

# In the American Tempest: Democracy, Conspiracy, and Machine

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## INTRODUCTION

No one can be certain precisely what “democracy” is, but everyone seems to agree that it is in danger. Since the beginning of the pandemic, warnings of “toxicity,” “vitriol,” and other ill humors infecting the body politic have invaded mass media and political discourse, while the foundations of our civic order—“truth,” “facts,” and “civility”—have been seen to erode to the point of collapse. Although the exact cause of the present rupture in the social and epistemic fabric is hard to pinpoint, many observers seem to agree that the internet is to blame. Online algorithms are found to spread “misinformation” and “disinformation,” while anointed experts attribute unexpected outcomes of public events, from election results to the verdicts in defamation suits, to online campaigns by malicious “bots.”<sup>1</sup> A *New York Times* opinion piece from June 2021 warned readers against examining or analyzing claims found online, since the impulse towards curiosity “allows grifters, conspiracy theorists, trolls and savvy attention hijackers to take advantage of us.”<sup>2</sup> The atmosphere of confusion and distrust not only pervades public discourse in the English-speaking world, but increasingly spills beyond it; the phrase “fake news” has entered, untranslated, into political discourse in France, where a law criminalizing false statements online fuels an acrimonious debate.<sup>3</sup>

To what degree our perceived social-epistemic crisis is new or even real is unclear, since its prophets rarely stop to define concretely what the

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1. Graham Kates, “Report finds online campaign of ‘widespread targeted harassment’ against supporters of Amber Heard,” *CBS News*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amber-heard-supporters-online-targeted-harassment-campaign-report/>.

2. Charlie Warzel, “Don’t Go Down the Rabbit Hole,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/18/opinion/fake-news-media-attention.html>.

3. Matthew Fraser, “Debate: The Legal Fight against ‘Fake News’ Must Not Veer into Censorship,” *The Conversation*, June 11, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/debate-the-legal-fight-against-fake-news-must-not-veer-into-censorship-98049>; Michael-Ross Fiorentino, “France Passes Controversial ‘Fake News’ Law,” *Euronews*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/11/22/france-passes-controversial-fake-news-law>.

alleged dangers are, nor precisely what they threaten to destroy. The characteristic combination of alarm and vagueness can be found, for example, in an article published in the *New York Times* in July 2022, titled, “Disinformation Has Become Another Untouchable Problem in Washington.” The article’s authors, Steven Lee Myers and Elaine Sullivan, blame the dissolution of the recently formed Disinformation Governance Board within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on false rumors and “conspiracy theories,” asserting that the body was undone by “the very kind of campaigns it was meant to monitor.” The authors do not define, much less question or examine, the category of “disinformation,” which appears in the article’s headline; since entering the political lexicon during the Second World War, the term has always had a vague meaning with no legal definition but strong overtones of foreign propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the article quotes a “former top intelligence official” at the DHS, who laments that “you can’t even use the word ‘disinformation’ today without it having a political connotation,” but the authors do not point to any time in the past when the word supposedly lacked political freight. Without further elucidation, it is impossible to determine what such terms as “misinformation” and “disinformation” denote apart from claims with which the speaker disagrees. Nevertheless, the *Times* article follows convention in associating these undefined threats with the alleged fragility of democracy and in pointing to the internet as the vector of attack, warning that, “coordinated disinformation campaigns threaten to . . . undermine democracy itself,” and quoting uncritically a DHS bulletin that bemoans “an online environment filled with false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories.”<sup>5</sup>

Sullivan’s and Myers’s article encapsulates the perception that our minds are under siege by deceptive and malicious actors, from which the founts of authoritative truth and consensus must protect us. Ironically, this sense of vigilance can often cross over into conspiracy theories much like those against which it claims to defend. In June 2022, the *Guardian* published an article titled, “Russia-Backed Network of Syria Conspiracy Theorists Identified,” which argues, based entirely on one study by a group called the “Institute for Strategic Dialogue,” that various journalists, pundits, and academics have coordinated with one another in a “campaign disseminating disinformation.” The article provoked a wave of criticism from readers, on the grounds that it reproduced accusations of conspiracy without providing specific examples; without examining the evidence, methods, or reasoning

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4. Merriam-Webster, “The Real Story of ‘Disinformation,’” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/disinformation-meaning-origin>.

5. Steven Lee Myers and Eileen Sullivan, “Disinformation Has Become Another Untouchable Problem in Washington,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/business/disinformation-board-dc.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

of the source study; and without noting that the ISD's backers include governments involved in the Syria conflict. The *Guardian* was subsequently obliged to remove the phrase, "Russia-backed" from the title and to add to the article no fewer than three addenda with caveats and qualifications. Still, none of these addenda noted the basic irony that, as some readers argued, the article itself, riddled with thinly supported and debatable conspiratorial claims, itself constitutes a conspiracy theory.<sup>6</sup> In sum, contemporary discourse has taken on a hall-of-mirrors quality, with suspicions and accusations of conspiratorial subversion engendering and reflecting one another with little firm connection to a shared reality.

It is with this context in mind that we must consider the question that the conveners of this symposium have put to us: namely, that of how the humanities might "inform tech policy and design to promote 'healthier' discourse and democracy online." We may admire our organizers' optimism that practical wisdom might point to a way out of our present crisis, but we must note the ambiguity of our guiding question, which hinges mainly upon the unclear meaning of the very thing that we have been called upon to defend: "democracy." Are we to understand the term to refer to a system of government? If so, which one? Most of us surely know that the word originated in classical Greece—but few observers today would count the gatherings in the Athenian agora as "democratic," since they excluded women, slaves, and immigrants. An American might assert the democratic legitimacy of our own system of governance, in contrast, by reference to the principle of "one person, one vote," even as it includes organs, such as the Senate and Electoral College, that directly contravene that principle. Regardless, the ancient Greeks considered elections as such to be an aristocratic exercise, and Demosthenes and his ilk would never acknowledge a republic in which citizens resign policymaking power to a small legislative body over whom they have little control to be "democratic."

The ambiguity of "democracy," as it is invoked in our prompt, is further compounded by the modifiers that surround it. For instance, does the word "online" modify only the verb, "to promote," or the noun phrase, "discourse and democracy"? In other words, are we to understand "democracy," in this conversation, as a process that happens online? If so, it must refer not to a system of voting or legislation, none of which currently takes place on the internet, but rather to something more diffuse, like a mode or sphere of social interaction, which now takes place largely, or perhaps even primarily, on the internet. Likewise, the invocation of "healthier" democracy—the ambiguity of which the conveners seem to acknowledge with scare quotes.

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6. Mark Townsend, "Network of Conspiracy Theorists Identified – Study," *Guardian*, June 19, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/19/russia-backed-network-of-syria-conspiracy-theorists-identified>.

To speak of a democracy as having good or ill health evokes a long tradition of casting states and governments as expressions of an organic “body politic” which experiences a life cycle of youth, aging, and death. Machiavelli, in the *Discourses*, calls for republics to be renewed by a periodic return to founding principles; otherwise corruption will “destroy the body”; echoing the “doctors of medicine,” he insists that “every day some ill humors gather which must be cured.”<sup>7</sup> We at this symposium have been asked, it seems, to serve as “doctors of medicine” in this sense—although we are not told precisely what ill humors we must purge, nor in exactly what sense the patient in our care is unhealthy.

History, sadly, is not a field of medicine. The discipline is ill-suited to provide precise prescriptions for contemporary problems, especially technical ones. History can, however, put the current crisis into context, by relating it to earlier struggles with which it shares similar dynamics and with which, in some cases, it may be causally linked. The historian cannot adjudicate the true meaning of “democracy,” nor define terms like “disinformation” or “conspiracy theories,” but history can illuminate the webs of associations and the worldviews that those phrases evoke. In doing so, it can help to clarify whether the contemporary crisis itself is real, whether it is new, or whether it has been misunderstood.

In sum, we must investigate three main questions: 1) What exactly is the nature of the “democracy” that we have been asked to help defend? 2) What is the nature of the purported or implied threats to democracy, and are they new? 3) How do these threats relate to electronic mass media, and has the internet in particular led to a new field of danger? In examining these questions, we will have to practice a kind of historical psychology—not using supposed inborn neuroses to account for historical events, but rather using the historical record to uncover our hidden and recurring obsessions. We must unearth currents of thought and evolving understandings of the world that are often implicit, captured in popular and elite perceptions of danger. More specifically, our journey ought to begin in the early nineteenth century, when the concurrent rise of both mass democracy and mechanization first promised—or threatened—to transform the world and unleash uncontrollable powers.

