Edward Young, *The Complaint; or Night Thoughts* (Philadelphia: Woodward for Stafford, 1798), and *The Centaur, not Fabulous. In Six Letters to a Friend on the Life in Vogue. Doth He Not Speak Parables? Ezek.* (Philadelphia: Stephens & Woodward, 1795). Other titles referred to in the text are: John Adams, *The Flowers of Modern Travels; being Elegant, Entertaining and Instructive Extracts, Selected from the Works of the Most Celebrated Travellers . . . Intended Chiefly for Young People of Both Sexes* (Boston: John West, 1797); James Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations: In Two Volumes. Containing Volume I: Meditations among the Tombs. . . . Volume II: Contempla-*

Table 1

	DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY GENRE	
	<i>Charitable Library Society,</i> 1795-1820 (N = 237)	<i>Concord Social Library,</i> 1821-50 (N = 491)
Genre of Publication	Pct.	Pct.
Agriculture	1.7	1.8
Biography	7.2	17.7
Conduct of Life & Education	7.2	2.4
Fiction & Belles-Lettres	18.1	39.1
Belles-Lettres	3.8	1.4
Children's Literature	2.1	0.2
Fiction	6.8	36.4
Poetry	5.5	1.2
Geography & History	8.4	11.4
Natural History	1.3	3.9
Politics	6.3	2.8
Religion & Moral Philosophy	41.8	5.1
Moral Philosophy	5.5	1.2
Religion	36.3	3.9
Travels	7.2	14.2
Other	.8	1.1

No library, of course, can be reduced to a single theme, but the Charitable holdings did reflect a common ethos: a commitment to the eighteenth-century virtues of order, balance, and harmony. This was, certainly, the distinctive character of the religious books, which formed the single largest genre, constituting from a third to forty per cent of the whole. By and large, these were not the latest religious writings of the 1790s. Nor were they the works of Americans. Rather, they resonated the theological world of a half-century before: the world of English clerics in the 1730s and 1740s,

tions on the Night . . . (Philadelphia: Johnson, 1795); *The Hive* . . . (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1796); Ezra Sampson, ed., *The Beauties of History. Being a Selection from the Old and New Testaments, with Various Remarks and Brief Dissertations; Designed for the Use of Christians in General; and Particularly for the Use of Schools, and for the Improvement of Youth* (Boston: Thomas & Andrews, 1802).

Table 2

DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY GENRE, IN FIVE-YEAR COHORTS

*Charitable Library Society, 1795-1820**Concord Social Library, 1821-50*

Genre	DATE OF ACQUISITION										
	1795-99	1800-4	1805-9	1810-14	1815-19	1821-24	1825-29	1830-34	1835-39	1840-44	1845-49
Agriculture	0.0	4.5	6.2	0.0	4.5	0.0	1.3	0.6	0.0	6.2	6.2
Biography	5.3	4.5	12.5	6.1	9.1	14.9	22.4	16.2	17.4	17.8	21.9
Conduct of Life & Education	6.6	4.5	12.5	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	7.0	0.0	0.0
Fiction & Belles- Lettres	21.0	18.2	18.7	18.2	22.6	49.0	48.7	44.3	27.9	32.9	21.9
Geog. & History Natural Hist. & Science	11.8	9.1	12.5	3.0	9.1	4.3	10.5	13.2	10.5	13.7	9.4
Science	2.6	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	4.8	3.5	8.2	3.1
Politics	9.2	6.8	0.0	0.0	4.5	2.1	3.9	0.6	5.8	4.1	0.0
Religion & Moral Philosophy	38.2	31.8	25.0	54.5	50.0	4.3	1.3	5.6	10.5	2.7	0.0
Travels	5.3	6.8	12.5	9.1	0.0	25.5	10.5	9.0	17.4	13.7	28.1
Other	0.0	4.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	9.4
N=	76	44	16	33	22	47	76	167	86	73	32

NOTE: Figures for Charitable Library include only those titles with known dates of acquisition. Figures for Social Library include both titles with known dates of purchase and those whose acquisition date could confidently be estimated.

when the dissenting doctrines of Puritanism came to terms with the rationalist legacy of John Locke.

It might be supposed that this devotion to old books of divinity reflects what David Hall has called the world of 'traditional literacy,' in which early Americans read, in a pious spirit, the same sacred texts over and over. Not at all. The religious books in the Charitable Library tell a very different story. They disclose a particular world-view, the perspective of what I would call the 'liberal moderate,' which commanded a wide audience among New Englanders at the turn of the century. The English divines in the collection, a majority of the group, included both prominent dissenters—the transatlantic counterparts of New England Congregationalists—and equally influential spokesmen for the Established Church. All were broad-minded men, who aimed to find a mediating position between strict Calvinism and outright Arminianism in the theological debates of the period. A couple of their works, Joseph Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* and William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*, represented major statements of rationalist religion, answering the skepticism of Deists with the logic of reason and the faith of the soul. They were required textbooks at Unitarian Harvard during the student years of Emerson and Thoreau. But more of the Charitable's authors hoped to skirt metaphysical controversy altogether and lead Christians to concentrate on spiritual experience. The influential Philip Doddridge, who contributed two titles to the Concord list, was, in Henry May's words, a 'cheerful and moderate Dissenter' who 'sought to reduce creeds and articles to a minimum' and recommended open-minded tolerance on such subjects as baptism and predestination. His close friend, the Dissenter Henry Grove, shared the same impulse toward harmony. 'The older I grow,' remarked Grove, whose *Discourse Concerning . . . the Lord's Supper* was the most popular book in the Charitable Library from 1795 to 1800, 'the less inclined I am to quarrel with men for differences of opinions.' He preferred to stress the reasonableness of Christianity and to preach the essentials of moral life. Even the strongest

Puritan in the Charitable Library, Richard Baxter, was, according to Conrad Wright, 'a mediating theologian'—an elusive figure who was 'accused of being a Calvinist by the Arminians and an Arminian by the Calvinists.'¹⁵

If the mid-eighteenth century English divines Concord favored preached an open-minded, liberal religion, so did the few contemporary New England clergymen, whose works appeared in the Charitable Library: Jeremy Belknap, John Clarke, Nathan Fiske, Joseph Lathrop, Charles Stearns. Belknap, Clarke, and Stearns were forthright liberals, but Lathrop and Fiske never departed the orthodox Protestantism of the fathers. Nonetheless, Lathrop hated controversy, shunned metaphysics, and in his pulpit at West Springfield, deliberately cultivated a 'middle ground between Arminianism and high Calvinism, ranking just about with the school of Doddridge.' Likewise, Fiske, minister at Brookfield, was said to be 'averse to disputation in every form.' But what is most striking about the list of New England clergymen whom the Charitable Society collected is who is *not* there. No strong Calvinists: no Jonathan Edwards, no Samuel Hopkins, no Joseph Bellamy, no Stephen West. The entire New Divinity is absent. But then so are the controversialists on the Unitarian side: no Samuel Clarke, no Charles Chauncy, no Jonathan Mayhew, no Henry Ware. The officers of the Charitable Library were determined to avoid any contentious religious stand.¹⁶

15. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 3–25, 38 (quotation, pp. 18–19, 38); David D. Hall, 'The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600–1850,' in William L. Joyce et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), p. 23; Henry Grove, *A Discourse Concerning . . . the Lord's Supper* (orig. pub., London, 1738; repr., Boston: Bumstead for Cazneau, 1793); *Dictionary of National Biography*, 23: 295–97; Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), pp. 3–4, 56–57; Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, pp. 14–15.

16. Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, pp. 284–85; William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, from the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five. With Historical Introduction. Volumes I-II: Trinitarian-Congregational* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 1: 536 (Lathrop), 571 (Fiske). For biographies of the Unitarian clergy mentioned above, see Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit . . . Volume VIII: Unitarian Congregational* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1865), pp. 80–82 (Belknap), p. 109 (Clarke), pp. 149–51 (Stearns).

Why the preference for such rational, moderate religion? In the 1790s, under the leadership of the Reverend Ezra Ripley, the Concord church was slowly, but surely edging its way into the Arminian camp of Boston and Cambridge. In 1778, just out of Harvard, Ripley had taken over a congregation that had been bitterly divided ever since the Great Awakening and had restored a sense of harmony among the members. His strategy was to play down theological debating-points, urge tolerance of differing views, and preach a homespun morality from the pulpit. Remarkably, this approach worked: in the early nineteenth century, Ripley would succeed in bringing his congregation to an outright Unitarian commitment—and without provoking a divisive split. Not until the mid-1820s would the Trinitarians of Concord withdraw from Ripley's church, and even then the town would not be torn apart by sectarian dispute. Ripley would ultimately preside over the Concord First Church for more than sixty years, a venerated embodiment of the old order, with his tie-wig, small-clothes, and eighteenth-century country airs. Interestingly, the New England clergymen whose books appeared in the Charitable Library conformed to this type: in the early republic, each succeeded in keeping the liberals and the orthodox in their towns within a single, united church. It was thus no accident that their volumes of sermons appeared in the Concord collection. Ezra Ripley himself served a dozen terms as president of the library and invariably was on the committee to choose the books. He clearly knew what he wanted: moderate, reasonable religion that would cause no great offense. By Henry Thoreau's time, this soft-spoken approach to the world would become a standing joke. Remarking in *A Week* on the sluggish, 'scarcely perceptible' current of the Concord River, Thoreau observed that 'some have referred to its influence, the proverbial moderation of the inhabitants of Concord, as exhibited in the Revolution, and on later occasions.' But in its heyday, Ripley's conciliatory pastorate bound Concord together into a single reading and worshipping flock.¹⁷

17. Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976),

This moderate approach to religion was not simply a politic way of evading conflict. It also reflected the spiritual priorities of the leading British writers on divinity and their turn-of-the-century American adherents. Within the theological world of New England Congregationalism and British dissent, most believers still thought and argued within the framework of Calvinism. Although many congregations, especially in eastern Massachusetts towns like Concord, were drifting away from their Puritan heritage and moving towards an affirmation of Unitarian faith, doctrinal lines had not yet hardened in the 1790s and early 1800s, the period when the Charitable Library was stocking up on religious books. Works by Anglicans and Presbyterians, French Catholics and Huguenots, Congregationalists and Baptists could stand together in the Charitable's small case of books in Stephen Wood's store, without any hint of incongruity. 'Orthodoxy, at that time,' Concord's Ezra Ripley was to recall towards the close of his long, sixty-year ministry, 'was so undefined, that it was not easy to say, whether the real creed of one agreed with that of another. Clergymen whose preaching and conversation were clearly Arminian, not only habitually read, but recommended Calvinistic authors.' The fact is that within the 'liberal-moderate' persuasion, neither formal creeds nor theological polemics were deemed crucial to the religious life. What mattered was experience: the active conversion of the individual soul. For this purpose, the best books were texts of practical piety, devotional works like Doddridge's immensely popular *Rise and Progress of Religion*, which spoke not just to the mind but to the heart, with the intent of rousing the affections and thereby awakening the soul. However much writers like Doddridge and New England clergymen like Ripley sought to avoid conflict within the community, their ambitions still ex-

pp. 18-29, 159-60, 167; Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, pp. 253-55; and Thoreau, *A Week*, p. 9. The New England clergymen whose books were purchased by the Charitable Library enjoyed remarkably long tenures in the ministry, presiding over unified congregations at a time when conflicts within Congregational churches were intensifying. For accounts of their pastorates, see the references in Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, cited in footnote 16.

