

François WEIL

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François WEIL

Early Nineteenth-Century New Yorkers and the Invention of New York City

- 1 Early nineteenth-century New Yorkers faced what I propose to call the problem of New York City. Despite its fast-paced urban and economic growth or because of it, to outside observers and New Yorkers alike early nineteenth-century New York appeared less as a culturally self-aware city than as a bustling commercial emporium, to borrow a term frequently used at the time. Compared to Boston, the self-proclaimed Athens of America, to Charleston, the pride of the South, and to Philadelphia, where simplicity of faith went along with arrogance of class and a desire for culture to mitigate the search for profit, New York fared badly, the eternal upstart².
- 2 Many New Yorkers were aware of New York's inferiority vis-à-vis its rivals in this respect, and they decided to act. By the 1850s, the city's self-awareness was a given. In 1853, *Putnam's Monthly*, a new magazine devoted to "literature, science, and art", published a series of articles entitled "New York Daguerreotyped", which purported to account for the city's architectural and cultural growth over the previous decades. Although the magazine acknowledged the city's shortcomings, it insisted on its wonderful achievements and, more importantly, revealed the extent of New York's awareness of its image, energy, and power³. Between the early and the mid-nineteenth century, then, something had happened, which is the topic of this paper.
- 3 New York's new self-awareness, I argue, resulted from various, parallel forms of cultural processes and elaborations, which most often were neither concerted nor necessarily coherent. Put together, however, they amounted to a remarkable transformation of the city's perception of itself by insiders as well as by outsiders. For the sake of clarity, I describe these processes under three, admittedly artificial headings – literary and artistic, historical, geographical and sociological.

Literary Pursuits

- 4 A first series of elaborations, also the best-known ones, took place in the literary and artistic spheres. When De Witt Clinton famously regretted in his 1814 *Introductory Discourse* before the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York that "the energies of our country have been more directed to the accumulation of wealth than to the acquisition of knowledge", he hastened to add that there was "nothing in the commercial spirit" which was "hostile to literature"⁴. In 1814, this was an optimistic assessment and wishful thinking to a remarkable extent. And yet, Washington Irving's *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gentleman*, published in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1802-03; and, more importantly, *Salmagundi*, written in 1807-1808 by Irving, his brother William, and James Kirke Paulding, suggested that New York and New York's society could be the subject of a literary work, even though it was, in this case, a clever spoof but a spoof nonetheless. Beyond the political satire of the Livingston and other leading New York families, beyond the acknowledgement of the depth of factionalism in New York politics, the Salmagundians displayed a new form of pride in New York, which a fantasy Dutchman named Diedrich Knickerbocker, aka Washington Irving, would carry to new heights in his imaginative *History of New York City*, published in 1809⁵.
- 5 It was only the beginning. In his book *New York Intellect*, the historian Thomas Bender has so well analyzed the complex and at times contradictory ways, in which a literary and artistic culture developed in New York during the antebellum era, that I only want here to insist on the self-aware nature of much of the individual and collective endeavors he describes. De Witt Clinton, John Pintard, and their successors in the 1820s and 1830s formed or sponsored institutions like the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York (1814), a new avatar of the American Academy of Fine Arts (1816), and the New York Atheneum in 1824. James Fenimore Cooper organized the Bread and Cheese Club in 1822, the first of several such literary circles until the more patrician Century Club was created in the mid-1840s. Artists like Samuel Morse, writers like William Cullen Bryant all partook in the growth of a literary and

artistic metropolitan landscape, which the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, born in 1833, perhaps best embodied. Nobody reads the *Knickerbocker Magazine* any longer, probably because it lost a major cultural war to Sullivan's *Democratic Review* and then unlikely outsiders like Poe, Melville, Whitman and others. And yet, it contributed to coalesce an early New York-centered culture – one against which the above named “young Americans” would be able to rebel in the 1840s and 1850s. This rebellion itself, of course, reflected a national and democratic ambition, but it also located the seat of this ambition in New York City, and this is no indifferent matter. When Charles Briggs and George William Curtis' *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* opened in early 1853, it projected, as Thomas Bender puts it, “images of the metropolis to the nation”—in a literal sense as the magazine included many daguerreotypes of New York City, and in a symbolic sense as its literary content was encapsulated in what at heart was a self-aware New York magazine⁶.