## 1. DEMOCRACY

Gallery no. 62, in the neo-classical West Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., houses the museum’s most prominent paintings from the Revolutionary period. These include John Trumbull’s iconic

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7. Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, translated by Christian Detmold (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1882), Book 3, chapter 1, paragraph 1, <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/machiavelli/works/discourses/ch03.htm#s06>>, accessed March 17, 2023.

depiction of Alexander Hamilton and Gilbert Stuart's portrait of John Jay, both of which blend in smoothly among a dozen or so posed portraits of eminent statesmen and cultured ladies from the time of the republic's birth.<sup>8</sup> However, one other painting in room no. 62 stands out dramatically from the rest. Measuring about 7 feet by 11 feet, the monumental work is among the largest in the entire museum, and it does not depict a lone figure or a couple posed against an Arcadian landscape, but rather a deep, almost cavernous interior scene, with scores of figures arranged in a complex, dynamic composition. Titled *The House of Representatives*, the painting depicts Congressmen, judges, messengers, and clerks, circulating around the vaulted Capitol chamber just before the opening of an evening session.

Aside from its extraordinary size and composition, the painting's provenance is exceptional. It postdates all of its neighbors in gallery 62, having been completed in 1822—after the end of the Revolutionary period as customarily defined. Moreover, the painting did not originate from an elite patron's commission, but rather from an ambitious young artist's scheme to create a work that the public would pay admission to view, as they had done several years earlier to see Trumbull's famous depiction of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The painter of *The House of Representatives*, the thirty-year-old Samuel F. B. Morse, even created a guiding pamphlet to help visitors to identify the 60-odd members of Congress whose likenesses he had meticulously fitted into his canvas. Such artistic spectacles were, in some ways, forerunners of cinema—and many aspects of *The House of Representatives* are indeed cinematic: gold-tinted pools of light sweep over the wide interior of the House chamber, softly illuminating its towering pillars, red cloth hangings, and gilded coffering, while below them, scores of male figures are captured in the midst of action—walking, pointing, reading, conferring—each one displayed before the unobstructed gaze of the viewer, but each oriented in his own individual direction.

Morse hoped that his painting would not only make him money, but would serve to elevate the minds of his countrymen: he aimed to “turn their thoughts from sensuality and luxury to intellectual pleasures,” as he wrote to his father, the Reverend Jedidiah Morse.<sup>9</sup> An orthodox Congregationalist minister from Charlestown, Massachusetts and the country's foremost geographer, Jedidiah had raised Samuel in the austere, moralistic New England tradition, the principles of which were further instilled in Samuel's mind by his education at Yale, then the foremost stronghold of

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8. “Collection database,” The National Gallery of Art, accessed August 17, 2022, [https://www.nga.gov/collection-search-result.html?artobj\\_credit=Corcoran%20Collection%20\(Museum%20Purchase,%20Gallery%20Fund](https://www.nga.gov/collection-search-result.html?artobj_credit=Corcoran%20Collection%20(Museum%20Purchase,%20Gallery%20Fund)

9. Samuel F. B. Morse to Jedidiah Morse, May 3, 1815, Morse papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Paul J. Staiti, *Samuel F. B. Morse* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76.

Congregational orthodoxy. Samuel had turned away from the traditional professions of law and divinity in order to pursue art, but he brought to his career a sense of moralizing mission; the artist's desire for paternal approval can be seen in the painting in the appearance of Reverend Jedidiah Morse in the House gallery, gazing down contentedly onto the scenes below.

Samuel's masterwork was painted amidst to so-called "Era of Good Feelings" following the collapse of the Federalist Party. The end of Federalism had marked a loss of confidence in the national state as an instrument through which a virtuous elite could mold and discipline society; the Jeffersonian belief in a yeomen's republic appeared to have won the battle over the proper meaning and legacy of the Revolution. Whereas statesmen of the Revolutionary generation such as Hamilton and John Jay rarely invoked "democracy," and when they did, it was disparagingly, as a byword for anarchy, it was in the 1820s that a new consensus formed that America was and ought to be a "democratic" nation.<sup>10</sup>

Like most men of his generation, Samuel F. B. Morse embraced the ideal of a republic whose stability rested in the virtue and industriousness of its white male citizens, but he was unusual in embracing art, in place of the sermon, as a vehicle for popular moral uplift. His grand painting represents an attempt to reconcile and synthesize the austere Protestant ethics of his upbringing with the rising populist, individualist, and expansionary ethos of the new century. Much as Jedidiah's landmark *American Geography* enabled his countrymen to imagine the new republic as a growing but unified organism, so Samuel's *The House of Representatives* seeks to capture the republic in miniature as an emergent, self-reproducing social order based in shared norms and habits. The painting, with its neo-classical background and its figures shown in dignified, upright poses and faces in three-quarters view, shares with its neighbors in the National Gallery an overarching mood—of dignity, harmony, and self-composure, instantiated not in a singular subject, but in the harmonious co-existence of the various different figures moving about in an open, round, three-dimensional space. Roundness has often symbolized equality of eminence, as in the Roman Pantheon (consecrated to all the gods) and in the Arthurian Round Table; Morse emphasizes the roundness of the House chamber by presenting it from an angled view, foreshortening the long arc of the Congressmen's benches and revealing the gentle curves of the vaulted ceiling.

Morse's vision of "democracy" comes into clearest relief by means of a contrast with earlier traditional depictions of legislative houses, which revolve around the presiding officers and show the legislators seated in

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10. For the framers' antipathy to "democracy," see Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang), 2007; for the rise of "democracy" as an ideal in the early nineteenth century, see Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1992), especially p. 230-33.

straight, orderly rows. For example, Peter Tillemans' early-eighteenth-century depiction of the British House of Commons centers on the Speaker in his large entablatured chair surmounted by the Queen's arms; painted shortly after the Acts of Union of 1707, Tillemans' work emphasizes the indirect presence of royal authority that maintains order and unity in the house.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Morse's color palette is reminiscent of Renaissance-era depictions of the governing bodies of Venice (the "Most Serene Republic"), such as Pietro Malombra's 1604 painting of the Venetian Signoria receiving an ambassador, with its warm, gentle sidelight falling upon gilded coffering and folds of red cloth. Malombra's composition, however, aligns with the ducal chamber's rectilinear forms and focuses on the brightly lit and imposing figure of the Doge.

In contrast, Morse's composition shows the House as if through the eyes of a visitor just entering from a side gallery. The speaker's dais is set far off to the side of the image and is depicted empty. The space is inviting, with the House members and staff caught in a moment of transition. The harmony of the scene is not artificially imposed, but voluntaristic, emergent, and organic, based on silent cues and rhythms. The implicit contrast with European courts is underscored most dramatically by the painting's visual heart: serving as the focal point of the composition is not a seated officer, but rather a servant—probably a slave or servant of a House member—standing on a stepladder to light the chandelier. The man's dark figure offsets the glowing Argand lamps and emphasizes the chandelier's three-tiered triangular shape, suggestive of the light of reason, religion, and the Holy Trinity that suffuses the scene.

Morse's ambitious masterwork sought to present "democracy" as a vital and dynamic social system not only to the middlebrow American public, but also to the courts of Europe, where skepticism as to the viability of the American experiment reigned. Indeed, even the mere fact that the expanding House continued to convene and debate national affairs was a triumph over European doubts: according to the historian George Dangerfield, "a cardinal maxim" of European thought in the early nineteenth century held that "republican governments could not survive if they were asked to adapt themselves to the needs of a great territory and a sprawling population." Since the United States already had both and continued to expand, the great powers of Europe "confidently expected" that the republic would soon fracture or collapse into chaos.<sup>12</sup> The serene and inward-looking atmosphere of Morse's painting therefore asserts the

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11. "The House of Commons in Session," UK Parliament, Object Record, [https://heritagecollections.parliament.uk/collections/getrecord/HOP\\_WOA\\_2737](https://heritagecollections.parliament.uk/collections/getrecord/HOP_WOA_2737), accessed March 17, 2023.

12. George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), 4-5.

viability of an evolving and dynamic democracy, refuting the fatalism of Europe.