pressed a militant vocation. They meant to inculcate virtue and to save souls.¹⁸

In this evangelical effort, the Charitable Library made available a wide range of religious writings: catechisms, guides to meditation, hymnals, narratives of conversion, and volume after volume of sermons. But readers could look for inspiration in other genres as well, particularly in poetry. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Young's *Night Thoughts*, Isaac Watts's *Lyric Poems*, the German writer Klopstock's *Messiah*, the numerous writings of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe: all were devoted to spiritual ends, summoning every instrument of persuasion, every resource of rhetoric at their command in order to attract the imagination, stir the heart, and inspire faith. Their Muse was consecrated to 'the beauties of religion.'¹⁹

Mary Wilder Van Schalkwyck, a young widow in her early twenties, read and relished these religious writers with exceptional zeal. An intense, intellectual woman, widely noted both for her literary talent and for her personal charm, Van Schalkwyck lived at the

18. Isabel Rivers, 'Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity,' in Isabel Rivers, ed., *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 127-64; Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, pp. 110-23, 200-22; E.R. [Ezra Ripley], 'Recollections and Remarks of an Aged Clergyman, Now Living, Respecting the Changes that Have Taken Place in Religious Opinions, and in the Character of Preaching, in New England, for the last Fifty Years,' *The Unitarian Advocate, and Religious Miscellany. Conducted by an Association of Gentlemen*, new series, 3 (1831): 130; Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion; Illustrated in a Course of Serious and Practical Addresses, Suited to Persons of Every Character and Circumstance; with a Devout Meditation of Prayer Added to Every Chapter* (Boston: Greenough, 1795). Although Ripley was describing the climate of opinion immediately before the Revolutionary War, it is clear from his reminiscence that theological pluralism continued to characterize the New England establishment through the 1790s.

19. Rivers, 'Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity,' pp. 129-39; Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution: Painting, Music, Literature, and the Theatre in the Colonies and the United States from the Treaty of Paris to the Inauguration of George Washington, 1763-1789* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), pp. 221-23; Elijah Fitch, *The Beauties of Religion. A Poem, Addressed to Youth. In Five Books* (Providence, R.I.: John Carter, 1789); Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, *The Messiah. Attempted from the German of Mr. Klopstock, by Joseph Collyer* (New York: Printed By G. Forman for E. Duyckinck and Co., 1795); John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton. With the Life of the Author* (New York: C. Wells, 1801); and Mrs. Elizabeth (Singer) Rowe, *The Works of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1796); Isaac Watts, *A Comprehensive Abridgement of Dr. Watt's Lyric Poems, and Miscellaneous Thoughts. Together with the Hymns Subjoined to His Forty-Four Sermons, and a Few Pieces from Pope, Addison, Rowe, etc.* (Northampton, Mass.: Wright, 1798); and Young, *The Complaint; or Night Thoughts*.

very center of the social circle that sponsored the Charitable Library during the 1790s and early 1800s. Her stepfather, Dr. Isaac Hurd, was on the executive committee for two decades and occasionally served as its president. One of her closest friends was Sarah Ripley, the parson's daughter, another Mary Moody Emerson, his stepdaughter. So intimate were the two families that 'hardly a day [passed] without an exchange of visits' between them. Raised in this milieu, educated at both the town grammar school and an academy, Van Schalkwyck seized on her advantages and explored the expansive cultural world that was opening up to New Englanders in small country towns during the early republic. She drew books from the Charitable Library, lent and borrowed others among friends, and compiled a sizable collection of her own. Her tastes were remarkably up-to-date. Consuming novels with enthusiasm, especially, the Gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe, she retold the stories so vividly that one listener returned home 'afraid to be alone in the dark, and on getting into bed, covered his head with the bedclothes in terror from the pictures which had been so vividly presented to his imagination.' She was keenly interested in anything new, including the radical Mary Wollstonecraft, whom she read with sympathy. 'Write me soon,' she enjoined a friend. 'Inform me if you have seen any new publications, if you have been introduced to any new characters, or if anything interesting has occurred to you.' Fortunately, she and her friends delighted in such correspondence. In her surviving letters and in a list she kept of her readings, Van Schalkwyck gives us a rare glimpse of the high seriousness, indeed, the religious devotion, with which a privileged, immensely talented, young woman at the turn of the century sat down to her books.²⁰

Given her love of novels, her openness to Wollstonecraft, her interest in history and government, and her disdain for the long tradition of male writers 'who degrade Woman to infancy, and

20. Elizabeth Amelia Dwight, *Memorials of Mary Wilder White: A Century Ago in New England*, ed. Mary Wilder Tileston (Boston: Everett Press Company, 1903), pp. 24, 122-23, 125, 145.

allow her scarcely any real virtue, except *Humility*,' it comes as something of a surprise that Mary Van Schalkwyck was every bit as devoted to books of divinity as were the male sponsors of the Charitable Library. Indeed, the list of nearly one hundred books she left behind at her death in 1817 is an epitome of that collection. It reflects as well the choices made by the forty-five other women or so, who borrowed books from the Charitable collection from 1795 to 1800.²¹ Religious books and poetry dominate the whole. Hardly a novel is alongside them. And her preferences were for the same writers of divinity who held sway in the library her stepfather helped to build: Baxter, Doddridge, Lyttleton, Massillon, Watts, Young. No more than 'her beloved' parson Ripley, 'who was like a father to her,' was she prepared to adopt a strict theological line. 'Read . . . the different tenets of Calvin and Arminius,' she reflected, '—neither of which can I wholly and cordially embrace. . . . I believe, with Calvin, in the depravity of human nature, and in salvation by grace alone; with Arminius, I believe man is a free agent . . . that grace is accorded to every one who will pray for it; and that those who have believed may fall, and finally come short of salvation.' For Van Schalkwyck, the essence of religion lay elsewhere, in the inner realm of the spiritual emotions. Cultivating 'divine Sensibility—the enthusiasm of feeling' as 'that quality which exalts us, nearer than any other, to *Divinity*,' she yearned to live, as the poet Emily Dickinson would later put it, with 'a Soul at the white Heat.' Against that absolute standard, as she interpreted it, the leading male writers of the age, like the great Samuel Johnson, might fail; too cold, too carping a critic, she snapped. Nor did the popular writers of devotional tracts captivate her imagination, though she admired writers like the French Bishop Massillon, who 'penetrates the heart, and elevates

21. Excluding the prisoners in the county jail, I count some 111 borrowers of books from the Charitable Library during 1795–1800. Of these, some forty-two percent were women. And their choices were overwhelmingly religious titles. Female readers were not, however, the most active users of the collection. Though they represented two out of every five users, their borrowing accounted for only a quarter of all loans. See Goldberg, 'Library,' pp. 85–86.

the affections.' Her highest regard flowed elsewhere: for her, as for Emily Dickinson, poetry was the natural medium of religious sensations. 'Next to the Bible,' she wrote, 'I rank the poets; I am confident Milton, Cowper, Young, and Thomson excite more devotional feelings than all the controversial authors in Christendom. . . . I know enthusiasm has its attendant dangers, but, to me, they appear far less fatal than its cold reverse; and were happiness, even in this world, my object, I would prefer waking and weeping with enthusiastic Mary, at the foot of the cross, to being the icy-souled, the self-thought rational, enlightened Deist.' Indeed, so fervently did she reverence the Muse that religious verse appeared far more often in her library than in the Charitable collections as a whole.²²

Perhaps, that difference was a matter of gender as well as personal style. Restricted in their outer lives, intellectual women from privileged homes may have directed their passions inward, and in the realm of the imagination, created an absolute arena in which they struggled and suffered for the good. Whatever, Van Schalkwyck was not alone in her passion for the poets. Mary Moody Emerson, the brilliant, spiritual seeker who was something of a 'sybil and prophetess' to her Transcendentalist nephew, became enraptured with John Milton, after discovering, as a child, a copy of *Paradise Lost* that was missing its title page. She 'read and reread [it] with delight,' the story goes, without ever knowing the author, until one day, hearing her brother and others extol the virtues of Milton, she borrowed his poems and 'found, for the first time, that her old book of the garret was Milton's "Paradise Lost."'

22. Dwight, *Memorials*, pp. 122-25, 135, 137, 159, 169-70, 174, 393-94. It is unclear whether the 'List of Books Found among the Papers' of Mary Wilder Van Schalkwyck White represents her personal library or a partial record of her readings. My guess is the former, since she omitted the various novels she had relished. It may be that early nineteenth-century fiction, like late twentieth-century mysteries or detective novels, was not considered worth keeping in a permanent collection. In any case, by my calculations, twenty-six titles, or nearly 30 percent of her books, were works of divinity—about the same proportion as in the Charitable Library. History and travels, too, held about the same place in each collection: 13 and 15 percent, respectively. But Van Schalkwyck was unique in her devotion to poetry. She held some twenty-two works, nearly a quarter of her holdings. Contrast that to the fifteen-odd titles in the entire Charitable Library.

To Mary Moody Emerson, as to Mary Wilder Van Schalkwyck, no book needed the imprimatur of authority—not the blessings of a publisher, not approval from a minister, not selection by a library committee—to endure. It rose and fell entirely on its inherent spiritual power.²³

While the Charitable's sponsors prided themselves on a broad-minded tolerance in religion, they closely confined their reading within a narrow range. No radical work of the Enlightenment showed up: no Voltaire, no Diderot, no Rousseau. Nor would Mary Van Schalkwyck find Wollstonecraft or William Godwin on the shelves. Occasionally, the officers of the library slipped: the *Essays* of the irreverent Marquis d'Argenson were ordered, only to be returned to the bookseller as 'unsuitable.' In polite literature, too, the Charitable kept up its guard. In 1797, the novelist Royall Tyler claimed that social libraries were transforming reading habits throughout the New England countryside. A 'taste for amusing literature' was abroad in the land, and 'all orders of country life with one accord [had forsaken] the sober sermons and Practical Pieties of their fathers for the gay stories and splendid impieties of the Traveller and the Novelist.' Not in Concord: only a handful of novels, and all of those highly moral, made it onto the shelves. The French novel, *Memoir of the Year 2500*, was speedily returned along with the 'unsuitable' d'Argenson. When one member deposited her copy of Hannah Foster's recent novel, *The Coquette*, in the collection for others to borrow, the officers pointedly noted, 'This books [is] not of the library.' If the young women of Concord wanted to read novels—and there were plenty available

23. Dwight, *Memorials*, pp. 114–15; Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Mary Moody Emerson,' *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, in Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903–4), 10: 411; Phyllis Cole, 'The Advantage of Loneliness: Mary Moody Emerson's Almanacks, 1802–1855,' in Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson: Retrospect and Prospect* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 1–32. 'No one can read in her manuscript,' Emerson remarked of his aunt, 'or recall the conversation of old-school people, without seeing that Milton and Young had a religious authority in their mind, and nowise the slight, merely entertaining quality of modern bards.' Emerson, 'Mary Moody Emerson,' p. 402.

in Boston and New York—they would have to follow Mary Van Schalkwyck's lead and obtain them on their own.

