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New Series, Part IV

“Periodic Reports from the Editorial Subcommittee”
(Continues *“Contributions on the ‘W’ Cache and Related Sources”*)

Documents Ostensibly Pertaining to the Origins and Development of
“The Order of the Third Bird”

The Editorial Board of ESTAR(SER) would like to acknowledge the support of its founding benefactors (Nasco Bass and Anonymous), and the faithful subscribers to the Proceedings in its recently resurrected form. Correspondence should be addressed to individual authors.

THE CLERMONT CONNECTION:

*EVIDENCES BEARING ON ASSOCIATIONIST ASSOCIATIONS
OF THE ORDER AT MIDCENTURY
(THE ROBINSON/FAIRWRIGHT CORRESPONDENCE)*

TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY SAL RANDOLPH AND D. GRAHAM BURNETT

In keeping with the mission of these *Proceedings*, we here present for the first time a suite of five letters (part of the “W cache”) that offer striking evidence for at least one, and possibly two, early American cells of the Order of the Third Bird, which appear to have been active in 1848. Though neither of these correspondents can offer directly witnessed accounts, the second hand reportage strongly suggests that the Ohio-based community alluded to in these pages was indeed engaging in formal, ritualized practices of sustained attention to works of visual art, and that these activities were recognizably akin to those characteristic of the Order in its “modern” incarnation—acknowledging, at the same time, significant disanalogies that will be evident to the informed reader. The intimation of parallel (or are they lineal?) goings-on in a Philadelphia-based community is intriguing, but ultimately unsubstantiated by the available documentation—since no additional letters between Mary Robinson and August B. Fairwright have yet come to light.

A word about the correspondents: Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the Brahminical (if passionate) spinster Mary, who hailed from a large and respectable family of merchants in the Boston area. The Robinsons had a hand in tanning, timber, and papermaking, and were linked by filiations of kin and contract with trading partners in Le Havre and the Caribbean. Mary had access to a fine library in the home of her maternal uncle, a medical doctor trained at Edinburgh who had a reputation as a freethinker.

It was from him, there is reason to believe, that she acquired an appetite for botany outstripping the ordinary enthusiasms characteristic of women of her station in the period. Whether she ultimately went to Philadelphia in pursuit of her enflamed sister (and the mysterious "Falcon")—either with Fairwright or otherwise accompanied—has proven impossible to ascertain, though there seems to be evidence that Mary Robinson did indeed travel south about eighteen months later, since she died relatively suddenly in New York City in 1850, apparently a victim of typhus.

Where Fairwright is concerned we can do only a bit better. He was an independently wealthy gentleman, then resident in Manhattan, who owned considerable tracts of land in upstate New York and had various interests in Ohio and Pennsylvania. The family had been active in national affairs at the time of the Revolution, and at least three of his relations held offices in Washington, DC, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. His education (which began at Yale, but was completed on an extended grand tour) was classical and continental, and his own politics, while not scandalous, were hardly conventional. His years in Paris apparently marked him in this respect, and he seems to have been more or less unassimilable both to the national political scene in the United States at midcentury and to the local machinations of his native state, New York (in the late 1830s he declined a move to Albany in connection with the administration of Indian affairs). He withdrew into science and, to a lesser extent, literature. His closest circles appear to have been a coffeehouse crowd of quirky collectors, writers, and naturalist-amateurs who gathered for convivium at a public house known as DeGraw's, not far from the old Tontine Coffehouse. Herman Melville was thought to have been briefly associated with this group, although the link has recently been disputed. Fairwright himself published nothing, though he receives acknowledgments in the works of the distinguished American botanist William Sullivant, to whom he refers in these letters. He died in 1861. There is little reason to doubt his claims about having been intimate with Fourier's followers in Paris, but there is no independent evidence for this connection.