Nonetheless, despite its soaring ideals and its cinematic overtones, *The House* was a commercial failure. Morse's magnum opus did not capture the public imagination: only a small trickle of visitors bought tickets to the exhibition as it traveled from city to city. The painter ultimately lost money on the project, complaining that the piece had "ruined him." Morse's sometime mentor, Washington Allston, the doyen of American art, praised the painting and reassured Morse that, "the lower classes must have been wanting in curiosity,"<sup>13</sup> but regardless, Samuel was obliged to return to the dull grind of conventional portraiture. *The House* was sent to Britain in the futile hope of finding a buyer, but resurfaced decades later back in New York, rolled up, dirty, and cracked, after which it was passed around among various owners, almost as a white elephant, for several decades.<sup>14</sup>

At least two reasons can be adduced for the public's lack of interest in *The House*. One is that it lacked a climax: the scene it depicted was ordinary, even routine, eschewing any dramatic moment of confrontation centering on a heroic figure, such as usually anchored conventional "history paintings" like Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe*. A second and more important reason is that it presented a sanitized view of American democracy. By portraying the House between sessions, Morse avoided depicting the often acrimonious debates that broke out on the House floor, such as the struggle that had taken place only two years earlier in 1820 concerning the extension of slavery into the western territories, which Jefferson himself called a "firebell in the night" for the American union. While that conflict, papered over by the fragile Missouri compromise, had remained peaceful, actual violence on the House floor was not unknown; a 1798 print, titled *Congressional Pugilists*, depicting a real brawl between a Federalist and a Democratic-republican, was viewed by many times more people in the early republic than was Morse's painting.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, Morse's masterwork failed to capture or reflect the wider public understanding of democracy as an arena of struggle among contending interests. Morse's vision ultimately appeals only to a limited intelligentsia that perceives itself as the stewards of democracy—those who imagine themselves in the role of what Richard Hofstadter famously described in the 1950s as "a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy," which would prevent bad actors from exploiting the country's "populistic

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13. Ross Barrett, "Violent Prophecies," *American Art* 27, no. 1, (Spring 2013): 30; Washington Allston to Samuel FB Morse, 15 April 1823, Samuel FB Morse paper, Library of Congress, quoted in Silverman, *Lightning Man*, p. 65.

14. Kenneth Silverman, *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 65-6, 458n.

15. "Congressional Pugilists," Library of Congress record, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661719/>, accessed March 17, 2023

culture.”<sup>16</sup> Even while Morse was still at work on the elaborate project, the painting aroused intense interest among the Washington political set, with capital newspapers and broadsheets reporting updates on his progress.<sup>17</sup> After its failure on the public market, the painting passed through various private hands, until the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, an institution that sought to elevate the status of American art, finally acquired it in 1911.<sup>18</sup> By that time, at the height of the Progressive era, as the genteel elite sought to distance itself from the exoticism and extravagance of the Gilded Age, symbols of the country’s early history and republican heritage conferred a new cachet. Rescued from obscurity, Morse’s once-forgotten masterpiece found a secure place in the care of the American cultural establishment: after the Corcoran Gallery abruptly closed in 2014, the enormous painting was transferred to the National Gallery, where it quickly appeared in room 62, where it serves as a capstone to the visual memory of the American Revolution.

Morse, himself, however, never entirely recovered from the failure of *The House of Representatives*. Although he continued to paint through the 1830s, his creative drive dwindled, and by the end of that decade he retired from art; his mind was occupied with other pursuits.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the convictions and the anxieties that drove Morse to undertake the project endured—and alternative pathways would present themselves in time. In order to promote his synthesis of Calvinist moralism with the new democratic ethos, he would have to take up a different strategy and a different medium. Morse would eventually ignite a sense of urgency and rally a movement in defense of democracy by making the stakes of the moment more manifest: the preciousness and fragility of the American democratic experiment could only be brought into relief through a vivid contrast with its opposite. In this second masterwork, the artist achieved an extraordinary success. For as some readers of this essay surely know, Samuel F. B. Morse first achieved widespread fame in nineteenth-century America not as a painter, but rather as a conspiracy theorist.

## 2. CONSPIRACY

In 1830, Samuel F. B. Morse traveled to Europe in order to study the surviving works of the Renaissance. He spent two years making his way, sometimes dodging epidemics, riots, and political upheavals, through several countries. Ultimately, Morse returned to America in 1832, and soon

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16. Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” *The American Scholar* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1954-5).

17. Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 61-2, 65-6.

18. The Corcoran Gallery, “The House of Representatives,” retrieved Oct. 10, 2022, <https://www.corcoran.org/collection/house-representatives>.

19. Paul J. Staiti, *Samuel F. B. Morse*, 207-30.

after accepted an appointment as the first professor of art at New York University.

Morse's account of his travels, published in 1833, expresses an unresolved and sometimes violent ambivalence. Samuel was impressed by the beauty of Europe, most especially of Rome, where he attended many Catholic worship services; these evoked in the artist a set of clashing responses, ranging from wonder and reverence to contempt and outright disgust. He found the church buildings "gorgeous beyond description," and a candlelit procession at St. Peter's struck him as "like enchantment . . . overpowering in brilliancy . . . truly sublime." On the other hand, he excoriated what he saw as the Church's self-aggrandizing rituals, such as the ceremonial kissing of clerics' hands and faces, as well as the senseless "whining" and "drawling" of the Latin liturgy. Morse cast the Church as the progenitor of all artifice and vulgar pantomime, asserting that theater was "a daughter of this prolific Mother of Abominations, and a child worthy of its dam."<sup>20</sup>

Morse's experience in Rome forced him to confront a tension between his religious convictions and his belief in the transformative power of art. Here, the wonders of sound, light, and color were mobilized to advance a religion of the senses—the opposite of the internal, intellectual, and scriptural piety that Morse had been raised to recognize as true Christianity. Catholicism, in the New Englander's eyes, was a religious corruption, misleading by appeal to the bodily instincts—hence the artist's allusions to sexual debauchery as a metaphor for spiritual seduction. Morse reacted to the encounter with Catholicism with revulsion in part because he felt the "overpowering" appeal of Catholic worship playing upon his own soul with the same "enchantment" that he felt in response to great art—and that he himself hoped to exercise upon others through his work. His vituperations contain a clear note of envy, as Morse evidently resented the Catholic clergy for touching the souls of the common people in ways that he himself had failed to do.

After his sojourn in Italy, Morse came to see the Catholic Church as not only a threat to the soul, but also as the root of Europe's political and economic ills, keeping the Old World mired in superstition, poverty, and dysfunction. According to Morse's later writings, this conviction was crystallized in one particular incident: an encounter that took place on Rome's Via del Corso, where the artist witnessed a procession for the festival of Corpus Domini. As a consecrated eucharistic host, guarded by Roman soldiers, was carried down the avenue under a canopy, onlookers removed their hats and genuflected, but Morse only pulled out a sketchbook

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20. Samuel F. B. Morse, "Sketches of France, Italy, and Switzerland," *New York Observer*, July 6, 1883, quoted in Silverman, *Lighting Man*, 103-4; S.I. Prime, *Life of Samuel F. B. Morse, LLD* (New York: Arno Press, 1875), 198.

to take notes. Suddenly, one of the soldiers knocked the hat off of Morse's head, pushed him to the ground, and at least according to some tellings, pressed a bayonet to the artist's chest, while spewing a string of Italian curses, of which Morse could only make out the phrase, "il Diavolo"—"the Devil."<sup>21</sup>

Morse retold the story of the Corpus Domini incident many times, using it as an encapsulation of his clash with the Catholic world. Here, in this sudden physical and spiritual assault, was the climactic clash between good evil that had been missing from his artwork. The story gave Morse a sense of mission—not merely as an artist seeking to elevate the souls of his countrymen, but as a prophet, warning Americans of the threat of Catholicism, which he called "a religion of force." Morse cast Catholic Europe as a civilization where "the sword and bayonet are everywhere" and "where the habit of dread operates . . . to preserve order"—the antithesis of the consensual, organic democracy that Morse imagined America to embody.<sup>22</sup>

First published in the evangelical Protestant newspaper, *The New York Observer*, Samuel's anti-Catholic writings were reprinted widely in the popular press. His jeremiads fed into a rising panic over the growth of Catholicism in America, as hundreds of thousands of Irish and German immigrants poured into the Atlantic ports. In August 1834, the year after the publication of Morse's "Sketches," anti-Catholic fears and rumors spilled over into violence in Samuel's own birthplace of Charlestown, Massachusetts, where a Protestant mob, chanting "No Popery," set fire to an Ursulines convent, then looted the building and desecrated graves as the edifice burned to the ground.<sup>23</sup>

Although Samuel rejected the violence and disorder of the convent attack, he applauded the rioters' sense of patriotic vigilance. What is more, the rising anti-Catholic furor of the age showed a similar sense of disgust to Morse's, associating the Church with sexual impurity. The Charlestown mob had responded to dubious rumors of young women being held in the convent against their will, with clear implications of sexual abuse. Two years later, a New York publisher printed the purported memoirs of a former nun from Montreal; *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* told a lurid tale of sexual debauchery in Montreal's Hotel Dieu, which allegedly served as the site of abortions and infanticides of the offspring of lecherous unions between nuns and priests. Although the book was exposed as a

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21. Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 105.

22. Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 119.

23. For a survey of nineteenth-century Anti-Catholicism in America, including a discussion of the attack on the Ursulines convent in Charlestown, see Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, (New York: MacMillan, 1938).

fabrication, it nonetheless became America's greatest bestseller of the 1830s, because its accounts both appealed to the prurient imagination and resonated with the age-old Protestant condemnation of the Catholic Church as the "Whore of Babylon" —as well as with Morse's own description of the church as the "mother of abominations."