Historical Explorations

- 6 The new self-awareness was not exclusively rooted in literary pursuits, if only because until the generation of the raven and the whale literature was hardly considered as an autonomous activity. Men like Gulian Verplanck, De Witt Clinton's young opponent and a forgotten though central figure in New York's antebellum intellectual life, easily and constantly linked literature and history⁷.
- 7 To a certain extent, New Yorkers reacted to what they perceived as the undue domination of the Puritan narrative and of New Englanders' claims over American history. Patrician New Yorkers of Dutch, Huguenot, and post-Puritan English origin begged to differ. “Why is it that we hear so much of ‘the Puritan Anglo-Saxon stock,’ who first settled on the outer-casing of this continent?”, the editor and poet Charles Fenno Hoffman rhetorically wondered in his address before the St. Nicholas Society of New York in 1847. By contrast, he deplored that so little was heard of the “bold Belgic navigators”, the “devoted Huguenots” and the “brave English cavaliers”. Here was, the orator insisted, a “trinity of good blood” which blended “for two hundred years on the soil of New York” and flowed “in the veins of her native-born children”⁸.
- 8 Such mid-century expostulations were the result of four decades of arguments to defend the specificity of New York's past and encourage native New Yorkers' genealogical and historical pride. Gouverneur Morris's 1812 address before the New-York Historical Society was one of the first and most influential illustrations of the New Yorkers' case. Morris described New York “as a commercial emporium” in the Dutch tradition of political and trade freedom and insisted on the specificity of New York's ethnic complexity. New Yorkers were “born cosmopolite” because their “ancestry may be traced to four nations, the Dutch, the British, the French, and the German”⁹. In 1814, De Witt Clinton petitioned the New York Legislature on behalf of the New-York Historical Society to request funds to promote local history and archival preservation, including Dutch materials. A few years later, Gulian Verplanck made the case for the Dutch and the Huguenots. “We have no cause to blush for any part of our original descent, and least of all for our Dutch ancestry”, he argued. As for the Huguenots, Verplanck was certain New Yorkers would agree “in ascribing parts of our character to the moral influence of a virtuous and intelligent ancestry”, and therefore “may well look back, with pride, to [their] Huguenot forefathers”¹⁰.
- 9 All this served to bolster a New York collective identity. The St Nicholas Society of New York, founded in 1835, was a natural place for expression of such feelings. James Fenimore Cooper thought the society was “one step in asserting the proper rights of the real New-Yorkers on their own ground” as it made heard “the voices of the descendants of the old stock”. At the Society's 1837 anniversary dinner, members toasted “the blood of the Batavian patriot, the Huguenot exile, and the English cavalier” that mingled in the state of New York. In 1839, Verplanck made fun of Yankee claims to primacy, spoofing “what, according to their tradition”, they call ‘the landing of the pilgrims’”.
- 10 New Yorkers translated this ancestral pride, identity feelings, and bonds of affection into historical and genealogical pursuits. New Yorkers of Dutch origin, like Pierre Van Cortlandt,

began to search for their ancestors¹¹. During the 1840s and 1850s the New-York Historical Society published materials on New York's Dutch period in the second series of its *Collections*. A major enterprise was the discovery and recovery of important sources about New Netherland in the Dutch archives by the American chargé d'affaires to The Hague, the distinguished Albany patrician Harmanus Bleecker. Bleecker's secretary John Romeyn Brodhead had these sources transcribed and put them to use in the first volume of his *History of the State of New York* (1853); they were compiled, translated, and published by Edmund B. O'Callaghan in his 4-volume *Documentary History of New York* published between 1848 and 1851 and in the *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, an 11-volume monument whose publication began in the early 1850s¹².

- 11 These various pursuits, in other words, created a new relation to the past in the present and future-minded place that was New York City. By the 1850s, it had become possible to write a narrative history of New York City and several writers did, with diverse fortunes. E. Porter Belden's 1849 *New York: Past, Present, and Future, Comprising a History of the City of New York*, Daniel Curry's 1853 *New York: A Historical Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Metropolitan City of America*, David Valentine's *History of the City of New York*, also published in 1853, and Mary L. Booth's still usable *History of the City of New York from Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, published in 1859, testified to the success of the new genre and the growing awareness of the city's historical identity¹³.