In late eighteenth-century New England, fiction was still deeply suspect among the custodians of virtue, who feared that novels disordered the imagination, fostered a taste for luxury and corruptions, and distracted people from attending to the state of their souls. George Frisbie Hoar, who grew up in Concord during the first decades of the nineteenth century, recalled that his father, the eminent Squire Hoar, the town's leading man and member of the Charitable Library, 'had a great dislike to fiction of all sorts, and for a good while would not tolerate any novels in the house.' No concessions would be made to youthful tastes. As a boy in Concord during these years, Edward Jarvis yearned for tales of adventure and romance, but as he looked with awe on 'the huge volumes—octavo, almost all of them' of the Charitable Library, his spirits drooped. True, they included 'the best books in the English language—sermons—Divinity—History—Philosophy—with a few travels, and very few tales.' But 'almost the whole' [of them] was 'beyond the comprehension of boys.' The bookish youth tried to make the best of the situation. He borrowed a few works of travel, including John Coustos's sensational account of his sufferings as a Mason, and devoured *Robinson Crusoe* several times. But after he took one book out for the fourth time, 'my mother told me, I must not do it again.' Jarvis, who would later serve on the standing committee of the Concord Social Library, was thus obliged to make a laborious way through heavy adult fare: 'I read Robertson's History of Charles V, America, and Scotland, in my father's library . . . in my twelfth year, and then went back to the town library, and got Burgh's Dignity of Human Nature, and then Faber on the Prophecies. But they were hard reading for a boy, and not profitable. I heard my father and Deacon Hubbard one Sunday noon discussing books, and both agreed that Burgh's Dignity was an interesting and valuable book, for young as well as old people.' What was good for one generation was good for all. To the patrons

of 'Little Reading,' popular fiction—the romances Thoreau parodied so well—was not 'polite literature.'²⁴

It was in the realm of politics and ideology, more than anywhere else, that the founders of the Charitable Library displayed their deepest commitments. Faced with the twin threats of radicalism in the 1790s—with French democracy in politics and Paineite deism in religion—the Charitable elite assumed High Federalist ground. In the early 1790s, Ezra Ripley, like most of the New England clergy, had welcomed the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, and as late as February 1795, he could still express sympathy for 'the rising republic of France . . . suddenly invaded by an unrighteous combination of powers, mostly on the continent.' But with the American publication of Thomas Paine's deist pamphlet, *The Age of Reason*, in 1794, a counterreaction quickly set in. For Paine's strident attacks on established churches and revealed religion as the bulwarks of tyranny threatened to unsettle the Standing Order of Congregational New England. There was nothing new, to be sure, in Paine's rationalist view of divinity. A good many educated New Englanders—too many, it was now thought—had taken up 'an intellectually fashionable' deism during the years of the Revolution. But as Paine's ideas gained quick popularity among the lower classes, the spokesmen for authority demanded a halt to religious irreverence and dissent. In Concord, parson Ripley warned that unless the upper ranks of the community resisted 'the

24. CLS Records, 2: 11–12 (March 4, 1800); Record of Books Lent by Charitable Library Society, March 10, 1798; Royall Tyler, preface to *The Algerine Captive* (1797), reprinted in Robert E. Spiller, ed., *The American Literary Revolution, 1783–1837* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 21–25; G. Harrison Orians, 'Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789–1810,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 52 (1937): 195–214; Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1961); George Frisbie Hoar, *Autobiography of Seventy Years*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 1: 58; CLS Records, 1: 15; Edward Jarvis, 'Traditions and Reminiscences of Concord, Massachusetts, or a Contribution to the Social and Domestic History of the Town, 1779 to 1878,' CFPL, pp. 305–7. In 1823, a writer in *The North American Review*, the voice of genteel authority for New England's literary class, recalled that novels were once proscribed from social libraries as *liberi non grati*. 'So ordinary a branch of letters were they esteemed, that we know of more than one respectable social library, of which the rules imposed the interdict on novels as the venerable Accursius did on the Greek language: *Graecum est: non legitur*.' Quoted in Orians, 'Censure,' p. 196.

progress of infidelity,' the social order would dissolve. His was a top-down approach to the spread of ideas. 'Those people, who hold, or assume, the highest grades in life, generally take the lead in the fashions,' he affirmed in 1799; 'and by the time the lower or those supposed the lower classes adopt the fashions, the other have taken new ones.' So it had been with deism. 'People of learning and of wicked hearts' had launched the trend; 'by and by people of less reading and knowledge [fell] in with the current which favors their depraved minds and manners; and at length people who [were] really ignorant, and [were] altogether unqualified to judge of the evidences of the truth of divine revelation . . . [adopted] the principles of infidelity.'²⁵

In this embattled setting, at the very moment Paine's dangerous book was being sold throughout the republic, Ripley and his like-minded friends founded the Charitable Library. It was a bid, I suspect, to consolidate respectable opinion before radicalism took hold in their town. No wonder, then, that the officers of the library were so quick to order the leading English and American counter-attacks on *The Age of Reason*, though not the pamphlet itself, and to distribute them among the inmates of the Concord jail. A few years later, they gratefully accepted a donation of the English evangelical Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, which appropriated the forms of popular ballads and chapbooks to combat 'seditious' and 'anti-Christian' literature.²⁶ Within American politics, every one of the contemporary political pamphlets in the

25. Gary B. Nash, 'The American Clergy and the French Revolution,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 22 (1965): 392-412; May, *Enlightenment*, pp. 174-76, 226-27, 252-77; Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, pp. 241-51; Ezra Ripley, Sermon No. 851, 19 February 1795, bMS 490/1, Harvard Divinity School Library; Ripley, Thanksgiving Sermon, No. 1050, 28 November 1799, bMS 1835 (11), Box 2, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

26. Responses to Paine include: Jeremy Belknap, *Dissertations on . . . Jesus Christ* (Boston: Belknap, 1795); John Clarke, *An Answer to the Question, 'Why Are You A Christian?'* (Boston: Belknap, 1795); Uzal Ogden, *Antidote to Deism. The Deist Unmasked; or, An Ample Refutation of All the Objections of Thomas Paine against the Christian Religion . . .* (Newark, N.J.: John Wods, 1795); William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1795). For the *Cheap Tracts*, see [Hannah More and Her Friends], *Cheap Repository Tracts; Entertaining, Moral, and Religious* (orig. pub., London, 1798; repr., Boston: E. Lincoln, 1803), and Altick, *English Common Reader*, pp. 73-76.

Charitable Library marked a major step on the reactionary road of New England Federalism. First came Jedidiah Morse's 1796 call to arms against the worldwide Illuminist conspiracy behind the French Revolution; then, in the wake of the XYZ affair, the *Patriotic Addresses* of loyal Americans to President Adams, urging suppression of internal dissent; finally, the high priests of reaction, Fisher Ames and Robert Goodloe Harper, rallying the faithful against the Jeffersonian tide. In a militantly conservative temper, the Charitable elite erected its ideological barriers against change, book by book.²⁷

The Charitable Library was, then, a distinctive product of the embattled era of the French Revolution: a Unitarian/Federalist project, designed both to shore up 'liberal-moderate' religion and to combat the radical currents of the time. It reflected the sentiments in prosperous village families, the circles in which the older relatives of Emerson and Thoreau moved. Ezra Ripley, as we have seen, was the inspiring force behind the institution, the safeguard of its orthodoxy. His stepgrandson was Waldo Emerson. Another president was Squire Jonas Minot, who presided over the institution at the peak of its ideological crusade. A gentleman-farmer who had been a noticeably lukewarm patriot in the Revolution, Minot married the widow Cynthia Dunbar in 1798 and thereby came to be the stepgrandfather of Henry Thoreau. The first generation of Thoreaus in Concord were themselves active supporters of the library, though not admitted into the small, select body of members. Within his first year in town, merchant John Thoreau,

27. The political works cited in the text are: Fisher Ames, *An Oration on the Sublime Virtues of . . . Washington* (Boston: Young & Minns, 1800); *A Selection of the Patriotic Addresses to the President of the United States. Together with the President's Answers* (Boston, 1798); Robert Goodloe Harper, *An Address from Robert Goodloe Harper to His Constituents* (Philadelphia: Young & Minns, 1796); Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, on the Anniversary Thanksgiving in Massachusetts. With an Appendix, Designed to Illustrate Some Parts of the Discourse, Exhibiting Proofs of the Early Existence, Progress, and Deleterious Effects of French Intrigue and Influence in the United States* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1798). My interpretation of the political significance of these works has drawn on May, *Enlightenment*, pp. 252-77; James Morton Smith, *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Laws and American Civil Liberties* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 11-21; David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Henry's grandfather, donated Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* to the collection; his widow Rebecca would extend this benevolence by occasionally contributing volumes of sermons. Moralistic religion and polite literature were thus family tradition for Emersons and Thoreaus. When the Transcendentalist scions of these homes broke with that heritage, they were rejecting, quite literally, the culture of both the fathers and the mothers.²⁸

For all its roots in Concord, the Charitable was similar to other social libraries in New England during the early republic. True, the institution stood alone as a small, benevolent enterprise; no one rushed to follow Concord's leadership in promoting public purposes at private expense. The restricted membership of the Charitable further constrained its influence. With a narrow base of financial support, the library moved slowly in amassing books. At the end of the 1790s, its holdings were a mere seventy-six titles, half the size of the typical collection; not until about 1820 would the Charitable possess even two hundred works, approximately one book for every nine or ten people in town. Even so, within its modest budget, the Charitable picked pretty much the same books as did other libraries. There was nothing special about its exclusion of voices from the radical French Enlightenment; few social libraries welcomed the texts of Condillac, Condorcet, or Diderot. Nor was Concord unique in its preference for 'liberal-moderate' religion. From the moment the liberal Baptist clergyman, Jeremy Condy, opened his bookshop in Boston during the late 1750s, serving an extensive network of faculty, students and graduates

28. CLS Records, List of Donations, recorded on last pages of vol. 1; Gross, *Minutemen*, pp. 59, 63; Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 7. The works donated by the Thoreaus were: Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education. With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (orig. pub., London, 1799; Charlestown, Mass.: E. Larkin, 1800) and Jacques Saurin, *Sermons, Translated from the Original French of the Late Rev. James Saurin, Pastor of the French Church at the Hague* (orig. pub., La Haye, 1708; repr., 6 vols., N.Y.: L. Nichols, 1803-7). For broader views of Federalist literary culture, see Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 89-102; and Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970).