More importantly, Morse himself synthesized the moral panic over Catholicism with the common antipathy among progressive reformists toward Austria, whose conservative imperial government had thwarted attempts at American-style liberal reform in Europe. In 1835, the artist released a series of dispatches which were later collected into two volumes, the second of which, titled *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States*, alleged that the Jesuit order and the Pope, acting as mere puppets of Austria's longtime prime minister, the Prince von Metternich, "the arch contriver of plans of stifling liberty in Europe and throughout the world," were intentionally orchestrating the mass migration of Catholics and the expansion of the Church in America with the goal of subverting the republic. In particular, Morse pointed to the Leopoldine Society, which had been formed in Austria in 1829 in order to support Catholic missions and dioceses ministering to German immigrants in America; the artist cast the organization as an instrument for "the political designs of foreign despots" and "a secret society, a sort of masonic order, with superadded features of most revolting odiousness, and a thousand times more dangerous." In Morse's theory, Metternich and the Pope, through the Society, directed the migration and settlement of Catholics to use them as a voting bloc to sabotage the republic and bring about "the ruin of democracy."<sup>24</sup>

The influence of Morse's conspiracism on American popular thought far outstripped that of his paintings. Morse's writings helped to give shape and direction to the growing anti-immigration or "nativist" movement, which eventually consolidated, in 1844, into the Native American Party. Morse was a culture hero to the nativists, who nominated him as their (unsuccessful) candidate for mayor of New York City in 1841 and for Congress in 1854, and who infused anti-Catholic paranoia into the zeitgeist of the antebellum age. By the 1850s, the Church's most innocuous acts were vilified in the popular press as subversive attacks on America; when in 1852, the Vatican contributed to the subscription drive to fund the construction of the Washington Monument, a Baltimore minister warned in print against "The Pope's Strategem" and decried the donation as an encoded sign that the Vatican intended to move the Papal throne from Rome

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24. Samuel F. B. Morse ("An American"), *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States, through foreign immigration and the present state of the naturalization laws* (New York Journal of Commerce, 1835).

to America.<sup>25</sup>

While, from the perspective of almost two centuries later, Morse's theories may appear delusional, his ideas stand in a long line of conspiratorialism in the West. Nearly every crisis in Western society since the twelfth century has engendered moral panics that seize upon subgroups as alien intrusions within the body politic, giving rise to conspiracy theories that scapegoat real or imaginary subversive networks for social ills. In the High Middle Ages, the western church fostered the understanding of society as a unified organism, with individuals and groups forming "members" on the mystical body of Christ. When medieval society came under strain from famines and epidemics after 1300, suspicion fell upon a series of subsocieties, beginning with the lepers, who generally lived in isolation in charity houses called leprosaria. In 1320, a raid on a leprosarium in France ignited a conspiracy theory that the lepers had plotted with Jews and Muslims to poison public wells and drinking fountains in order to overthrow Christian society and establish their own unholy dominion.<sup>26</sup> In the seven centuries since the "leper plot," self-appointed guardians of society have repeatedly accused subgroups of plotting with foreign powers to contaminate the social body; the word "corruption" originally refers to decay or infection, and conspiracy theories associate plotters with poison and disease. In recent decades, conspiratorial fears have focused upon fluoride, vaccines, and cell-tower radiation; in the same vein, accusers often equate corruption and disloyalty of elite factions with sexual defilement, instantiated in adultery, orgies, sodomy, polygamy, or in recent years, pedophilia.

Therefore, on the one hand, Morse's theories are fairly typical of the long conspiratorial tradition in the West. The convent stands in the Protestant nativist imagination in the same position that the leprosarium, the synagogue, the witches' coven, and the Masonic lodge occupied in the minds of other generations, as a site for the projection of conspiratorial fantasy and dread. On the other hand, the nativist frenzy in antebellum America exemplifies the special intensity of conspiratorial thinking in the United States specifically. American society, both elite and popular, has long been a hotbed of conspiratorial speculation; American social critics of every generation have decried their own time as "the golden age of conspiracy theory."<sup>27</sup>

The particular salience of conspiracy theories to American life can be seen to stem from three main causes. One is the country's origins

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25. John F. Weishampel, *The Pope's Strategem: Rome to America*, (Philadelphia: Anonymous publisher, 1852).

26. Malcolm Barber, "Lepers, Jews, and Moslems: The Plot to Overthrow Christendom in 1321," *History* 66, no. 216 (1981): 1-17.

27. Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105-8.

as a colonized land, conquered by European migrants and adventurers. Unmoored from the sacralized space of European royal courts and rituals, authority in the so-called “New World” was ambiguous and open to contestation and subversion. The earliest European ventures onto the Atlantic provoked anxieties over the limits of sovereignty: in the opening act of Shakespeare’s Atlantic fantasy, *The Tempest*, a boatswain, struggling to keep a ship, representing civilization, afloat, rebuffs the orders of a royal counsellor, pointing to the raging waves and asking, “What care these roarers for the name of king?” After the vessel runs aground, the stranded passengers immediately fall to conspiratorial scheming for control of the island. While the play resolves with the castaways returning to Europe, the American reality has been an ongoing *Tempest*—a history of classes and factions contending over weak sites of authority.

The second major reason for the power of conspiratorialism in America, and the most obviously relevant to antebellum nativism, is its Protestant heritage. In the Anglo-Protestant worldview, politics is a battleground for the workings of divine providence, as earthly events participate in a cosmic redemptive struggle between Christ and anti-Christ. Fear of Catholic subversion suffused colonial Anglo-American life;<sup>28</sup> as historian Mary Beth Norton has shown, even the Salem Witch Trials found justification in the notion that witches were conspiring with Catholic Indians and by extension, with France and the Vatican.<sup>29</sup> The Charlestown mob’s cries of “No Popery” as they torched the Ursulines Convent in 1834 echoed those of Protestant colonists who each year burned effigies of Guy Fawkes to commemorate the thwarting of the Catholic militant’s failed plot to blow up the King and Parliament.<sup>30</sup> The long tradition of anti-Catholic fear in Anglo-America was disrupted in 1778 by the new nation’s alliance with France; George Washington suppressed Guy Fawkes Day celebrations in the Army and Protestant ministers who had been warning against Popish tyranny were obliged to change their tune, recalling that God’s providence could use even the Devil himself as an instrument to further His ends.<sup>31</sup> Anti-Catholic conspiratorialism remained in abeyance in the decades after the Revolution, until the renewed outbreak of the 1830s, after which it flared up repeatedly over the next hundred years. During the First World War, as many patriots

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28. For an exploration of the many forms of anti-popery in England and early America, see Evan Haefeli, ed., *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism*, (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

29. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

30. Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 56-61.

31. Francis Cogliano, *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995).

suspected Catholics of secretly supporting the Kaiser, the Ku Klux Klan boosted recruitment by circulating a forged oath for the Knights of Columbus according to which the initiate pledged to carry out the Pope's designs to "wage relentless war" on Protestant America,<sup>32</sup> while the governor of Florida accused German-American monks of scheming to assassinate him and hand the state back to Spain.<sup>33</sup>

The third principal reason for the strength of conspiracism in America is its republican heritage. The American revolutionary generation drew their understanding of republican life from Classical and Renaissance writers, most especially Machiavelli, who devoted an entire chapter of his *Discourses* to conspiracies, which he presented as the greatest existential threat to a republic. Subversion, in Machiavelli's view, was only possible after a long process of corruption and moral decline, "for in [a republic] not yet tainted by corruption such thoughts could never enter the mind of any citizen."<sup>34</sup> While the villains have changed many times through the years, the search for subversion as an index of social and moral decay has not; indeed, the broadening of the franchise and the rise of mass democracy in the past century went hand in hand with the multiplication of targets of conspiratorial thought.

In fact, investment in democracy and fear of conspiracies are inseparable. Both "democracy" and "republic" are ambiguous concepts, referring to various deliberative practices that draw their authority from an abstract collective entity—the *publius* or *demos*—which, unlike a monarch or the body of Christ instantiated in the eucharistic host, cannot appear before the eye, but exists only phantasmically, in the imagination. The collective sovereign is defined by social norms and relationships that must be continually renewed and by conceptual boundaries that must be policed. Conspiracies, in principle, exercise power while operating outside of licit, public processes of deliberation; they undermine the republic not simply because they threaten to misdirect public actions, but because, by their mere existence, they violate the organic unity of the *demos*. The search for conspiracies is thus inherent to democratic life; only through vigilant scrutiny of the conceptual and moral boundaries of the *demos* and scrutiny of its internal "health" can the republic be conceived as a living entity. In this way, democracy finds definition only in reference to its own subversion.

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32. Thomas E. Watson, *The 4th Degree Oath of the Knights of Columbus: An Un-American Secret Society Bound to the Italian, By Pledges of Treason and Murder* (Thomson, GA: The Tom Watson Book Company, 1928), 19-21.