Representing the City

- 12 In 1807, a long forgotten medical doctor, politician, and Columbia College professor by the name of Samuel Latham Mitchill published a book more than 200 pages long entitled *The picture of New-York, or, The traveller's guide through the commercial metropolis of the United States*. Also a proud city booster, Mitchill provided a topographical description and a historical summary; several chapters were devoted to listing the banks, markets, insurance companies, courts of justice, and municipal regulations which could prove useful to travelers and New Yorkers alike. A significant part of the book, however, focused on the various organizations that in his opinion made New York City a cultural center: benevolent institutions, literary establishments, and public amusements. In so doing, fully conscious, as he explained, that New York was "not as well known to its own inhabitants as it deserves to be" and that "strangers and travellers" had "not done justice to it", Mitchill attempted to set New York's record straight¹⁴.
- 13 Arguably the first guidebook and description of the city, *The Picture* had many successors of many kinds. They had little in common except that they served to bolster the elaboration of an image and perception of New York City among its inhabitants, visitors, and observers. Some contributed to a new grammar of a city whose extremely rapid growth had created a lack of readability; others provided often titillating accounts of the sleazy aspects of New York's low life. Some catered to their readers' eyes, others to their ears, some to their brains, others to their desires and lust. Taken together, they drew the contours of a new geography and sociology of the metropolis, in much the same way as works of history had rooted New York in a newly-discovered past¹⁵.
- 14 Consider three examples. The first one is *The Cries of New York*, arguably America's first picture book, whose first known edition is from 1808, with several printings in the following years and a second enlarged edition in 1814. Designed after the 1775 *Cries of London*, the *Cries of New York* targeted New York children and included short chapters articulated around New York's street life, activities, and sounds. The first edition listed over twenty cries, ranging from the watchman ("Twelve o'clock at night, and all's well!") to many types of peddlers, including those of sweet potatoes ("Sweet potatoes, Carolina potatoes, here's your sweet potatoes!"), corn ("Hot corn!"), onions ("Here's your beauties of onions: here's your nice, large onions!"), and cattails ("Here's cattails, cattails to make beds"). The cries, the woodcuts, and the text all contributed to fashion a sense of locality that revealed pride and self-consciousness¹⁶.
- 15 My second example is from 1831. That year, the writer Theodore S. Fay and the architect James Harrison Dakin began to publish a series entitled *Views in the City of New York*, a multi-part collection of high-quality engravings of New York's streets, public and private buildings,

churches, etc. Fay's introduction insisted that their book was an attempt to provide an accurate description of an often maligned city. Indeed, the engravings' cumulative visual effect was impressive. It offered a narrative of architectural beauty, economic power, and cultural pride to its readers. It captured the rapid spatial growth of the city. Alongside Fay's *Views* literally hundreds of texts and images celebrated the growth and the virtues of the antebellum city. Soon, for instance, Currier and Ives would pick up the trend and inundate America with cheap lithographs of New York which would democratize and nationalize this new narrative. This promotional rhetoric was not unique to New York, but in New York its development accompanied the actual rise of the city to national supremacy¹⁷.

16 Finally, there were two highly successful books authored by the journalist George Foster, *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver*, and *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, published in 1849 and 1850 respectively. Over 200 000 copies of these books were sold. Foster literally dissected the metropolis in slices of life animated by colorful characters. He offered a social geography of the city, which provided its readers with a solution to better read the puzzle that New York City had become¹⁸.

17 I could take many other examples, ranging from urban mysteries to guides to the city's brothels to Horatio Alger's edifying novels, but they would only reinforce this paper's central point: these texts and images helped to bolster New York's self-awareness during the antebellum era in much the same way as literary and historical pursuits had. By the 1850s, New York had its writers, its poets—even if they came from Brooklyn to celebrate mast-hemmed Manhattan—, its artists, its historians, and its journalists. It had become a metropolis with an attitude.

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Notes

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2 See Jahner.

3 "New-York Daguerreotypes", *Putnam's Monthly* 1, 2, February 1853, 121-136; 1, 4, April 1853, 353-368; 3, 15, March 1854, 233-248.

4 De Witt Clinton, *An Introductory Discourse, Delivered before the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York, on the Fourth of May, 1814*, New York: Published by David Longworth, 1815, 17.