Those concerned with ESTAR(SER) and the general history of the Order will want to take note of several features of what follows. It is striking, for instance, to observe a reference to the saffron color of the robes or "hoods" (the color, though naturally not the headgear, representing a continuity with late twentieth-century usage), and to sense in the fluttering air of

mystery surrounding the Order in this exchange something of the *frisson* of Masonic secrecy that has inhered in the rites of the community to the present day. Also important is the simple intersection of this early Bird cell with the Associationists at Utopia, though the editors are inclined at present (pending new evidences coming to light) to agree with Fairwright that the link to the Fourierists is probably indirect (at best) or (more likely) simple coincidence. The notion of Transcendentalist ties merits further consideration, as does the issue of spiritualism, alluded to briefly.

These and other points, illuminated by the documents that follow, will require proper historical investigation, which the editors allow themselves to hope will be advanced by the presentation of these pages to our discerning readership.

Waltham, Massachusetts

24 June 1848

Dear Mr. Fairwright,

I write in some haste, presuming on our too-brief acquaintance, and on the kind attention with which you answered my many questions after the meeting at Mrs. Hawkins. I know you to be an expert in matters which have come to take on urgency since my sister Anne—I believe you are not personally acquainted with her—returned from Ohio, from a place surely well known to you, with a strange and unsettling tale. I tell you frankly, sir, I do fear for her.

I will try to lay the matter out for you neatly, as it otherwise threatens to occupy many sheets, and I do not wish upon you the labor of making out a letter closely cross-written. I feel certain you have friends and acquaintances involved in the creation of the Associationist township now occupying the site of the former Clermont Phalanstère, as you must have with other ventures of this nature, so I need not elaborate on that score at least. My sister—somewhat excitable in nature—in a state of keen curiosity set aflame by some meetings she attended here in Boston, determined to visit with a school friend, a Mrs. Turner, who is residing at the town.¹ I encouraged her—I admit this—due to my eagerness to learn how things truly fare in this grand experiment.²

And on that account, as you have no doubt heard through other friends, the settlement proceeds with some difficulty. There is much rebuilding after the flood and reorganization, but one can hardly say they are well established.

1. The Phalanstère mentioned by Robinson was more commonly known as the Clermont Phalanx, a utopian community founded by followers of Charles Fourier in 1844 on the banks of the Ohio River, not far from Cincinnati. The Phalanx was disbanded in 1846, and the community reorganized first (and briefly) by the followers of spiritualist John O. Wattles, and then by anarchist Josiah Warren in 1847 who gave the new township the name of Utopia, Ohio. A lively account of the founding and fortunes of the Clermont Phalanx can be found in John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Company, 1870). A further narrative of the Utopia years is included in William Baile, *Josiah Warren: The First American Anarchist, a Sociological Study* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1906).

2. For a sketch of the broader context for the undertaking see the classic: Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Mrs. Turner had requested my sister to bring with her such staples as could be had in Cincinnati which were in short supply in the township: salt, sugar, flour, some yards of good wool and the like. They are anything but expert farmers, being mostly educated in the literary arts, and both money and small luxuries have already grown short. But this turns me aside from my main concern. Mrs. Turner also requested from my sister something most peculiar, that being such paintings, engravings, or small objets as she might locate or spare. My sister naturally believed these were wanted in order to relieve the plainness of the newly built houses, but it seems this was not precisely the case.

For several days my sister Anne simply visited with her school-friend, inspecting the farm and building projects underway, attending community meetings and a dance, and helping to care for Mrs. Turner's youngest child who was recovering from fever. One night, deep into the midnight darkness, Anne felt herself shaken awake by the hand of Mrs. Turner. She was bade to rise and carry with her one of the paintings from her luggage. This my sister did, all wondering. Mrs. Turner led her by shielded lantern to a small out-building of uncertain purpose. There, with my sister's willing permission—and though you do not know Anne, I can tell you I express no surprise that she would give it—she covered my sister's eyes with a scarf, cutting off her vision. Bumps and rustling followed, the sounds of people entering, low murmurs my sister could not make out. Then a kind of chanting began and the scarf was taken away to reveal a strange cabal, six persons hooded and robed in a dark orange, all facing the small landscape by Cranch that my sister had carried with her from Boston.³