33. Wayne Flint, *Cracker Messiah: Governor Sidney J. Catts of Florida* (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

34. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, translated by Christian Detmold (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1882), Book 3, chapter 6, paragraph 24, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/machiavelli/works/discourses/ch03.htm#s06>, accessed March 17, 2023.

The close conceptual link between the American republic and conspiracism can be seen especially in the 1790s, when the new nation's alliance with France at once suppressed anti-Catholic passions and raised new fears and anxieties about foreign influence. It was in this early period of anxiety that the New England Protestant elite, seeing their traditional authority eroded by the rise of secular moralities and humanist philosophies, raised a new conspiratorial alarm. In a sermon delivered in Charlestown in 1798, Jedidiah Morse, the father of Samuel F. B. Morse, blamed the rise of "irreligion" on the Bavarian Illuminati, who spread their radical doctrines from Germany by way of France and the Masonic order; the "atheistical" Illuminati and their useful idiots "abjure Christianity, justify suicide, declare death an eternal sleep . . . [and] declaim against the baneful influence of accumulated property, and in favor of liberty and equality." The aim of their subversive doctrines, according to Morse, was to "to root out and abolish Christianity, and overturn all civil government." Furthermore, their effort to weaken the moral fiber of the republic was embodied in their sexual impurity, as the Illuminati "decry marriage, and advocate a promiscuous discourse between the sexes."<sup>35</sup>

Jedidiah Morse's theory spread quickly, promoted by self-declared "watchmen of the new Jerusalem" including Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College (Jedidiah's and later Samuel's alma mater and the bastion of New England orthodoxy). Under Dwight's direction, Yale quickly became the main beacon of conspiratorial thought in Federal America, adapting Anglo-Protestant conspiracism into a civic-republican mode.<sup>36</sup> The atmosphere of conspiratorial panic in the summer of 1798 encouraged the Federalist-dominated Congress to enact the controversial Sedition Act.

The Illuminati panic of the 1790s illustrates not only the social but also the psychological forces that tend to fuel conspiracism. Conspiracy theories appeal to those who see themselves as embattled by social forces beyond their control; in recent years, social-science research has found that individuals are most likely to embrace conspiracy theories when they fear the loss of control over their environment; conspiratorial paranoia tends to follow, for instance, in the wake of wars and natural disasters.<sup>37</sup> The particular conspiracy theories that Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight espoused reflect their anxiety at the loss of their accustomed moral authority and a fear of shifting cultural ground. This psychological dynamic accounts

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35. Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered at the New North Church in Boston, in the Morning, and in the Afternoon at Charlestown, May 9th, 1798, Being the Day Recommended by John Adams, President of the United States of America, for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer*, (Boston: Hall, 1798), quoted in Richard A. Snell, "Watchmen of the New Jerusalem: Jedidiah Morse, the Bavarian Illuminati and the refashioning of the jeremiad tradition in New England," (Master's Thesis, University of New Hampshire, 2008), 1-3.

36. Snell, "Watchmen of the New Jerusalem."

37. Uscinski & Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 11.

for the pattern that in times of social upheaval, the bastions of mainstream orthodoxy can become founts of paranoid fantasy.

For all of the above reasons, conspiracism proved to be a defining theme of nineteenth-century America, and fundamentally constitutive of American party politics. Whereas European political systems may countenance parties as representing an ideological niche, American parties must necessarily conceive of themselves as representing the body politic at large against a subversive cabal. Just two years after Morse painted *The House of Representatives*, the same chamber would hold a contentious presidential election, the result of which a scorned Andrew Jackson would blame on a “corrupt bargain” between his opponent and the Speaker. After Jackson won the presidency, his opponents would label him as a “Caesar” with secret designs to overthrow the republic. (Raised on the Latin classics, American statesmen of the 1830s had been trained to fear “Caesarism,” and Morse himself invoked this tradition when signing his early anti-Catholic letters as “Brutus.”) The struggle between Jackson and his opponents would give rise to the Democratic and Whig parties, while the first nominating convention ever held in America, in 1831, was that of the Anti-Masonic Party. In the 1850s, as the sectional crisis mounted, the anti-slavery movement consolidated support for the Republican Party by railing against a conspiratorial “slave power” that sought not only to extend the institution westward, but ultimately to enslave white workers. Morse adopted the opposite position, casting abolitionism as a Jesuit-orchestrated plot to instigate slave insurrection and divide the union.<sup>38</sup>

As a man of the nineteenth century, Samuel Morse carried with him an awareness of the fragility of the republic, not only as a governmental system, but as a mode of legitimation rooted in an abstract body politic which can only be grasped in the imagination. He attempted to manifest that body visually in *The House of Representatives*; after this project failed to find purchase, he sought to define the republic through a discursive contrast with its opposite, just as the “raw” can only be defined in reference to the “cooked.” It is no coincidence that the pivotal moment that launched Samuel’s polemical career took place at a Corpus Domini procession, in which the consecrated host tangibly represents the Church as a social body, which Morse perceived as fundamentally incompatible with democracy. The latter is thus not merely a form of government but a mode of life, suspended in a complex web of oppositions with other alien states of being, including “anarchy” and “tyranny,” into which it perpetually threatens to transform. Modern democratic theory, too, like Morse’s writings, defines democracy by opposition to its internal and external threats, as exemplified by the title of Karl Popper’s seminal work, *The Open Society and Its*

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38. Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 336-8, 393-4.

*Enemies.*

Ultimately, Morse's confrontation with the Catholic world sharpened his understanding of the godly republic and his vision of "democracy." In 1836, Samuel completed his last non-portrait painting, his *Allegorical Landscape of New York University*, which shows the institution's edifice beside a placid lake, surrounded by trees, and in the foreground, an embankment with a statue of Athena. Across the lake rises a mountain with terraces leading to a mysterious temple or palace. Although the *Allegorical Landscape* is more fantastical than any of Morse's earlier works, its composition, as the art historian Paul J. Staiti has pointed out, closely mimics that of the *House of Representatives*, with the NYU building occupying the place of the Speaker's dais, the Athena statue that of the lamp-lighter, the lake that of the House floor, and the hilltop palace that of the House gallery.<sup>39</sup> Between 1822 and 1836, the setting for Morse's vision of American life has translated from an indoor scene of a real room to an evocative mythic landscape, from the prosaic to the poetic; the republic comes alive not in the organs of government or the actions of statesmen, but rather in the journey of the mind from the university building to the mountaintop, from the practical to the spiritual.

The *Allegory* reflects Morse's evolution into a more philosophical and abstract vision of the American experiment. Perhaps an observer, seeing the painting in 1836, might have taken it to herald a more expressive and inventive phase of his artistic career. This was not to be. Rather, the painter sank into a depression after Congress declined to commission him to beautify the Capitol rotunda, and he stopped painting entirely after a few more portraits. Morse's students would later recall their "grief" at seeing their professor's canvas left untouched, as they vainly "longed to see him again calling into life events in our country's history."<sup>40</sup> Ironically, they did not realize that their teacher had already moved on from the small canvas in his studio to a much wider and more expansive one—a canvas upon which the artist would not only depict the great events of American history, but make them.

### 3. MACHINE

In 1832, during his return voyage from Europe to America, Samuel F. B. Morse joined a conversation in which several British and American passengers were discussing a recent new invention: the electromagnet. According to later testimonies, one interlocutor—most likely Morse himself—observed that in principle, it should be possible to use electrical circuits to communicate across a distance instantaneously. That night in his

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39. Staiti, *Samuel F. B. Morse*, 212-13.

40. Prime, *Life of Samuel FB Morse, LLD*, 724, quoted in Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 156-7.

cabin, Morse began furiously sketching a device that would use battery-charged circuits to move a distant electromagnet in order to inscribe coded markings onto paper. Morse worked obsessively on his invention in his NYU studio; he soon developed the famous dash-dot code for efficient communication on the device and in 1840, with the help of colleagues, obtained a patent for his “telegraph.” After a three-year lobbying campaign by Morse and his allies, Congress, one late night in 1843, allocated funds to lay an experimental line from Washington to Baltimore. A team of laborers quickly erected poles and wires alongside the rail line linking the cities, and by May 1844, Morse was ready for a public ceremony to transmit the first message. The inventor asked Annie Ellsworth, the daughter of the director of the Federal Patent Office, to choose the text, and she selected a verse from the Book of Numbers: “What Hath God Wrought.” One morning, in the old Supreme Court chamber within the Capitol, Morse tapped out the message, which the operator in Baltimore repeated back. The simple ritual, it seems, attracted little attention at the time. However, several days later, the Democratic National Convention, meeting in Baltimore, sent a messenger to Washington to offer the Vice Presidential nomination to Senator Silas Wright. At the same time, the delegates, possibly for the sake of novelty, also conveyed the same question via telegraph. The convention received Wright’s negative reply almost immediately—but still did not believe it until the messenger returned the next day to corroborate it.<sup>41</sup>

The real-life demonstration of the telegraph’s power touched off a sensation. Through the mid-1840s, the popular press roiled with excitement, wonder, and fear at the implications of the new device. Morse himself, with apparent delight, collected many of the breathless reports and commentaries in his scrapbooks, including the claim that the telegraph had “annihilated space and time.”<sup>42</sup> As new transmission lines and stations sprang up along the Atlantic seaboard and then westward to the Great Lakes, the device promised to solve a political conundrum: the question of how the republic could function over a constantly widening geographic expanse. Now, information, news, ideas, and orders could move across the continent at lightning speed; the sections of the country, North, South, and West, that had seemed to be drifting apart, were now bound together like nerve endings firing in a single nervous system. As later scholars have pointed out, the telegraph launched the field of cybernetics—the perfection of communication through networks that include both humans and machines.<sup>43</sup>

Although the reading public had little understanding of the mechanics of the device, which they still referred to as powered by “lightning,” they were

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41. Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 206-39.