from Harvard College that stretched throughout New England, he regularly supplied his customers with Doddridge, Watts, and Young. The taste for practical piety may have originated along the banks of the Charles, but it transplanted easily, thanks to support from the booksellers. Finally, popular enthusiasm for books and libraries followed the same rhythm in Concord as elsewhere. Founded during the peak years of the social library movement in New England, the Charitable flourished for a decade, then gradually lost momentum, reaching a low point in its fortunes during the years after the War of 1812. It was the same story everywhere else.²⁹

By 1820, while Waldo Emerson was studying at Harvard and Henry Thoreau was only three years old, the Charitable Library was on the verge of collapse. A product of the supercharged politics of the Federalist era, it could not be sustained for long. Even at its peak, the library reached only a hundred or so men, women, and children—no more than a fifth, if that, of the potential audience—and nearly all of them lived in the center of town. When its political moment had passed, the book collection lost urgency, and the members ceased to keep it up. But changing economic times hurt the library as well. Established during an era of economic expansion, it fell victim to the hard years of the Embargo, the War of 1812, and the succeeding depression. By 1821, the Charitable's members had to admit that their institution was in sad shape: 'the books in the library are, many of them, much worn and need new binding; few additions of new books have been recently made; and very small contributions of money have been

29. Shera, *Foundations*, p. 76; David Lundberg and Henry F. May, 'The Enlightened Reader in America, 1700 to 1813,' *American Quarterly* 23 (1976): 252-71; David Lundberg, 'New England Society Libraries and the Common Reader of the 1790s,' (paper delivered at annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, April 19, 1985); Elizabeth Carroll Reilly, 'The Wages of Piety: The Boston Book Trade of Jeremy Condy,' in Joyce et al., eds., *Printing and Society*, pp. 83-131. During its first decade of existence (1795-1804), the Charitable acquired an average of thirteen books a year; thereafter, it could barely sustain annual purchases of more than five. (For 1805-14, the average was 5.0; for 1814-21, 4.7.)

Table 3

DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION

<i>Charitable Library Society, 1795-1820</i> (N = 237)		<i>Concord Social Library, 1821-50</i> (N = 491)	
Date of First Publication	Pct.	Date of First Publication	Pct.
Before 1700	5.5	Before 1800	3.4
1700-24	2.5	1800-20	10.7
1725-49	9.3	Contemporary (1821-50)	97.3
1750-74	10.5		
1775-94	19.8		
Contemporary (1795-1820)	52.3		

made for the use of the library.' So neglected were the libraries of Concord and elsewhere that some critics wrote them off entirely as agents of cultural improvement. 'Many towns are wholly destitute' (of libraries), one writer observed in *The Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman* in 1824, 'and many more have such a wretched choice of books, that their best recommendation is, they are so stupid that nobody reads them; or they are composed of the trash of a circulating library (that is, a private library that rented out books, mainly fiction, for profit)—furnishing no rational instruction, but merely gratifying a morbid appetite for excitement.' But help was on the way, in the form of the Concord Social Library, which absorbed the Charitable's members and collections in 1821 and set about promoting books and reading in a fresh spirit. A new era of cultural reform was at hand.³⁰

The new institution dropped the paternalism of the past. It became a standard subscription library, much like any other in Jacksonian America. It expanded its membership to fifty and thereby went from the smallest social library in New England to become one of the biggest. No longer was the library a tiny, closed

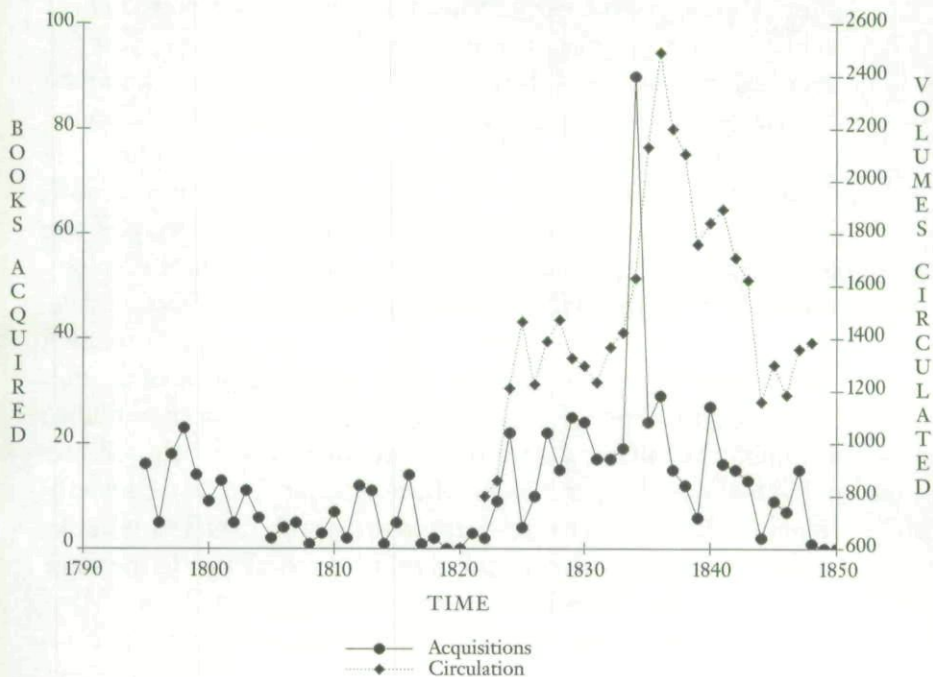
30. Record of Books Lent, 1795-1800; CLS Records, 1: 69-73 (January 11, 1821); Shera, *Foundations*, Table 4, p. 69; 'The Proser,' No. 4, *The Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman*, January 3, 1824.

corporation, to which admission was granted only by a two-thirds vote of the members. Proprietorship was now available on a democratic basis. To join the Concord Social Library, one need only purchase a share of stock; money, rather than status, opened the door. The price of a share, five dollars, was, to be sure, a little steep; only a third of New England's social libraries charged as much. But annual dues were kept as low as in most other towns, ranging from fifty to seventy-five cents. At these rates, the library was accessible to a broad, self-improving middle class. And if one lacked the ready capital to buy a share in the enterprise, there was now an alternative to charity: nonmembers could do as insiders did, and pay an annual or monthly fee. In fact, the Social Library counted on contributions from outsiders to sustain the institution. They were not running a philanthropy for the town.³¹

With a wider base in the community and a renewed sense of purpose, the Social Library set about building up its collections. It made its acquisitions through a variety of sources: assessments on shareholders; fees from nonmembers; donations; and that perennial resource of all libraries, fines for overdue books. Not a year passed without an increase in the holdings; so relentless was the drive for growth that inevitably, some members fell into arrears and were threatened with the sale of their shares, if they did not pay up. The pressure worked. By 1837, the Social Library held almost six hundred books, nearly three times the number it had inherited from the Charitable. That same year, Horace Mann, the crusading secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, whose boundless faith in books as 'the grand means of intellectual cultivation' inspired his career in school reform, conducted a survey of libraries and lyceums throughout the Commonwealth. To the school committees in every community went his anxious queries into the 'means of Popular Education': was there a library in town? how many books did it own? who could use it? did the books have 'good intellectual and moral tendencies?' Back came

31. Concord Social Library Records, 1821-51, CFPL, Safe, Shelf 3, Item 6, March 7, 1821; Shera, *Foundations*, pp. 76-77.

ACQUISITIONS AND CIRCULATION
Charitable Library Society of Concord, 1795-1820
Concord Social Library, 1821-50



a dismaying picture of a cultural wilderness, here and there relieved by 'a few deep, capacious reservoirs, surrounded by broad wastes.' Concord was an oasis in that parched landscape. Thanks to the assiduous labors of its standing committees, the Social Library had amassed a collection that was two and a half times the size of the average institution. Indeed, for a modest country town of some two thousand people, Concord was richly endowed with books. The Social Library possessed one book for every two inhabitants; by contrast, in its county, Middlesex, the ratio was one to five, and in largely rural Worcester County to the west, one to ten. After years of struggle to keep up one of the smaller libraries in the state,

Concord could now boast of its literary riches, even before Emerson and Thoreau made the town a cultural mecca.³²

Though no longer a 'charitable' institution, the new library still carried a benevolent intent. Launched amid the prosperity and political peace of the early 1820s, it was part of a renewed effort to bring about an 'age of reading' in the region. The very year the Social Library was established, the Concord newspaper described Americans as 'a reading generation'; within a few years, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story characterized the era as 'emphatically the age of reading,' marked by 'the general diffusion of knowledge.' Such pronouncements were as much expressions of hope as descriptions of social fact. They articulated a dynamic ideology of moral reform through reading. To the promoters of this crusade, reading was a fundamental social good. For one thing, it provided the basis for an informed, self-reliant citizenry, capable of defending its rights. For another, it was the key to social mobility. Through the pursuit of knowledge in books, it was believed, the individual could expand his intellectual capital, increase his efficiency at work, and raise his status in the world. Even more, books formed character, which would strengthen moral fibre in the wake of success. After all, as Brown University President Francis Wayland explained to the proprietors of the Providence Athenaeum in 1838, 'the path of prosperity is thickly strewn with temptations. Wealth multiplies our opportunities for the gratification of the passions. . . . Hence it is, that wealth is so fatal to character, and, when newly made, is even more frequently fatal, than hereditary wealth.' Wayland's solution was simple: read a book. Evoking themes that would later resonate in the writing of Henry Thoreau, Wayland explained that the very act of intellectual cultivation assured the triumph of mind over matter. The individual, he noted, 'learns to rejoice that he is a thinking being. His mind becomes to him a kingdom. Delivered from the thralldom of the senses, he

32. 1836 Catalogue of Concord Social Library; CSL Report for January 1837; Horace Mann, 'Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education,' *The Common School Journal* 2 (1840): 144, 122-23, 126.

can look with pity on the gilded manacles which are ostentatiously displayed around him, and rejoice that . . . it is not possible that he should ever be despicable.' In effect, books inoculated men against the love of luxury. Most popular amusements—dinner, drink, dances, plays—indulged the senses and dissipated vital energy. But books expanded mental powers. They were means of constant production in the sphere of morals as well as wealth.³³

The vast potential of books depended, of course, on what was read. The proprietors of the Concord Social Library, like their Charitable predecessors, clearly knew what they wanted: books that would 'diffuse useful information among the young, and afford instruction or rational amusement to all classes.' But they redefined 'useful' knowledge to suit the needs of a new age and in the process, discarded the collections policies of the past. Religion was out; so were political polemics. Poetry fell from favor. And the literature of previous generations was forgotten. The new library was a contemporary collection, deliberately selected from 'the useful and popular works of the day.'³⁴

To the officers of the library, such a policy was essential to attract nonmembers to borrow books. In every annual report, the executive committee counted the number of books and periodicals that had been taken out by members and nonmembers alike, compared the totals to previous years, and solemnly announced whether reading had risen or fallen, in the confidence that they were measuring the mental progress of the town. Nobody bothered to question the assumption that a book withdrawn from a library was a book read. That would have shaken the foundations of the whole enterprise. Instead, year after year, the members reiterated their

33. Editorial on 'Our Own Times,' *The Middlesex Gazette*, July 28, 1821, p. 2; Joseph F. Kett and Patricia A. McClung, 'Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 94 (1984): 97-147; Joseph Story, *A Discourse, Pronounced before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at the Anniversary Celebration, on the Thirty-First Day of August, 1826* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1826), pp. 9-10; Francis Wayland, *Discourse, Delivered at the Opening of the Providence Athenaeum, July 11, 1838* (Providence: Knowles, Vose, and Company, 1838), pp. 22, 26; John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 83-85.