Here, my sister's tale grows fragmented. She tells me she was asked to keep silent about what she saw and did that night and the nights that followed. Happily for me, her nature is not such that silence comes easily, and I have written to beg more details, which hope to receive. At present, all I know is that some kind of ritual or ceremony took place, one that was characterized by unnaturally prolonged gazes at the picture in question. Few words were spoken, and the faces of the participants remained veiled. After an

3. Presumably Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813-1892), the Cambridge-based poet and painter who had longstanding ties to the Transcendentalists. He contributed to the *Dial*, and his landscape paintings combined elements of Hudson River School atmosphere and Barbizon-style social realism.

hour or more, my sister was led from the room, some parts of the ritual continuing, apparently too private for her to see, and she was taken back to her bedchamber by Mrs. Turner. Such mysterious goings-on are calculated to intrigue one such as my sister, and she fell in readily with Mrs. Turner's plans, waking again on several future occasions to view diverse works of an artistic or decorative nature.

Though she has returned from Ohio, my sister remains much entranced. She speaks of new ways of thinking and feeling with a passionate enthusiasm that troubles me, and as well alludes to vague commitments and obligations undertaken on behalf of this hidden society—known, she says, as *Avis Tertius*. Mr. Fairwright, though she assures me the activities of this group are harmless, my sister's very excitement renders me cautious.

What seems most perverse to me is that this group would seem to almost worship these paintings and objets they stare at. I am familiar with the small Cranch she took away with her, and I can only surmise that the heavy trees, winding river, and sunset skies it shows are much like those found in place in the township itself. I hear the town is sited beautifully near the banks of the Ohio (though that proved a perilous choice for the first settlers). Does it seem proper to prefer the depiction of a river to the river itself? I confess, consulting myself, it does not.⁴

My sister now entreats me to visit the public meetings of an Aesthetical Society here in Boston, where some sorts of similar principles are apparently elucidated and discussed by a Mr. Tuckerman and others. I shall, perforce, attend.

Nonetheless, my heart is not easy. What I ask of you, Mr. Fairwright, is this: please tell me what you know of this *Avis Tertius*. My sister suggests its origins lie on the Continent, or even in the East Orient. Are its history and purposes familiar to you? Is it an occult science of Mr. Fourier's ideas? A

4. It is tempting to suppose here that Mary Robinson had received some instruction in Plato's traditional critique of the representational arts. The Spens translation of 1763, printed in Glasgow, might well have been a book in the library of her maternal uncle, since it was a volume freely available in Edinburgh in the years that he was assembling the bulk of his book collection. But this is pure speculation. The larger import of Platonism (or Neoplatonism) in the Transcendentalist milieu makes it equally likely that Mary absorbed her Platonic sensibility from acquaintances (or acquaintances of acquaintances) like Amos Branson Alcott (1799-1888), who had centered the Temple School around a bust of Plato by the 1830s.

form of his distributive passion known as *Cabalism*?⁵ Or is it some Spiritualist contamination? Does the name not simply mean “Third Bird?” It strikes me as not unlikely that whatever its purposes, the ritual may have been invented by some of the more imaginative young members of the township whose intellects have been underemployed in their new lives as farmers. Perhaps they are plagued by crows.

Your time in France and your certain knowledge of Mr. Fourier’s ideas, as well as the other philosophies currently in vogue on the Continent, must make you the best person to whom I can turn. If you could spare a few moments to set my mind at rest on these matters, I would be most grateful.

Your sincere friend,

Mary Robinson

*Deichtman House
above Waverly
in the City of New York
this 7th day of July, in the year 1848*

Dear Miss Robinson:

I must beg your forgiveness for the great delay in my replying to your letter, which reached me only after my return from a week of rambles with my dear old school friend, William Sullivant, who has become, since our New Haven days, quite the colossus of Bryology.⁶ I am well aware that you are passionate about ferns (the pressed specimen with which Mrs. Hawkins presented you seemed rather a palm of triumph in your hand), but you must reserve a measure of your enthusiasm for the mosses, low as they may seem.

5. On “Cabalism,” “Passional Attraction” and the other aspects of Fourier’s philosophy alluded to in these exchanges, one does well to start with Fourier himself. The English edition of *The Theory of the Four Movements* (Gareth Steadman Jones and Ian Patterson, eds. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]) has a very helpful introductory essay. See also Charles Fourier *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* (Dijon: Les Presses de Réel, 1998).