42. Samuel FB Morse Papers, Library of Congress, Box M33, fr. 537, quoted in Silverman, p. 240.

43. David Hochfelder, “Electrical Communication, Language, and Self,” in *Technohistory*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Company, 1996), 119-21.

quick to see its political and even metaphysical significance. The metaphor of the emerging telegraphic republic as a single brain with an emergent sentience was not lost on the Americans of the 1840s: one commentator proclaimed that the machine had created “a new species of consciousness” transcending the individual, and the *Christian Observer* prophesied that it would eventually enmesh all Americans—or even the entire world—in “a sensorium of communicated intelligence.” Even the US Patent Office, in its report for 1849, observed that the telegraphic network seemed to be taking over the role of thinking and deliberation that had previously been the domain of government bodies.<sup>44</sup> Soon, it seemed, the need even for the House of Representatives would be obviated by the rise of an unmediated collective mind.

The Biblical verse, “What Hath God Wrought,” which served as the first telegram in 1844, rose in fame year by year, appearing increasingly prophetic in retrospect.<sup>45</sup> The phrase has become indelibly inscribed in the American mind principally because it captures an ambivalence, a mixture of aroused emotions that attached to the new device. Lacking punctuation, the phrase is both an exclamation and a question, the words suspended between awe and terror at the moment of awakening; they could indeed have served well (in place of the cinematic “It’s Alive!”) as Dr. Frankenstein’s exclamation upon seeing his monster spring to life.

In short, the first telegram was a small masterpiece of Gothic literature, which through the first half of the nineteenth century chronicled the conflicting emotions evoked by technological advance. The parallels between Morse, an embittered art professor who assembled a strange and ambitious electrical device in his small studio in NYU’s Gothic-revival edifice, and the fictitious Dr. Frankenstein, the mad scientist who assembles an artificial man in his castle laboratory and vivifies it using electricity, are uncanny. Where Shelley’s antihero stitches together the limbs of corpses into a new, half-living monster whose behavior is unpredictable and out of its creator’s control, so Morse’s creation promised to bind the regions of the continental republic into one living organism, distinct and independent of its constituent parts. Although Morse himself was untroubled by the danger that he had brought to life a monster, other observers, beginning with Annie

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44. Samuel FB Morse Papers, Library of Congress, M33, fr. 382; *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1849* (Washington, 1850); *Christian Observer*, March 20, 1846, quoted in Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 240-1.

45. For example, The historian Daniel Walker Howe, in 2007, used the phrase as the title of his Pulitzer-Prize-winning history of the antebellum age, although he fails to consider either the Biblical or literary context that gave the verse its relevance. The phrase appears in Numbers 23:23, as part of the Moabite prophet Balaam’s warning regarding the unstoppable advance of the Israelites who, with God’s backing, will soon take possession of Canaan; the famous verse therefore alludes to the unstoppable advance of the new Israel, the American republic, which, aided by the awesome new device, would consolidate its grip upon the continent. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

Ellsworth, were unsettled.

Moreover, the resonance between the stories of Frankenstein and of Morse is not incidental: Mary Shelley's tale, first published in 1818, captured the troubled mood of its era, when disillusionment with mankind's potential for rational self-transformation following the French Revolution converged with wonder at the rapidly advancing ability of technicians to counterfeit conscious life. Shelley drew inspiration from contemporary experiments in which doctors zapped dead limbs to cause ghostly muscle twitches; less often acknowledged, though, is the tale's reflection of anxiety over the rise of inorganic machines that appeared to mimic human sentience. Beginning at least as early as the 1770 debut of the Mechanical Turk, which toured Europe pretending to beat the greatest chess masters at their own game, Europeans had grown excited and anxious about the potential for "automata" not only to mimic but even to attain consciousness. The craze only grew after 1800, as Swiss watchmakers, the foremost experts in the fine manipulation of gears, turned to creating mechanical marvels that seemed to come alive. The Swiss studio of Jaquet-Droz reached the pinnacle of the art form with automata that could draw, write, and play music with expressive subtlety; Mary Shelley viewed an exhibition of the Jaquet-Droz creations in Neuchatel in 1816, and two years later, she began writing her famous tale in Geneva; in the novel, the mad scientist's upbringing and education take place in Switzerland, the Silicon Valley of the automaton age.<sup>46</sup>

The story of Frankenstein distilled a current of fear that underlay optimistic humanism—namely, that mankind would unleash horrors by stepping into the role of God. While Romanticism revived and enshrined the role of the artist as lone creative genius, the Gothic writers imagined creating a monster (as Mary Shelley, ironically, did) that would take on a life of its own beyond its creator's control. Morse's career, too, taking place just before the final conceptual split between "art" and "science," illustrates both the struggle of the artist and that of the inventor, which similarly inspire awe and dread by seeking to harness divine power. More specifically, German critics and theorists who pioneered the study of Gothic horror have often identified its defining mood as that of "the uncanny" (*unheimlich* or "alien"), which stems from inanimate objects' ability to play upon human sensitivity to the signs of life and sentience, creating the

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46. For discussion of the widespread craze surrounding automata between 1780 and 1830 and its influence upon Mary Shelley, see: Wendy C. Nielsen, "Rousseau's Pygmalion and Automata in the Romantic Period," *Romanticism, Rousseau, Switzerland*, eds. Esterhammer, Piccitto, and Vincent (London: Plagrove MacMillan, 2015), 68-83; Judith Pike, "Resurrection of the Fetish in Gradiva, Frankenstein, and Wuthering Heights," in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, eds. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1995), 150-58; Julia V. Douthwaite & Daniel Richter, "The Frankenstein of the French Revolution: Nogaret's automaton tale of 1790," *European Romantic Review* 20, no. 3 (July 2009), 381-411.

illusion of a conscious presence. The uncanny, in their account, unsettles and disturbs the basic distinctions guiding our interaction with the world, creating a thrill of existential dread.

While Frankenstein may be more familiar to the Anglophone world, the theorists of the uncanny found their touchstone in the works of the German Gothic writer, E. T. A. Hoffmann, in particular his classic story, “*Der Sandmann*” or “The Sandman,” first published in 1817, which centers on an unfortunate young man who falls in love with an automaton. As a young boy, the protagonist, Nathanael, witnesses clandestine alchemical experiments performed by a sinister local man named Coppelius, who discovers the boy and threatens to burn his eyes out. Years later, Nathanael enrolls in a university, where he buys a spyglass from an Italian technician named Coppola, whom Nathanael suspects in fact to be the villainous Coppelius. The student uses the spyglass to peer into his professor’s apartments across the street, where he sees the scholar’s daughter, Olimpia. The professor holds a party to introduce Olimpia to society; she sings a song, and whereas most attendees find her strangely stiff and mechanical, Nathanael is entranced. Later, the student goes to call on Olimpia, but finds his professor and Coppelius fighting over credit for their mechanical creation, which they tear apart in fury. The student goes mad at the horrible sight and must withdraw from school. He later recovers his sanity and proposes marriage to his friend Clara. However, one day traveling through a country town, the couple climb a belltower to see the view, and Clara points out a bush that seems to be moving; Nathanael pulls out the spyglass that he had bought from Coppola, and upon gazing through it, he again loses his mind, trying to throw his fiancée off the tower. The young lady is saved, but Nathanael looks down at the crowd gathering beneath the tower, sees Coppelius in it, and leaps to his death.