34. CSL Records, January 6, 1824, January 4, 1830.

Table 4

Nationality of Author	DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY NATIONALITY OF AUTHOR	
	<i>Charitable Library Society,</i> 1795-1820 (N = 237)	<i>Concord Social Library,</i> 1821-50 (N = 491)
	Pct.	Pct.
American	29.1	38.3
British	56.1	53.9
French	8.9	2.4
German	2.1	1.8
Other European	2.1	2.8
Classics	1.3	0.0
Unknown	0.4	0.6

policy of recruiting new borrowers with new books, until it became an unquestioned article of faith. And when circulation fell off, despite up-to-date purchases, they preferred to ignore the facts. The truth was that the proprietors themselves wanted to read the latest books, and although they claimed to be acting on nonmembers' behalf, it was their reading that over the years correlated most strongly with new accessions. Occasionally, they even acknowledged their taste for the new. 'Most of [our libraries] contain volumes venerable for their antiquity,' complained one sponsor of the Social Library in the first years of the association, 'as well as valuable for their *solid contents*, but great advances and discoveries have been made of late years in almost every branch of knowledge,' and these belong on the stacks. Libraries are for the living, not the dead.³⁵

In their enthusiasm for the new, the proprietors meant to pro-

35. *Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman*, December 25, 1824. In a test of the library officers' refrain that new titles were essential to induce nonproprietors to borrow books, I correlated annual acquisitions with the yearly circulation reports. It turned out that the standing committees were deceiving themselves by their rhetoric. The relation between purchases and circulation was stronger for proprietors than for nonmembers. In the former case, the Pearson correlation coefficient was .36 (with a .05 level of significance); for nonmembers, the figure was .28 (with a .10 level of significance).

Table 5

DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY NATIONALITY OF AUTHOR, IN FIVE-YEAR COHORTS

	<i>Charitable Library Society, 1795-1820</i>										<i>Concord Social Library, 1821-50</i>				
	DATE OF ACQUISITION										DATE OF ACQUISITION				
	1795-99	1800-4	1805-9	1810-14	1815-19	1821-24	1825-29	1830-34	1835-39	1840-44	1845-49				
Nationality	27.6	38.6	43.8	30.3	9.1	43.8	37.1	21.0	51.2	47.9	62.5				
American	55.3	47.7	37.5	57.6	86.4	47.9	57.7	74.8	39.5	34.2	28.1				
British	10.5	4.5	18.8	0.0	4.5	4.1	2.6	1.2	0.0	8.2	0.0				
French	3.9	6.8	0.0	6.1	0.0	4.1	1.3	1.8	8.1	9.6	9.4				
Other European	2.6	2.3	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0				
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.6	1.2	0.0	0.0				
Unknown	76	44	16	33	22	48	78	167	86	73	32				
	N =														

NOTE: Figures for the Charitable Library include only those titles with known dates of acquisition. Figures for the Social Library include both titles with known dates of purchase and those whose acquisition date could confidently be estimated.

mote only solid and moral books. No more than the Charitable's sponsors did they intend to unsettle morality or to encourage radical thought. But they no longer aimed explicitly to prescribe proper conduct and faith. Rather, they were eager for fresh knowledge about the world in which they lived. The preference was for 'matters of fact': histories, biographies, travels, practical science, the latest knowledge of the past and the contemporary world. Such works made up nearly half of the purchases. At the same time, the books increasingly expressed an American view of the world. Back in the 1790s, at most a third of the Charitable Library's holdings had been written by Americans. But that proportion rose and fell in the Social Library, until American authors achieved a majority in the period 1835-40—the very moment when Emerson announced that 'we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe' and thereupon declared our cultural independence from the Old World.³⁶

In this quest for useful knowledge, the Social Library unashamedly sought out popularizations of the latest scientific and intellectual discoveries of the day. It was especially fond of the titles issued in the 'Family Library' of J. & J. Harper from 1830 on. Sold for forty-five cents a copy, a price made possible by the Harpers' adoption of stereotype plates in printing, and advertised as the 'cheapest series of popular books ever published,' the Family Library promoted 'interesting, instructive, and moral books,' chiefly, biographies, histories, travels, natural science, with astonishing success. So popular were they in Concord that the Social Library bought the entire series of forty-one volumes through 1833. The next year, however, Harpers' miscalculated the market

36. CSL Records, January 6, 1824, January 4, 1830; 'The Proser,' No. 4, in *Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman*, January 3, 1824 ('Matters of Fact'); Emerson, 'American Scholar,' p. 69. The slight proportion (21 percent) of American-authored titles in the period 1830-34—a return to the cultural dependence of the Charitable Library—was due largely to the CSL's enthusiasm for the Harper's Family Library, which heavily reprinted British books.

37. Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper: A Unique Publishing Partnership and Its Impact upon the Cultural Life of America from 1817 to 1853* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 20-22, 32, 42, 111, 120, 130, 146, 160, 180; CSL Records, January 2, 1832, January 7, 1833, January 6, 1834; Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 109.

by issuing another fifty-four volumes. The CSL officers, pleading 'limited means' and the availability of other books of 'more value,' decided to pick and choose. Even so, during the 1830s, the publishing company alone accounted for nearly forty percent of the CSL's purchases. When Henry Thoreau asked in *Walden*, 'Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers . . . to select our reading?,' he knew whereof he spoke.³⁷

The zeal for 'useful knowledge' ran so deep in Concord that it inspired the formation of other societies for self-improvement. It was the governing impulse behind the Concord Lyceum, which was essentially an extension of the Social Library. Indeed, nearly half the members of the library joined in starting the lyceum; and year after year, the leadership of the one invariably belonged to the other, with the striking exception of the sometime lyceum curator, Henry Thoreau. The lecture topics at the lyceum reflected the concerns of the library: biography, history, travels, natural science. It is tempting to think of the lyceum members consulting the library's collections in preparation for their debates. In fact, the lyceum owned its own reference set, which included, among other things, *The Library of Useful Knowledge* and *The Library of Natural Philosophy*. In 1835, the lyceum even deposited the collection at the Social Library, so that other townspeople might enjoy its use.³⁸

Yet, for all its earnestness, the Social Library could not avoid the problem that vexed all such ventures: the problem of novels. In the 1820s, the ban on fiction in respectable homes ceased, owing in large part to the sublime influence of romancers like Walter Scott. Squire Hoar changed his mind, according to his son, after he had been stranded at a country inn by a sudden snowstorm; with nothing to read, 'time hung heavy on his hands,' until the restless lawyer asked his host if there were any books. The only

38. Jan Seidler, 'The Concord Lyceum' (paper for graduate seminar on Concord in the Era of Emerson and Thoreau, Boston University, December 18, 1973); CSL Records, January 6, 1834, January 5, 1835, January 4, 1836; Donald M. Scott, 'The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,' *Journal of American History* 66 (1980): 791-809; Records of Concord Lyceum, CFPL.

thing to be found was the first volume of Scott's recently published *Redgauntlet*. 'Father read it with infinite delight,' wrote his son. 'His eyes were opened to the excellence of Scott. He got home the next day at about noon, and immediately sent one of the children down to the circulating library [i.e., the Social Library] to get the second volume. He . . . was a great lover of Scott ever after.' Soon his teenage daughter Elizabeth would be reading Scott's romances as they poured from the press. In the wake of Scott's literary sensation, the floodgates opened to a deluge of tales. To their dismay, the executive committees of the Social Library discovered that satisfying the popular taste for novels was the key to increasing circulation. They tried valiantly to regulate the demand. 'It was our object,' recalled Edward Jarvis, who had grown from a boy, starved for stories of adventure and imagination, into a sober, medical reformer and sometime member of the library's executive board, 'to get books of as high character as the people would read. Not so dull & heavy as to fail to attract their attention & secure their taste—nor so light as to be unprofitable. History—Novels—a few novels of the best kind—and works of morality, religion & philosophy—we got.' Jarvis remembered his intentions better than the results. For the truth is that fiction dominated the selections; it was the single largest category, accounting for forty to fifty percent of accessions in the 1820s and 1830s. The officers insisted, however, upon respectable, wholesome works. They 'condemned' the English writer Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* for its 'immoral tendency' and sent it back. Their preference was for the host of American imitators of Scott, who had eased fears of fiction by yoking the imagination to the hard world of historical fact. By 1840, the vast majority of novels ordered by the Social Library, an amazing seventy percent, were written by their countrymen, including not only Cooper and Irving but also such female chroniclers of New England as Catherine Sedgwick and Lydia Maria Child. Such writers safely instructed in morals while they inspired the imagination. They were the next

best thing to historians—romancers of New England's and America's past.³⁹

Such fastidious tastes did not long satisfy popular demand. In the mid-1840s, American readers enjoyed the benefits of a short-lived 'paperback revolution' in publishing, when ambitious entrepreneurs began issuing cheap, pirated reprints of the latest English fiction in newspaper form. These 'story papers' took advantage of a provision in American law granting the newspaper press—but not periodicals or books—cheap delivery through the mails. The loophole was soon closed by Congress, but not before these early paperbacks exposed the hunger for sensational fiction throughout the country. Concord shared in the excitement. It was doubtless this mania for cheap novels that Thoreau had in mind when he blasted popular reading habits in *Walden*. But the Social Library was no happier than Thoreau. Having watched borrowing by non-members dwindle since the Panic of 1837, the CSL officers pinned the blame on 'the quantity of periodicals which have flooded the Community.' And when circulation picked up again in the late 1840s, they attributed it not to the changes in the law that ended the 'flood of light and effemeral [sic] literature,' but to 'the sober second thought of the people, who again turned their own attention and directed that of their children to the perusal of the more

39. CSL Records, January 2, 1826, January 5, 1829, January 2, 1832, January 2, 1837; Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 26-43; Hoar, *Autobiography*, p. 58; Elizabeth Sherman Hoar to Marianne Cornelia Giles, October 1-2, 1828, in Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, ed., 'Elizabeth of Concord: Selected Letters of Elizabeth Sherman Hoar (1814-1878) to the Emersons, Family, and the Emerson Circle (Part Two),' *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 9 (1985): 99; Edward Jarvis, 'Diary,' CFPL. For one promoter of the library in Concord, reading novels was better than nothing, but if the fiction was by Walter Scott, it was worth close study. Addressing himself, in particular, to female tastes, 'Concord' told readers of the *Yeoman's Gazette* of April 29, 1826 that 'although I would not have a lady's reading consist altogether of novels, yet I would rather have her well read in them, than ignorant of every thing. Scott's novels are worth three readings at least. One for their moral—one for their history of manners and customs of different ages—and one for their facility of expression and elegance of style. Of two ladies one of whom can tell me all the news of town—describe the different dresses at meeting—tell who are engaged—who are going to be and why—and another who can analyze the last novel, point out its faults, remark upon the merits of the hero and heroine, which do you think I would choose?'