5 Washington Irving, *History, Tales, and Sketches*. On Irving's satire of New York aristocrats, see Grover 63-75 and Weatherspoon Bowden 133-160.

6 See Bender.

7 Twenty years ago Thomas Bender noted we were still in need of a recent biography of Gulian Verplanck. The same holds true today.

8 Charles Fenno Hoffman, *The Pioneers of New York. An Anniversary Discourse Delivered Before the St. Nicholas Society of Manhattan, December 6, 1847*, New York: Stanford & Swords, 1848, 8-9.

- 9 Gouverneur Morris, "A Discourse Delivered Before the New-York Historical Society, at their Anniversary Meeting, 6th December 1812", *Collections of the New-York Historical Society, for the Year 1814*, New York: Printed by Van Winkle and Wiley, 1814, 121, 128.
- 10 E.B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 11 vol., Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1856-, 1: vi-viii; Gulian C. Verplanck, *An Anniversary Discourse, delivered before the New-York Historical Society, December 7, 1818*, New York: James Eastburn, 1818, 59, 73.
- 11 Pierre Van Cortlandt to John P. De Lancey, 2 August 1826, reproduced in Edward F. De Lancey, "Original Family Records of Loockermans, Bayard, Van Cortlandt, Van Rensselaer, and Schuyler", *New York Biographical and Genealogical Record* 5, April 1874, 70.
- 12 Harriet Langdon Pruyn Price, *Harmanus Bleecker: An Albany Dutchman, 1779-1849*, Albany, 1924; Edmund B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, transl., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 11 vols., Albany, N. Y.: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1853-1887, 1: x-xliv.
- 13 E. Porter Belden, *New-York; Past, Present, and Future; Comprising a History of the City of New-York, a Description of Its Present Condition, and an Estimate of Its Future Increase*, New-York: G. P. Putnam, 1849; Daniel Curry, *New York; a Historical Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Metropolitan City of America*, New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853; David T. Valentine, *History of the City of New York* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1853); Mary L. Booth, *History of the City of New York from Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (New York: W.R.C. Clark & Co., 1859). On New York City's early historians, see 699-719.
- 14 Samuel L. Mitchill, *The Picture of New-York, or, the Traveller's Guide, through the Commercial Metropolis of the United States*, New-York: Published by I. Riley and co., 1807.
- 15 Weil 153-160.
- 16 *The Cries of New York*, New York: S. Wood, 1808.
- 17 Theodore S. Fay and James H. Dakin, *Views in New-York and Its Environs from Accurate, Characteristic, & Picturesque Drawings, Taken on the Spot, Expressly for This Work*, New York: Peabody & Co., 1831.
- 18 See Foster and the inspiring introduction by Stuart M. Blumin, "George G. Foster and the Emerging Metropolis", 1-61.

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Résumé / Abstract

Cet article s'intéresse à l'« invention » de New York, dans la période antérieure à la Guerre de Sécession, et aux formes ou aux procédés qui susciteront l'émergence d'une nouvelle conscience de soi dans la ville. Il évoque d'abord les facteurs contradictoires qui contribueront au développement d'une culture littéraire et artistique. Il tente ensuite de montrer comment les new-yorkais traduisirent leur fierté ancestrale et leurs sentiments identitaires sous forme de recherches historiques et généalogiques. Enfin, il montre la manière dont certains ouvrages élaborèrent une nouvelle grammaire, une nouvelle image, afin d'esquisser les contours géographiques et sociologiques de la métropole naissante.

Mots clés : New York City, période antérieure à la Guerre de Sécession, culture, magazines, Washington Irving, histoire, généalogie, cartes, guides, rues, gravures

This essay explores the « invention » of New York City in the antebellum era, or the parallel forms of cultural processes and elaborations that led to the emergence of a new sense of self-awareness in the city. It first evokes the contradictory ways in which a literary and artistic culture developed. It then attempts to reveal how New Yorkers translated their ancestral pride and identity feelings into historical and genealogical pursuits. It finally explores the way in which some works contributed to the creation of a new grammar, a new image, in order to draw the contours of the geography and sociology of the new metropolis.

Keywords : maps, New York City, antebellum era, culture, magazines, Washington Irving, history, genealogy, guidebooks, street life, engravings