6. William Starling Sullivant (1803-1873), botanist and author, in 1840, of *A Catalogue of Plants, Native and Naturalized, in the Vicinity of Columbus, Ohio*.

Good Mr. Sullivant can make a grown man weep for a clump of the stuff—and we collected many clumps, I can assure you, in the wet woods above the East Branch of the Delaware. He left last Thursday, for Ohio, as it happens (whence he hails, and where he has settled), with two trunks packed to the brim with the fruit of our botanizing. I was sorry to see him go, though I must say it is most pleasant to be back at home. I am getting too old for camp life, and prefer the comforts of library, my fire, and my good pipe (which I do not take fishing).

Your tale has all the mystery and intrigue of a work by Radcliffe. And issued in serial, at that, for I now must await the next installment. But I should here allay any hope you might have that I possess special intelligence on such strange goings-on. Of Fourier's teachings, I do indeed have some command (more, I should say, than Messrs. Brisbane and Ripley, whose Fourier is very penny-press, in my view).⁷ As I think I told you, I fell in with a number of the great man's leading disciples during my years at the Jardin des Plantes—and even met with the sage himself shortly before he died. And I do follow the doings of these Associationists, though I am inclined to find in their enterprises pale dilapidations of the true glory of the Harmonian crede (however impious and, frankly, mad it is).

And yet of your secretive *Avis Tertius* I fear I know nothing (though I do recall being shown, in Cluny, a handsome *Vasa Manualia* emblazoned with three ostriches; they are, I believe medieval hieroglyphs for Mary, in that they leave their eggs to be hatched in the warmth afforded by direct sun). Moreover, I do doubt a proper Fourierist genealogy for the peculiar rites you describe. The visionary of Besançon spent precious little time on paintings and sculpture, both in life, and in his writings. And as for

7. Fairwright refers here to two of the major American proponents of Fourier, Albert Brisbane (1809–1890) and George Ripley (1802–1880). Brisbane's *Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (Philadelphia: C. F. Stollmeyer, 1840) introduced the American intellectual community to Fourier's ideas, and his pamphlet, *Association: or, A Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier's Social Science* (New York: Greely & McElrath, 1843) acted as a kind of manual in the formation of the Phalanxes and related experiments. Ripley was a founder of the Transcendentalist utopian experiment, Brook Farm (active 1841–1847), which became the first American attempt to apply Fourier's principles to the organization of communal life. Fairwright's criticism likely refers to the tendency of Fourier's American admirers to bowdlerize his work, deemphasizing Fourier's frank promotion of free-love and his flamboyant cosmological fantasias in favor of the pragmatics of his blueprints for a new social architecture.

practices of prolonged looking, one can hardly imagine it of a man so thoroughly distractible—indeed, a man whose philosophy, if you like, might be summed up as a utopian *summa* of distractibility. For him and his, gastronomical pyrotechnics first, amorous pageantry to follow, and then banners, dance, and song, together with prolonged speechifying and a good deal of theatrical melodrama. I can hardly imagine any of them sitting still long enough to admire a tidy little Cranch, however compelling it might be as a specimen of the painter's art. Fourier makes, I think, only the most passing allusion to aesthetical contemplation, referring very cryptically to a figure named Damon, who in the fine world to follow "civilization," will be free to fancy flowers with the fullness of his time and person.⁸ You can imagine why that fellow stuck with me (as did the master's preoccupation with that fine product of nature's art, the *Fritillaria imperialis*, but I digress).

No, this must rather be some sodality of the transcendental persuasion, oriental syncretism out of Kant and his kin. If I am skeptical, it is in my nature as a man of science. But so too is the attribute of curiosity, to be sure. And so I do attend upon the post for further word of these doings.

Remaining, in the while, your most
respectful servant,

August B. Fairwright

Waltham, Massachusetts
28 June of 1848, A.D.