solid and substantial works which are found in our Library.' Even as Thoreau was using 'Little Reading' to associate the Social Library with the addiction to fiction, the institution stood resolutely against the fad.⁴⁰

But the greatest challenge to the guiding ideals of the Social Library arose over the prosaic issue of magazine subscriptions. From its very start, the association had committed itself to get two quarterly journals, the Boston-based *North American Review* and the Scottish *Edinburgh Review*, each year; in 1826, it added a third, the *Quarterly Review*, also from Scotland. The decision to take the reviews was no minor matter. It affirmed the very cultural identity of the institution. For the British reviews and their American counterparts represented the literary establishment of their day. Written and edited by active professionals, by lawyers and ministers, above all, for an audience of educated gentlemen like themselves, the journals were the self-appointed guardians of cultural and political orthodoxy. In long, sober, scholarly essays that occupied their weighty volumes, the public events of the day—acts of legislatures, relations between states, the progress of trade—passed in review, for judgment by the earnest custodians of received opinion. So, too, did the latest developments in the world of letters. To the editors and readers of the quarterlies, literature was an official institution, as important, in its way, to maintaining the social order as were government or religion in theirs. It thus became imperative for literary critics to monitor the 'moral tendency' of books, to insure that the language and the ideas of texts upheld 'religious ideals and moral standards.' Not that the reviews resisted all change. To the contrary: they diffused knowledge and promoted improvements, even as they presumed to define the limits of progress. But their fundamental mission, in the words of William Charvat, was 'judicial': in the courthouse of the quarterly, critics decreed the rules and precedents of literature, demanded social responsibil-

40. John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States. Volume I: The Creation of an Industry 1630-1865* (New York and London: R.R. Bowker, 1972), pp. 240-42; CSL Records, January 4, 1847, January 1, 1849.

ity from writers, and, in the process, asserted the authority of a governing class.⁴¹

The Concord Social Library was quick to identify its endeavors with the prestigious reviews. It took enormous pride in the large, imposing volumes on the shelves; one annual report after another pointedly noted the rising number of reviews. The members had no illusion about the popularity of learned journals to the townspeople at large. 'It cannot be denied,' observed one promoter of the library in 1824, 'that such journals as the *North American Review* are eminently fitted to disseminate that kind of knowledge which is wanted. But this is limited in circulation, and indeed it is above the capacity of the uneducated community—I do not mean that its tone is too high, but the minds of the mass of people are not sufficiently developed to read with profit.' Still, the proprietors of the Social Library expected to read the reviews, and as cultural leaders of Concord, to pass on the authoritative judgments of Boston and Edinburgh to their neighbors. The problem was that the quarterlies cost a lot of money for the benefit of very few readers. As anticipated, it was overwhelmingly the proprietors who took out the reviews, accounting for two-thirds to three-quarters of all such loans. The members were undeniably buying the journals for themselves. But was it worth spending three-eighths of the budget for 1832 on journals that drew only six percent of the entire readership? That question clearly troubled the standing committee for that year; it proposed dropping one of the journals, 'notwithstanding the high estimation in which the Reviews are deservedly held by a portion of the reading community.' The proprietors endorsed the idea, but there was a catch: members would pay for the *North American Review* out of their own pockets, rather than from the treasury. The authoritative journals would not disappear from the shelves. And within a year or so, the library

41. William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (orig. pub., Philadelphia, 1936, New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1961), pp. 1-6, and passim; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 174-96.

was again paying for the subscriptions. That was money needed for the purchase of new books, the sine qua non of increased circulation. The library was caught in a bind: it could popularize reading—its announced purpose—only by giving up the badges of cultural authority. The members declined to make that choice. After all, gentlemen had a duty to keep up standards. The Social Library had absorbed that lesson well.⁴²

Faithful to the conservative, institutional values of the quarterlies, the Social Library shunned the modern literature of individualism. None of the great Romantic poets showed up on the lists: no Byron, no Wordsworth, no Shelley, no Keats. The preference was for socially minded poets, and Americans at that: John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell. True, Edgar Allan Poe also slipped in, no doubt a tribute to literary nationalism. But the Social Library heeded the advice of the *North American Review*: however appealing the 'sublime spirit' of idealist poetry and philosophy, stick to the hard 'reality of sober fact.' In consequence, modern philosophy is as sparse as poetry: no Cousin, no Marx and Engels, no Brownson, no *Emerson*. Despite, or maybe because of his membership in the library, the association did not buy Emerson's books. It also passed up the Transcendentalists' own quarterly, *The Dial*, in favor of the stolid *North American Review*.⁴³

With its unswerving commitment to public improvement through established institutions, the Social Library carried on the

42. *Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman*, January 3, 1834; CSL Records, January 7, 1833.

43. Charvat, *Origins of American Critical Thought*, p. 85. The Social Library did order Bronson Alcott's *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* upon its publication in 1837, perhaps in the expectation of receiving a respectable work on moral education. Or maybe they knew what they were getting. That year Ralph Waldo Emerson served both as head of the association and a member of the standing committee that bought the books. But what did his fellow proprietors—men like the conservative Unitarian minister Barzillai Frost—think when they discovered that Alcott was preaching a new religion of his own, a Romantic gospel of childhood, in which the innocent young were offered up as true models of spirituality and ethics, superior, by nature, to established teachers of religion? In Boston, the publication created a public uproar, with talk of mob action or legal prosecution against the author; Alcott was forced to close his Temple School. To their credit, the members of the Concord Social Library, who surely must have learned about the scandal, did not insist upon returning the book. For the incident, see Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 79-83.

values of its Charitable predecessor. Cultural conservatism did not disappear in the Jacksonian age; it took on an updated, modernized form. Symbolizing that continuity was the presence of Ezra Ripley, seventy-nine years old, in the fifty-first year of his ministry, at the opening of the Middlesex County Lyceum in November 1829. Heralding the 'progress of improvements in useful sciences and arts,' Ripley happily contrasted the poverty of his childhood with the cultural riches of the present day: 'The only books used were the little Primer, the chief contents of which were the Assembly's catechism, the Lord's prayer, and Dr. Watts' cradle hymn—a spelling book, psalter, testament, and Hodder's arithmetic. And he who could read and spell these correctly (not understandingly) and could work a sum in the rule of three, was thought to be a bright scholar.' But thanks to institutions like the library and the lyceum, whose purposes were 'in perfect accordance with the principles and practice of our holy religion,' knowledge was rapidly advancing through the land. 'Our common town schools, in some branches of learning, excel the Colleges as they were before the American Revolution. Now we may hear respectable lectures on Geography, Astronomy, Agriculture, and other subjects, by mechanics and farmers. A contrast striking and joyous!' To Ripley, there had been no great change of direction in the shift from the Charitable to the Social Library. The progressive diffusion of 'useful knowledge' kept on. Nor had there been, in fact, any radical alteration in leadership. Ripley himself served as the first moderator of the Social Library. The institution was guided by secular leaders—a doctor and two lawyers—through most of the 1820s. But in its last two decades of existence, the library opted for clerical leadership again. From 1832 to 1851, it had only three presidents, two of them Ripley's successors at the Unitarian Church, and the third their one-time brother in the pulpit, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who served a single term. Once a Unitarian/Federalist project, the library was now, arguably, Unitarian/Whig.⁴⁴

Yet, the bases of ministerial authority had substantially altered.

44. *Yeoman's Gazette*, November 28, 1829; CSL Records.

Ripley had presided over a unified town and church; when he took the helm at the Charitable Library, he was simply extending his pastoral office in new ways. By contrast, his successors found in the Social Library an alternative to their diminishing religious influence in the community at large. In 1826, Concord's religious unity was sundered for good, with the secession of orthodox Congregationalists into a Trinitarian church of their own. In the wake of that withdrawal and the final separation between church and state in Massachusetts, townspeople increasingly 'signed off' the parish. Shorn of their flocks, faced with competition from other churches, the Unitarian pastors could no longer presume to express common religious values, either in the sermons they offered from the pulpit or in the books they wanted on the library shelves. Their cultural leadership had lost its spiritual dimension.

In its new, pluralistic setting, the Social Library aimed to steer clear of controversy over both politics and religion. In 1830 the executive committee ordered the four-volume *Works* of Thomas Jefferson, the first full edition of the late president's papers to be issued since his death. It accepted the set sight unseen, owing to the members' eagerness to have the writings of 'so eminent a patriot and statesman.' But when the *Works* arrived in Concord, a member of the library, the storekeeper Moses Prichard, was horrified to discover that one of Jefferson's letters 'contained sentiments which he was sorry to see.' That letter touched on the vital subject of religion, and, the committee reported to the membership, it 'served to ridicule St. Paul and to call into question the truth of that part of the gospel relative to the birth of our Saviour.' What should be done to satisfy Prichard's objections? The committee came up with a seemingly obvious solution: cut the offensive pages out of the book. Its action, one surmises from the annual report, aroused unease. For the committee was clearly on the defensive for its arbitrary act of bowdlerization. 'Whether the act of taking away these leaves is right or wrong,' the members announced in self-justification, 'the motive which prompted it was good—for it is better that a work should loose [*sic*] two leaves than

that a Sentiment it contains should be the means of leading a single individual to doubt the truth of revelations.' Actually, the committee understated the damage done to the text. The Concord Free Public Library now owns the once-controversial set, and after a page-by-page examination of the four volumes, it is evident that not one, but two of Jefferson's letters were expurgated. The 'obnoxious' passages were what the committee said: rude dismissals of the authenticity of the Gospels, written in the irreverent spirit of Henry Thoreau. 'I read [the Pauline doctrines],' Jefferson explained, 'as I do those of other antient and modern moralists, with a mixture of approbation and dissent.' Enlightened deism remained as unsettling in the Concord of 1830 as it had been a generation before—at least to some readers, like Moses Prichard. But one has the sense, from the defensive tone of the committee report, that the CSL officers were as concerned to mollify Prichard as to protect potential readers' souls. In any case, the brief stir did not stimulate interest in Jefferson's *Works*. Two years later, the officers proposed selling off several books in the collection that 'are of little use,' and it singled out the Jefferson, 'an interesting and valuable work for a private Library, but not sufficiently popular to be of much use where it now is, having been loaned out but once during the past year.'⁴⁵

By midcentury, the readers in the Concord library decisively cast aside the theological concerns of the past. In the archives of the Social Library, there sits an intriguing document: a draft of the executive committee's report for the year 1840. Amid the routine accounting of accessions and circulation is a recommendation for a radical change in the collections policy, offered without the slightest hint of its historic significance. 'There is a number