“The Sandman” shows the fundamental connection between fear of machines that mimic humans and fear of humans that become machines. In his famous essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud theorizes that Nathanael’s madness reflects unresolved resentment towards the father, represented in the tale by the sinister Coppelius; this psychoanalytic reading supposedly accounts for the tale’s ending, in which Nathanael leaps to his death upon seeing Coppelius in the village crowd. However, as philosopher Stanley Cavell points out in his lectures on “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” Nathanael erupts in fury upon looking through his telescope and seeing not Coppelius, but his fiancée, Clara.<sup>47</sup> The narrator does not describe exactly what Nathanael sees, but his cry of “Spin round, wooden doll!” indicates that just as the instrument made the automaton Olimpia appear as a real

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47. Stanley Kavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Stanford University, April 1986, <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/resources/documents/a-to-z/c/cavell88.pdf>, accessed March 17, 2023.

woman, so it reveals the flesh-and-blood Clara to be an automaton. The story describes a symmetry: just as technology threatens to bring machines to life, so it correspondingly threatens to reduce the living to the mechanical. Human and machine collapse into one horrifying continuum.

Nathanael's spyglass symbolizes the power of technology to disrupt our identities and social relationships. This fact is underscored by a scene of Hoffmann's story that digresses from the central plotline: after word gets out in the university town that the lovely Olimpia was in fact only a convincing automaton, the town's social set heaps contempt upon Nathanael for falling in love with the machine—even as they know that they themselves fell for the illusion. The ladies and gentlemen begin to distrust their own perceptions, and many fear that their own sweethearts may also be automata. Lovers observe and test one another's emotions for signs of artifice (in a kind of perverse Turing test), and some relationships fail. Thus, Olimpia's beauty represents the danger that technology, by blurring the boundaries between the real and the illusory, the rational and the mad, will undermine the foundations of society.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, the theme of vision and perception that pervades "The Sandman" points toward a psychological commonality connecting the uncanny with conspiracism. In the childhood scene, Coppelius threatens but spares Nathanael's eyes; thereafter the protagonist owes his very sense of sight to the madman, and so cannot trust his own perceptions. The ambivalent symbolism of eyes as representing both true and illusory vision pervades much of Gothic literature; as the sight of Olimpia's disembodied eyes drives Nathanael to madness, so Dr. Frankenstein, in Shelley's tale, runs from his laboratory in terror when the monster's eyes spring open. These tales reflect a perceptual confusion as simulations of life and instruments for the enhancement of perception threaten to destroy the boundaries between reality and illusion, and subjects find themselves trapped in a dream world from which they long to awaken. (Mary Shelley wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Frankenstein* that the vivification scene appeared to her in a dream.)

Similar imagery of eyes, dreaming, and awakening pervade conspiratorial literature as well. Samuel F. B. Morse, commenting approvingly on the rise of the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party, wrote that "the American mind is at length awake,"<sup>49</sup> and the young men's street militia that formed in the 1850s to counter the conspiratorial "slave power" called themselves the

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48. Considering that Olimpia charms her audience with a song, it should not be surprising that music has been used to elaborate on the themes of Hoffmann's tale, including in 1881 as the first act of Jacques Offenbach's magnum opus *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Offenbach's opera draws a parallel between the hypnotic rhythms of music and those of mechanical motion. Olimpia's song (one of the most difficult arias in the operatic canon) involves scales leaping up and down the soprano range while maintaining a halting, mechanical rhythm, and Olimpia twice runs out of energy and must be wound back up.

49. Morse, letter 2 Edward Beecher, 9 April 1855, quoted in Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 337.

“Wide-Awakes,” adopting as their emblem a huge eyeball. The promised awakening offers to expose both machines that behave like humans and humans that act in tandem like machines, engaging in conspiratorial “machinations.” The psychological symmetry between the two types of fear is illustrated, again, in *The Tempest*, in which the shipwrecked voyagers find themselves in a dream-like realm, surrounded by strange sounds and phantasms that play upon their imaginations, blinding them to the conspiratorial plots that seek to control the island. The airy spirit, Ariel, sets out to rouse the good counsellor Gonzlao from his dream state, singing in his ear:

While you here do snoring lie,  
 Open-eyed conspiracy  
 His time doth take.  
 If of life you keep a care,  
 Shake off slumber, and beware:  
 Awake, awake!

Music has traditionally been understood as a form of magic (to “enchant” at root means “to sing”), and whereas Ariel’s rhyme could serve as the rallying-cry of every conspiracy theorist through the ages, Prospero, who holds sway over the island through the powers of illusion and the charms of music, represents Shakespeare’s version of the archetypal magus—the magician/sorcerer/scientist that establishes dominion by manipulation of the hidden forces of nature. Similarly, in “The Sandman,” the figure of Sandman/Coppelius/Coppola represents not the archetypal father, as Freud would have it, but rather a Gothic magus. The fame of Samuel F. B. Morse, too, who was seen by many as the pre-eminent American of his age, fulfilled the desire for an American magus who would conjure a phantasmic republic into being.

In sum, the sense of the uncanny links the mounting fears around both conspiracies and machines. These related anxieties spring from the same basic human impulse to discern patterns amid randomness. The pattern-seeking instinct intensifies in times of danger and powerlessness, leading to the illusive perception of order.<sup>50</sup> As the political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent have observed, “inducing anxiety or loss of control triggers respondents to see nonexistent patterns and evoke conspiratorial explanations.”<sup>51</sup> The same mechanism similarly leads to the perception of life or sentience in inanimate objects. Hence, just as “The Sandman” rests

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50. Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception,” *Science* 322, no. 5898, (2008): 115-17.

51. Uscinski & Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 11.

upon a deep symmetry, so the Gothic dread of machines coming to life has its mirror image in the fear of social and political combinations that seek to control or undermine the social order, reducing humans to mechanical cogs. It is no accident that in the 19th century, the patronage networks that formed within urban governments (especially those relying upon Catholic immigrant support) came to be called political “machines.” The term has its roots in Samuel F. B. Morse’s writings, such as in the preface to *Imminent Dangers* of 1835, in which he describes the Catholic migrants to America as “human priest-controlled machines.”<sup>52</sup>

Both Gothic horror and conspiracy theories play upon the mystery of how disparate parts combine to form a moving, acting whole, whether dead limbs coming to life as a half-living monster, or living individuals resigning their autonomy to become instrument’s (or “puppets”) of another’s will. Here, then, are twin fears—of machines becoming humans and humans becoming machines—that converge into the same middle ground, a liminal space of existential horror. Each one threatens to destroy the organic life of the body politic, whether by creating a social machine that annihilates the agency of the free citizen, or by creating physical machines that exercise human agency while remaining essentially alien. Each one threatens to dissolve the boundaries of the social body, exposing it to conceptual chaos. These two fears coexisted, distinct but in conversation with one another, through the nineteenth century. Only many years later, following new breakthroughs in electronic communication, have they converged once more in a new crisis.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although it may seem that in our long excursion into the nineteenth century we have strayed far from present-day concerns about discourse and democracy online, some parallels and connections must loom forth. Fears for the survival of democracy, conspiracy theories, and alarms over foreign and internal subversion have been inherent to American political life since the early years of the republic. Citizens express their attachment to democratic liberties in part through the policing of the boundaries of the body politic and of the democratic process; the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of “democracy” itself makes an atmosphere of vigilance unavoidable.

Nonetheless, we cannot casually dismiss those who perceive the present day as a time of unusual division and anxiety. Specifically, the rise of the internet has revived fears and antipathies that have remained relatively dormant since the nineteenth century. The structure of the internet, as a decentralized nexus of communication among unlimited nodes, resembles

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52. Morse, *Imminent Dangers*, quoted in Silverman, *Lightning Man*, 140-1.

that of the telegraph more closely than any other medium of the electronic age, and hence it gives rise to a similar array of fears. Whereas radio and television signals are “broadcast” from central nodes to a limited geographical zone, allowing for monitoring and control, the internet resists such surveillance, seeming to take on an organic life of its own. Hence, while social critics of the broadcast era could assume a passively receptive audience and bemoan its supposed decline into a hypnotized stupor, the prophets of the internet age decry the opposite—namely, the seeming emergence of a teeming, uncontrollable cybernetic mass, zapped to life by spectacle, rumor, and irrational passion.

This cybernetic apocalypse was long anticipated: the latter half of the twentieth century saw many echoes of the Gothic age, with mounting fears of machines that could come alive and overpower their masters. The new Gothic found expression mainly in popular science fiction, where automata, from Philip K. Dick’s “replicants” to Clarke’s Hal-9000 and *Terminator*’s “Skynet” threaten to awaken and usurp their human masters. The name of *The Matrix*’s “Deus ex Machina” refers, like Hoffmann’s Olympia, to the classical Greek custom of representing divine intervention on stage by means of a machine. Clearly, by the close of the twentieth century, the Gothic mood that once attended the technical advances of the nineteenth century had alighted upon the internet; in a 1999 BBC interview, the musician and impresario David Bowie warned of the dangerous and “unimaginable” implications of the creation of the internet, which had already become, in his words, “an alien life form.”<sup>53</sup>

Bowie’s prophesy ought to sound prescient to those who decry a present-day “epistemic crisis” inflamed by “bots,” “trolls,” and other simulacra of intelligence, or who sound alarms over software programs supposedly gaining sentience.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, whereas the debate about the ill effects of broadcast media was carried on mostly in rarefied intellectual circles off of the airwaves, concerns about the internet pervade popular discourse, which is carried on largely on the internet itself, where conspiracy theories are deployed to account for the origins of conspiracy theories and discourse drowns in metadiscourse. The internet, in short, has become self-aware; the nineteenth-century fantasies of a “sensorium of communicated intelligence” seem at last to come true, threatening to subsume the autonomous citizen into the machine. The final convergence of conspiracism with the uncanny can be seen in the satirical “Birds Aren’t Real” movement, launched in 2017—a fictitious conspiracy theory, born online, alleging that all birds

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53. “Bowie talks to Paxman about music, drugs and the internet,” BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-35286749>, accessed March 17, 2023.