Dear Mr. Fairwright,

It pains me to reveal rather too much of my own nature by writing again so soon, in advance of any reasonable period in which you might have the opportunity to reply. Perhaps you will be able to forgive me, as the circumstance of having a flock of younger brothers and sisters under my

8. The "Damon" figure is discussed by Jonathan Beecher in his monumental *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 256. A useful account of Fourier's ambitions for botany follows in the text.

care has made me a too rapid and too frequent correspondent (my brothers especially can be indifferent in their letter-writing, and my sisters offer either floods or droughts as their moods take them, so I often find myself writing several letters against each one I receive). I feel my responsibilities greatly, yet have little power to affect circumstance, and therefore I put pen to paper. Pray do not be disturbed if our letters cross in the mail, as I am more than familiar with this occurrence.

My sister writes, laughing at my concerns. The mummery is all in fun, she assures me. Yet she also claims the identities of most of the members of this *Avis Tertius* remain hidden from her despite the small size of the settlement, so it strikes me that there is something here in earnest. Further, she has received correspondence, from one styling himself "Falcon," inquiring as to whether she might wish to continue attending ritual events, as apparently there are members of the group in Philadelphia, where my sister is now residing with our Aunt. Anne is certainly a grown woman, perhaps a bit old to remain unmarried as she does (though I find myself, her elder, in like circumstance, and so cannot overly chide her), yet as I have suggested before, there is something childish in her character. It might seem puzzling to you that I am so concerned for her philosophic constitution, but what are we if not the sum of our thoughts? Anne would argue, I think, that we are also made of perception and sensibility. All too much sensibility in some cases. Why, one wonders, are intensities of feeling so unevenly distributed among humanity's members?

Having given some further thought to the notions of Mr. Fourier, I wonder if it is not precisely this that links those midnight ventures with eager town-building: are not both a sort of passional attraction?

I leave off now, and assure you that I await your reply with all patience.

Your most sincere,

Mary Robinson

The Manse, Waltham

11 July, 1848, A.D.

Dear Mr. Fairwright,

Ah, if only I had shown a bit more restraint, and properly awaited your reply which appeared in a most timely manner yesterday. Your letter made me quite smile at the overblown sense of triumph with which I had regarded that fine specimen of fern given me by Mrs. Hawkins. And now, perhaps without meaning to, you have set me a new task: the collection and study of such mosses as can be found hereabouts. As you can no doubt predict, a location rich in ferns and toadstools must also have many mosses to recommend it. It is a temptation to think I might apply to you from time to time for the identification of such cryptic specimens as might be slipped into a letter. But here I must begin to presume too much on your kindness. Surely you can not wish to be burdened with the solving of all my mysteries!

On the subject of mysteries and gothic tales, I have little to offer in the way of further installments. I have not yet been able to attend a meeting of the Aesthetical Society, but friends tell me that it is a rather dour series of public lectures on the topic of our duty to attend on such forms of beauty as are given us by God in order that we may be more reconciled to this otherwise difficult life. I feel reluctant to take up new duties, as I have an abundance of them. At least for the ferns I feel a kind of passional attraction. So it appears that the Aesthetical Society at least has not been drawn from the pen of Mrs. Radcliffe as those over-dramatic birds appear to have been.

On that point, I thank you for sharing what you know of Mr. Fourier's thought. You must be right that the odd practices my sister described have some other origin. I confess I am sorry to hear it, as it leaves this particular mystery back in my hands and in my heart. As much as your allusions to fictional romances have helped me make light of what has happened, it is my sister's future that gives anxiety. I have had only a few lines from her, to the effect that she may not say more about the rituals. Out of character as it is, she preserves her silence. And I fear that behind her silence she hides the intention of further correspondence with this "Falcon." If she will not put these adventures aside, it may

be necessary to travel to Philadelphia myself in the hopes that my presence there will prevent any rash behavior. Would that my Aunt's supervision were of stronger character, but alas it is not.