45. CSL Records, January 3, 1831, January 7, 1833; Thomas Jefferson Randolph, ed., *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, From the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 4 vols. (Charlottesville, Va.: F. Carr & Co., 1826), pp. 320–23, 363–65. With the help of Mrs. Marcia Moss, curator of archives at the Concord Free Public Library, I have compared the town's set, which carries the nameplate of the Concord Social Library, with that in the American Antiquarian Society. On the page opposite that containing Jefferson's irreverent letter to John Adams, April 11, 1823, there is inscribed the following notation: 'Does Prichard want to tear out 3 or 4 leafs out of this Book?'

of books. . . ,’ observed the committee, ‘of a religious and theological character consisting chiefly of sermons, which have no circulation from year to year.’ It was time to clear them from the shelves. With no further explanation and not a sign of regret, the committee proposed to donate the works to the Unitarian Church, which was said to be planning a ‘Public Religious Library’ for the benefit of the town. What gives this report exceptional interest today is that it was composed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had served on the standing committee for the previous three years, at the very time he was commanding national attention for the most radical acts of his public career. How fitting that the man who had summoned the American scholar to cast off bondage to the past should be a pioneering advocate of the policies of ‘deaccession’ so controversial among librarians today! Unfortunately but characteristically, Emerson had conservative second thoughts. The radical proposal is crossed out on the manuscript; it never made its way into the official report; Perhaps Emerson dropped the suggestions for lack of consensus.⁴⁶

But ten years later, back on the executive committee, he again was trying to dispose of the dusty intellectual inheritance from the eighteenth century. This time the committee reached agreement on a plan to pack away, but not to sell, the books with no circulation, and to remove from the shelves, but keep readily accessible, works that seemed occasionally to be in demand. There were 529 such volumes, and luckily, a partial listing of the titles survives. The books came overwhelmingly from the Charitable Library. The collections of sermons, the impassioned refutations of Thomas Paine, the moralistic advice of Hannah More (including the donation by John Thoreau), the lives of converted sinners, the Federalist eulogies of George Washington and the campaign

46. Interestingly, it is only in the annual report composed by Emerson that there appears an expression of doubt that the circulation of books indicates intellectual improvement in the town. ‘The usefulness of the Library,’ Emerson observed, ‘has been greater during the present than during the last year, if that fact may be concluded from the number of its books in circulation.’ Concord Social Library, Draft Report of Standing Committee for 1840, included in Concord Social Library Papers, Three Reports by Ralph Waldo Emerson, CFPL, Safe, Filing Cabinet, Drawer 2; CSL Records, January 4, 1841.

against French radicalism, a few items of polite literature, including Edward Young's lesser-known *The Centaur Not Fabulous*, even Samuel Miller's *Brief Retrospect*: all these works that the post-Revolutionary elite had so painstakingly acquired for the benefit of their townsmen now evoked only indifference. The final title on the list is ambiguous: it is called 'Little Reader' and said to consist of a single volume. Perhaps, it is not the insignificant anthology that Thoreau brought to public notice, but I have found no similar title in all the records. Given its representative role in *Walden*, it would seem appropriate to take 'Little Reader'—whatever it is—as the unlamented symbol of the vanishing world of eighteenth-century Concord.⁴⁷

Even as 'Little Reading' was disappearing into storage, the Concord Social Library was itself passing from notice. In 1846–47, at the very moment Thoreau composed his indictment of his neighbors' reading, the Social Library was in crisis, with new acquisitions reduced to a handful, donations at an end, and circulation, especially among nonmembers, plummeting by fifty percent, a victim, in part, of the rage for light fiction that was sweeping through the town. The proprietors could boast of 'an age of reading' no more. They, too, were falling away from the enterprise. No longer did they freely meet annual assessments to buy new books. Instead, they ignored the bills, year after year, until the library was forced to move from pleas to threats. Either pay up, members were warned, or lose your stake in the institution. The ultimatum had little effect. The library was obliged to auction off the stock of five delinquent proprietors, including the share of the erstwhile Charitable president, Isaac Hurd. That step brought still further embarrassment. Membership had originally cost five dollars a share; by 1847, it could command only half that price. In such straitened circumstances, which beleaguered its sister institutions throughout New England, the Social Library had to face financial facts: private money could not sustain a public resource.

Fortunately, a solution to this dilemma lay at hand, in a new

47. CSL Records, January 20, 1851.

state law, passed in 1851, enabling towns to establish modern, tax-supported libraries. Seizing the opportunity, the Social Library donated its collection as a gift to the town and happily went out of business. To Thoreau, this marked 'the puny beginning of a library suggested by the state.' But it tokened a cultural revival. Founded within six months after the passage of the Massachusetts act, Concord's was among the first town libraries in the state. With renewed dedication to the cause of reading, the community once again marched in the advance guard of change.⁴⁸

Ironically, on the very verge of its demise, the Social Library signaled the cultural preferences of the future. In reaction against the 'flood of light and effemeral literature,' the standing committees of the library turned away from popular fiction and narrowed the range of their selections. Increasingly, their tastes ran to the leading male writers of the day, on both sides of the Atlantic: Carlyle, Dickens, Hawthorne, Melville (before *Moby Dick*), Whit-tier. All were available from a handful of publishers in Boston (Little and Brown), Philadelphia (Carey and Hart), and New York (Harper and Brothers, Wiley and Putnam). By midcentury, the canon of American and English literature was taking form. Indeed, it may well have been this preference for 'serious' literature that precipitated the decline of the Social Library. If so, then the creation of the Concord Town Library, supported by local taxes, formed a brilliant stratagem for consolidating the world of Victorian culture.⁴⁹

True to the past, the new institution put its highest premium

48. Thoreau, *Journal*, 2: 372-73; CSL Records, January 5, 1846, January 4, 1847, January 3, 1848, January 1, 1849; Goldberg, 'Library,' pp. 65-69; Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 107; Shera, *Foundations*, pp. 123-26, 189-99. In addition to Concord, whose library was overlooked by Shera, the towns of New Bedford, Beverly, and Winchendon founded libraries in 1851.

49. In the first half of the 1840s, the three publishing centers of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York accounted for five out of six new books (87%) in the Social Library. By the end of the decade, New York's leading houses, Harper and Brothers and Wiley and Putnam held that overwhelming market share by themselves (85%). In developing this theme of cultural consolidation in the Concord Library, I have drawn upon John Hingham's stimulating essay *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: William L. Clements Library, 1969).

Table 6

DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES BY PLACE OF PUBLICATION

Charitable Library Society, 1795-1820
(N = 237)

Place of Publication	Pct.
New England	59.9
Massachusetts	53.6
Boston (incl. Cambridge and Charlestown)	43.4
Worcester	3.5
Other	4.6
New Hampshire	2.5
Connecticut and Rhode Island	3.8
New York State	15.1
New York City	13.0
Other	2.1
Philadelphia	12.6
Other U.S.	3.0
London	6.8
Other England	0.4
Scotland	1.7
Dublin	0.4
Paris	0.4

Concord Social Library, 1821-50
(N = 491)

Place of Publication	Pct.
New England	43.0
Massachusetts	41.3
Boston (incl. Cambridge and Charlestown)	39.5
Other	1.8
Other New England States	1.6
New York City	37.5
Philadelphia	15.7
Other U.S.	1.2
London	2.2
Other British & European	0.4

on history, biography, and travels, giving these genres pride of place in every one of its catalogues. But it was no longer so eclectic, so far-ranging in its acquisitions. With ample funds from the public treasury, and under the leadership of Emerson, the library actively sought out 'the best' that men had thought and written. Thoreau had complained in *Walden* that hardly anyone in town knew the classics, even in translation; and if a man read 'a Greek or Latin classic in the original . . . , he [would] find nobody at all to speak to, but must keep silence about it.' The town library could not be so rigid. During the 1850s and early 1860s, it obtained a substantial collection of 'Translations from the Classics,' from Aristotle and Aeschylus to Virgil and Xenophon. No more need a citizen of Concord 'hear the name of Plato' and be unable to 'read his book.' In fact, there was no excuse for ignorance of any major writer available in English. On the shelves of the Town Library stood the complete works, in the latest standard sets, of the great authors of antiquity, the classical writers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, even the newly canonized English and American 'men of letters' of the day. The British Romantics—Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth—were now respectable. So, too, was the Transcendentalist Emerson, whose major books quickly entered the collection. And even Thoreau won recognition from his neighbors. Within a year of its publication, the library bought a copy of *Walden*, which it classified, along with *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, under 'Travels.' Not yet recognized as a classic, the book nonetheless won an immediate place in a library dedicated to collecting 'the noblest recorded thoughts of man.'⁵⁰

By the early 1860s, the drive for cultural consolidation had triumphed in Concord. To self-conscious devotees of fine literature, the library was a model of taste, whose books were chosen

50. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 106–7; *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Concord Town Library, 1852* (Concord: n.p., 1852); *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Concord Town Library, 1855*, pp. 18, 37–38, 41; *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Concord Town Library, January 1865* (Concord: Benjamin Tolman, 1865); *Accessions Catalogue, 1873–75, Special Collections, CFPL, Item 1, Vol. 1, Cage Shelf 191.*

'by men of rare culture and mental endowments.' The only problem lay in the accessibility of the collection. With limited hours, closed stacks, and no reference staff on hand, the library could not achieve its grand educational mission. These problems were soon remedied, thanks, in large part, to a generous gift from the wealthy Concord merchant and pencil manufacturer, William Munroe. In 1873, Munroe provided Concord with its own temple of culture, a handsome building in the half-Gothic, half-Mansard style of the day, and endowed it with a \$10,000 capital fund. The town could now afford a variety of innovations, including extended hours, a comfortable reading room, and the appointment of a woman as full-time, professional librarian. And it could exult that its holdings ranked among the finest in the state:

If we compare the volumes in the public libraries . . . of a half-a-dozen wealthy towns in our vicinity [reported the Town Library Committee in 1873], Concord ranks high in this Commonwealth. . . . Brighton, for example, has in her library two books to each inhabitant; Brookline the same; Framingham has one book to each inhabitant; Newton, with its model library, only two-thirds of a book; Woburn has not one book to each inhabitant; Watertown has one; while in Concord, with only 2,500 people, has 10,000 volumes, or four to each man, woman and child within her boundary lines!⁵¹

For all the riches it was accumulating, the Town Library still carefully monitored the books it admitted to the stacks. If recognized male novelists, like Concord's adopted citizen Nathaniel Hawthorne, were now welcome additions, this was not true for the popular female writers of the day—Fanny Fern, Caroline Lee Hentz, E. D. E. N. Southworth, among the most prominent—who sold wildly in the 1850s, far outstripping such romances as *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne scorned his sentimentalist rivals as 'a

51. Samuel R. Bartlett, 'On the Town Library,' *Concord Monitor*, April 10, 1862; Goldberg, 'Library,' pp. 71-74; Report of the Town Library at the Dedication of the New Building for the Free Public Library of Concord, Massachusetts, 1873, CFPL, Item 104. Recall that in 1820, Concord had one book in its library for every nine or ten inhabitants; by 1837, that ratio had more than quadrupled to one book for every two citizens. Nearly four decades later, that ratio had soared again by a factor of eight, to four volumes per person.

d----d mob of scribbling women.' His judgment was shared by the Concord Library, which excluded every one of them, notwithstanding the evident interest of townspeople in their work. In the face of this restrictiveness, a new rental library, run by the bookseller Albert Stacy, opened up, offering the latest best sellers that could not be had from the town. Ironically, during a half-century or so of voluntary societies, when books could be borrowed only under the auspices of the Charitable's benevolent paternalists or at a fee set by the Social's earnest reformers, Concord had never supported a single entrepreneur in the business of lending books. Only after the town established a *public* institution, funded by taxpayers, did the demand for a private alternative emerge. Thanks to the high ambitions of the Town Library's trustees, a new division of labor came to characterize Concord culture: the 'best books' sat in the official collections, while the popular, transient works of the day were ever-present in the market stalls.⁵²

In short, the Concord Town Library embraced the classics of ancient and modern literature with a conservative taste for respectability that mirrored the moralism of previous generations. Reacting against the expansive, indiscriminate culture of the Jacksonian age, the promoters of the public library were eager to buttress their world view with a ten-foot shelf of 'great books.' It was the beginning of the genteel tradition of letters, in the first of many American crusades for 'cultural literacy.' In 1885, the Concord Free Public Library won national attention by banning a new novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, from its collection. The work, explained one member of the selection committee, used 'bad grammar' and 'ignorant dialect' to relate a 'series of adventures of a low grade of morality' in a flippant and irreverent style.' 'It deals,' the member stated, 'with a series of experiences that are certainly not elevating. The whole book is of a class that is more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people, and it is trash of the veriest sort.'