54. Leonardo de Cosmo, “Google Engineer Claims AI Chatbot Is Sentient: Why That Matters,” *Scientific American*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/google-engineer-claims-ai-chatbot-is-sentient-why-that-matters/>.

have been replaced with electronic surveillance drones—which expresses exasperation with the perception of ordinary aspects of reality as simulacra, but which is itself a simulacrum.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, some of our cybernetic anxieties are surely unfounded. Intellectual elites in the twentieth century had the luxury of observing and theorizing about the effects of broadcast media on the public without having to see the audience’s responses in real time; a passive recipient could be assumed. The internet, uniquely among all media, provides observers with a perpetual vivisection of the climate of ideas and opinion circulating on its channels. The picture may look unattractive to some, but there is no reason to assume that such a live view of public opinion would have presented a more appealing aspect at any previous time in history. The burden of proof rests upon those who would claim that the internet has somehow increased the prevalence of misinformation or irrational beliefs. Indeed, the television era coincided with the McCarthyite Red Scare, the rise of fluoride conspiracy theories, the UFO and alien-abduction craze, and the Satanic Panic, all flourishing through magazines, late-night radio shows, and ordinary word-of-mouth. George Steiner, in his 1974 lecture series, “Nostalgia for the Absolute,” bemoaned the rise in the West of alien beliefs and of such “eastern” practices as yoga and meditation, arguing that they proved his own time to be “the most infected by superstition [and] by irrationalism, of any since the decline of the Middle Ages.”<sup>56</sup> It is therefore ironic that since the advent of the internet, alien and UFO theories have faded out of popular discourse, while meditation and yoga have been adopted into rationalized business management; one age’s superstition becomes another’s instrumental reason.

What is more, pre-electronic media carry an equally checkered history. Oral communication, including ordinary whisper networks, are capable of circulating outlandish fears and speculations, and the old-fashioned rumor mill has proven more than adequate to touch off riots and revolts. The same cautions apply to the printed word: although it is reasonable to observe that the internet has lowered the barrier to publication, allowing ordinary, uncredentialed users to share ideas instantly across unlimited distances, still one should not exaggerate this effect by ignoring the previous baseline. The barrier to publication, between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, was also very low, with basically any crank or would-be guru having access to a small press and hence to a potential audience. From *Common Sense* to *Maria Monk* to *Mein Kampf*, texts ranging from the sublime to the slanderous have exploded into public discourse; indeed, the first Western

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55. Birds Aren’t Real; <https://birdsarentreal.com>, accessed March 17, 2023.

56. George Steiner, “Nostalgia for the Absolute, part 4,” CBC Massey Lectures, last modified March 14, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-1974-cbc-massey-lectures-nostalgia-for-the-absolute-1.2946821>.

author to sway public events via the press was Luther, who in addition to his soteriological arguments, put forward the incendiary theory, in *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, that the Pope was an anti-Christ and the Church in the grip of Satan. Likewise, the press has always produced dubious reports probably born of mass delusion; George Steiner might have been dismayed to learn that a German printer, in 1561, published an illustrated broadsheet with an elaborate report of a mass UFO sighting in the skies over Nuremberg.

Hence it is only natural that the first critic to analyze public discourse and to find it to be in a state of grave disorder was an analyst of the press. In 1920, the journalist Walter Lippmann co-wrote “A Test of the News,” an essay examining how the *New York Times* had reported on the Russian Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. The authors found the paper repeatedly printing false reports of atrocities and baseless predictions of imminent Bolshevik collapse; the coverage reflected a worldview refracted through rumors, wishful thinking, and self-flattering delusions. Lippmann went on, in 1922’s *Public Opinion*, to probe troubling conceptual questions about modern democracy. Since, in a mass society, most citizens had no direct access to the “real environment” of national and world events, they necessarily relied on trusted intermediaries, using second-hand reports to build a simplified world-picture. If this information, though, was transmitted through biased and distorting media, run by greedy magnates and opinion-mongers that prioritized market appeal over accuracy, then how could the public possibly make sound judgments about the world? Ultimately, Lippmann despaired of the efficacy of enforcing voluntary professional ethics in journalism, instead advocating that public policymaking be taken out of the hands of the uninformed public and reserved to closed circles of experts who could bring accurate knowledge to bear on the questions of the day.<sup>57</sup>

Lippmann’s argument and his prescription in *Public Opinion* should sound familiar to those who, exactly one hundred years later, debate the putative merits of “technocracy.” Hopefully, the benefit of historical perspective should reveal the pitfalls of Lippmann’s proposal. If the story of Samuel Morse’s career teaches us anything, it should be that the well-educated and the well-informed are in no way immune to self-delusion. Raised by a respected minister and geographer, educated at Yale, worldly, well-read, and well-traveled, Morse was about as knowledgeable an expert on world affairs as one could hope to find in the early American republic, yet he used this extensive knowledge to sow division and fear. Nor is Samuel (or for that matter, his father Jedidiah) unique; people of all classes and backgrounds use conspiracy theories and other delusions to defend their

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57. Andre Forget, “Public Opinion at 100,” *The Bulwark*, Sept. 16, 2022, <https://www.thebulwark.com/public-opinion-at-100>.

interests and worldviews. Although experts, by definition, have exceptional knowledge of a given topic, they still filter that knowledge through their own agendas, ambitions, and fears. In fact, a wealth of facts and knowledge can, instead of pointing toward a singular truth, rather allow for a multiplicity of possible interpretations. Information in itself is no substitute for judicious interpretation, nor erudition for honesty; in short, “expertise” is only as trustworthy as the character of the expert.

The value of Walter Lippmann’s analysis lies not in his technocratic hopes, but in his insight that reality is fundamentally social. Modern people resemble their forebears in that they build their world-picture on relationships of trust. The perceived ills of modern democracy cannot be cured, then, by the medicine of information alone; any remedies must aim to cultivate mutual respect and confidence between audience and speaker. Faceless “fact checkers” cannot substitute for journalists or scholars who strive to depict the world accurately while acknowledging their own limitations and those of their profession, their outlets, and their industry. Aspiring reformers must navigate our manifold and confused reality with caution and humility.

Firstly, we must resist the temptation to suppress the multi-nodal nature of the internet, using design fixes to shore up the authority of supposed experts. This would merely hide the now-visible social processes of reality construction in favor of an illusory consensus. There is no necessary reason to assume that the internet has undermined the authority of experts, science, or Truth as such, but only challenged it, exposing to view the skepticism and opposition that has always existed. This presents, then, an opportunity for both experts and mediators to prove their worth, to build trust among resistant audiences and to gain respect on an open playing field. Only with such trust can commentators move beyond the sterile, technocratic newspeak of “misinformation” and “disinformation” to a clear distinction between “truth” and “lies.”

Secondly, the anxieties aroused by the confusion of reality and simulation must be allayed by drawing a clearer line between human and machine. This does not entail verifying online accounts belonging to supposed experts, but rather those belonging to human beings as distinguished from bots. Nevertheless, if, as the conveners of this symposium seem to suppose, the online public square is vital to the health of democracy, or contemporary “democracy” itself takes place on the internet, then important online platforms must, like the postal service and the public schools, be public properties, subject to the decisions and judgments of the democratic process. Ownership is prior to design; only collectively can humankind maintain its dominion over the machine.

Finally, any attempt at reform must depend neither on capacious knowledge, nor on technical wizardry, but upon self-examination and

resignation to the public will. Prospero, at the end of *The Tempest*, abjures his “rough magic” and resolves to drown the books from which he draws his powers. In his final monologue, he asks the audience for clemency and understanding, so that he may return home from the dream-island upon which he has been trapped; he ends by drawing an equivalence between himself and the audience that must judge him: “As you from crimes would pardon’d be, / Let your indulgence set me free.” There may be no escape from the dream-world in which we have immersed ourselves, no easy path back to certainty and consensus; but like all people, we may, with a spirit of humility, learn to make the best of our shared predicament.