I will end here, so as not to obligate you in further reply. I delighted in your letter, but I know you must have many demands on your time. When next you see a fine *Adiantum pedatum*, I hope you will think of me,

Your friend,

Mary Robinson

Deichtman House
above Waverly
on the island of the Manahatta
16 July, in the year 1848

Dear Miss Robinson:

I have received your last letters with great interest, and no small measure of disappointment that we have not firmer reports concerning the activities of this avian conspiracy. Upon receipt of your missive of 28 June, I went so far as to write to an acquaintance of mine in Philadelphia (a Mr. Cassin, who is very knowledgeable concerning ornithology) to inquire as to whether he might be in possession of intelligence on this "Falcon" of yours, and his ilk. As yet I have nothing from him.⁹

And I have rifled my shelves in pursuit of some clues that might be of use to you as you sift this matter. But I fear I have thus far put my hand on little that could truly be of use. There are, as you may know, several striking instances of birds being used as judges of the aesthetic merit of antique paintings (these are tales from Pliny's infinite *Natural History*).¹⁰ But none of them would seem to be particularly concerned with any triumverate of

9. This would presumably be the great American ornithologist John Cassin (1813-1869), then in accession to his position of leadership at the Academy.

10. Fairwright is doubtless alluding to the famous *Zeuxis/Parrhasius paragone* of Book 35, Chapter 36.

the feathered tribe, and I can find no trace of any clubbish association or fraternal order that styles itself *Avis Tertius* or the equivalent in any language over which I have command. The Plinian tales I should be most charmed to share with you nevertheless, as they are themselves most charming. If you do decide to make your way to Philadelphia, might I suggest that you keep me informed of you [sic for "your"] preparations. My friend Mr. Cassin has a position of some authority at the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, and I have not seen him in some time. I should most welcome the occasion to pay him a visit, and I can hardly think of anyone better suited to aid you in your pursuit of any bird, however reclusive or philosophical. I shall keep you informed, should I strike on any worthy reference or allusion. Meanwhile, you will be thoroughly amused to learn that I have recently received, from a correspondent in Quebec, the most curious nest of what I assume must have been a family of cerulean warblers: it is perfectly carpeted in the finest young fronds of what would appear to be a new species of *Adiantum*. I shall offer it to you as a token of esteem when next we find ourselves in the same parlor.

With all respect, your faithful servant,

August B. Fairwright

Dedham Mass
near Waverly
on the island of Martha's
16 July, in the year 1848

Dear Miss Weston:

I have received your last letter with great
interest and a small measure of disappointment
that we have not former reports of this same conspiracy.
Your receipt of your volume of 23 June, I went so far
as to write to an acquaintance of mine in Philadelphia
(Mr. Cassin, who is very knowledgeable concerning
ornithology) to inquire as to whether he might
be in possession of intelligence on the subject
of yours, and his reply: He got it had nothing
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And I have sifted my shelves in pursuit of
some others that might be of use to you as you
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FIGURE: A facsimile of Fairwright's letter of July 16, 1848. First of two leaves; 5 7/8 inches by 9 1/4 inches; umber ink on American foolscap (reproduced courtesy of Willard Maine; photo by Sal Randolph).

of any despotic appropriation or invasion
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or the equivalent in any language, or what
I have conceived. The Plinianists
should be most charmed to share with
you nevertheless, as they are themselves
most charming. If you do decide to
make your way to Philadelphia, might
I suggest that you keep me informed
of your preparations. My friend Mr.
Cassin has a reputation of some authority
at the Philadelphia Academy of Natural
Sciences, and I have not seen him in
some time. I should most welcome
the occasion to pay him a visit, and
I can hardly think of any one better suited
to aid you in your pursuit of any bird
lessor, reclus, or philonthusian.
I shall keep you informed, should
I strike on any worth, reference or
attention. Meanwhile you will be thoroughly
amused to learn that I have recently
received, from a correspondent in Cuba,
the most curious nest of what I assume
must have been a family of cerulean
warblers: it is perfectly completed
in the finest young branches of what
would appear to be a new species
of Thiantant. I shall offer it to you as
a token of esteem, who next we find
ourselves for the same Parcel.
With all respect, your faithful servant
Robert B. Fairwright

FIGURE: Facsimile of Fairwright's letter of July 16, 1848. Second of two leaves; 5 7/8 inches by 9 1/4 inches; umber ink on American foolscap (reproduced courtesy of Willard Maine; photo by Sal Randolph).