52. Caroline Ticknor, *Hawthorne and His Publisher* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), pp. 141-42; Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); *Catalogue of Books in Stacy's Circulating Library* (Concord, Mass.: Benjamin Tolman, 1860).

In Gilded Age Concord, the spiritual elevation that Emerson and Thoreau had once demanded from books was now reduced to an insistence upon correct manners and speech. Armed with the classics and the 'best' works of their time, the educated middle class of Victorian New England would safely cultivate their tastes and improve their minds, without fear of encountering anything disquieting or rude. And who should have been serving on the library's selection committee but Edward Waldo Emerson, the loyal son of the Concord Sage! Apparently, nobody appreciated the irony. In the course of a century, the Concord libraries had gone from battling irreligious words to banning irreverent ones. Meanwhile, the old sermons continued to sit, unread, on the shelves.⁵³

And what do we say, from all this, about Thoreau's critique of his neighbors' reading? Simply that over the decade he spent writing and rewriting *Walden*, he had seen the popular and the official versions of Concord culture and found them wanting. In the transit of two generations, the townspeople had left behind a culture that, to his mind, lacked any vital spiritual power—the Federalist culture of English divinity and poetry—but they had failed to establish anything authentic in its place. Remote as he was from the spirit of the Augustans and just as distant, if not more so, from the inner strivings of privileged women, Thoreau could never apprehend that 'Divine Sensibility' Mary Wilder Van Schalkwyck discovered in the collections of the Charitable Library. He was out of sympathy, too, with popular romances, though he had sampled a variety of novels, chiefly historical—Irving, Cooper, Lydia Maria Child, and Timothy Flint—during his student days at Harvard. Against the artificial world of fiction, there stood the narrow utilitarianism, the excessive present-mindedness, and the conservative attachment to authority on the part of the Social Library. Thoreau, of course, was not the only man of letters to look disdainfully at popular culture. He shared Samuel Miller's scorn for the superfi-

53. Victor Fischer, 'Huck Finn Reviewed: The Reception of *Huckleberry Finn* in the United States, 1885-1897,' *American Literary Realism* 16 (1983): 16-18.

cial and love of the classics and was no less intolerant of inordinate, conspicuous consumption than Francis Wayland. But the larger world-view of those clerical-intellectuals, like that of the *North American Review*, was not his. Their devotion to social institutions and to public improvements proved anathema to the independent spirit, who signed off from all involuntary associations and denied any public duty to do good. 'I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society,' he declared. 'I am not the son of the engineer.'⁵⁴

Books and libraries, in themselves, were positive goods to Thoreau, if used in a self-reliant spirit. He himself had seen and used virtually every form of library in his day: the collections of Harvard College and the Boston Athenaeum, the personal holdings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Social Library of his native town, and the private, rental library of bookseller Albert Stacy. And he shared the curiosity of his middle-class contemporaries with the latest useful knowledge: he owned works in Harper's Family Library; he ranged freely in the fields of biography, history, travels, and natural science. No one was readier than he to take advantage of the 'rapid strides' of the nineteenth century, when they could be 'improved means' to truly 'improved ends.' But he could not accept the Social Library leaders' uncritical, childlike faith in the power of numbers. He would always be an individual unit.⁵⁵

Yet, it is too simplistic to view Thoreau as a solitary dissenter, set in unyielding hostility to the main currents of his town. Far from it. If anything, his attack upon the 'little reading' of Concord was a harbinger of the emerging genteel culture. In his celebration of the classics, 'the recorded wisdom of mankind,' Thoreau anticipated the acquisitions policy of the new town library. Even more,

54. Kenneth Walter Cameron, 'Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library,' in Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1945); Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, ch. 1; Henry David Thoreau, 'Civil Disobedience,' in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), pp. 236-37.

55. Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, ch. 1; Harding, 'A New Checklist of the Books in Henry David Thoreau's Library,' pp. 152, 155.

his expansive vision of literary culture would eventually shape the public identity of that institution. Although Thoreau is commonly regarded as an inveterate foe of all organized effort, he appreciated the possibilities of neighborly cooperation, especially in the realm of culture. 'To act collectively,' he announced in *Walden*, 'is according to the spirit of our institutions.' Why not, then, create a cosmopolitan center in Concord, where townspeople could 'pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives' in the best books of past and present? 'It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities. . . . Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? . . . In this country, the village should in some respects take the place of the nobleman of Europe. It should be the patron of the fine arts. . . . Instead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men.' Thoreau predicted that his proposal would be dismissed as 'Utopian' by his tight-fisted neighbors. In fact, the Town Library set out to achieve his agenda. Evidently, Thoreau liked what he saw. A few years after the public library embarked upon its quest for the classics, Thoreau reflected upon the happy combination of nature and culture in his native town. In the woods and fields, he wrote, 'I enjoy the retirement and solitude of an early settler. . . . I see a man sometimes chopping in the woods, or planting or hoeing in a field, at a distance; and yet there may be a lyceum in the evening, and there is a *book-shop* and *library* in the village, and five times a day I can be whirled to Boston within an hour.'⁵⁶

Thoreau died too soon to see the culmination of his design in the munificence of William Munroe, Concord's own patron of the arts. But at the dedication of the new building in 1873, an aging Ralph Waldo Emerson was to confer upon the library the posthumous blessings of his old friend: 'Henry Thoreau we all remember as a man of genius, and of marked character, known to our farmers as the most skilful of surveyors, and indeed better acquainted with their forests and fields than themselves, but more

56. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 109-10; Robert A. Gross, 'Transcendentalism and Urbanism: Concord, Boston, and the Wider World,' *Journal of American Studies* 18 (1984): 378.

widely known as the writer of some of the best books which have been written in this country, and which, I am persuaded, have not yet gathered half their fame.' It was Thoreau's spirit, Emerson went on, that graced the auspicious occasion. 'He, too, was an excellent reader. No man would have rejoiced more than he in the event of this day.' And why not! The ideals Emerson held out for the library, the large purposes he beckoned it to serve were also Thoreau's. Affirming the credo that had informed his entire literary career, Emerson told his audience that books were 'the best type of influence of the past,' the means of passing on the wisdom of the ages and of provoking people to discern in their own times the freshest reports of nature to the mind. To this end, what better resource than the splendid new library of the town. 'I think we cannot easily overestimate the benefit conferred,' he declared. So attractive was the building, so easy to use, that the library would readily draw people within and foster the habit of reading through the town. It would 'make readers of those who are not readers, — make scholars of those who only read newspapers or novels until now.' And it would induce 'strangers who are seeking a country home to sit down here.' Ever the canny New Englander, Emerson knew that good libraries, like good schools, enhanced the value of real estate, even as they expanded the mind. Most of all, though, the library would make small-town Concord the equal, perhaps even the envy, of the metropolis of Boston and the great cities of Europe:

If you consider what has befallen you when reading a poem, or a history, or a tragedy, or a novel, even, that deeply interested you, — how you forgot the time of day, the persons sitting in the room, and the engagements for the evening, you will easily admit the wonderful property of books to make all towns equal: that Concord Library makes Concord as good as Rome, Paris or London, for the hour; — has the best of each of those cities in itself. Robinson Crusoe, could he have had a shelf of our books, could almost have done without his man Friday, or even the arriving ship.

In sum, thanks to the library, Concord could enjoy the cos-

mopolitanism of an urban age, though it remained a bucolic town. It could realize Thoreau's vision and become a 'noble village of men.'⁵⁷

Emerson's address was fit for a ceremonial occasion, on which Concord congratulated itself for its devotion to culture. But having long since accommodated to the dominant ways of the bourgeois world, Emerson assimilated Henry Thoreau too easily into the new genteel culture. If Thoreau was no hermit in the woods, he was also no booster for the Concord chamber of commerce. Bonded to his countrymen by a thousand ties of sympathy, as well as antagonism, he was locked into a constant quarrel with people, whose possibilities he admired and whose premises he shared sufficiently to be outraged at their failure to lead 'heroic' lives. He would forever be correcting his neighbors, in an unending campaign to wake them up.

On the eve of the incorporation of the Concord Social Library into the public library of the town, the executive committee took stock of their institution's achievements. 'Has the perusal of more than 40,000 good books during the past quarter of a century had any thing to do with the general intelligence of the first generation of inhabitants in this ancient and enlightened town?' The committeemen were, of course, asking a rhetorical question. But Henry Thoreau never indulged in more rhetoric. Nor would he willingly confine his pursuit of truth to any one time or place. For him, the classics were not sealed up in the Western tradition, as interpreted by Anglo-American critics and revered in the Concord Town Library. They emerged from all times and places, in the writings of Persian poets, Nordic bards, and Hindu mystics, as freely as in the 'sacred Scriptures' of Congregational and Unitarian New England: 'That age will be rich indeed,' Thoreau observed, 'when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall

57. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Address at the Opening of the Concord Free Public Library,' *Miscellanies*, in Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4), 6: 496-97, 500.

have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last.' No canon of great works could ever be prescribed for the ages. For wherever original souls dared to explore the limitless realms of Nature, there awaited 'heroic' books, filled with 'the noblest recorded thoughts of man.' Such classics demanded to be read in the inspired spirit they were written. 'This only is reading, in a high sense,' Thoreau declared, 'not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tiptoe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.'⁵⁸

In the end, books and reading posed a strenuous challenge that few of his countrymen had ever considered. To read 'deliberately' and heroically is to take language seriously and employ it imaginatively, to experiment with ideas and life, and to join with an author in the most elevated form of production there is: the production of meaning, not of wealth.

58. CSL Records, January 1, 1849; Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 101, 103-4, 107; Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 48-69.

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